

Twenty Questions

*Seeking the Forgiveness God Offers
in Jesus Christ*

Gary Henry

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Seeking the Forgiveness God Offers in Jesus Christ

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WordPoints
12123 Shelbyville Road, Suite 100-247
Louisville, KY 40243

(601) 490-0514

Web: wordpoints.com
Email: garyhenry@wordpoints.com

PREFACE

GOOD QUESTIONS ARE ONE OF THE BEST GIFTS WE CAN GIVE OURSELVES. In this booklet we discuss twenty questions related to the most important subject in the world: *our relationship to God*.

The questions discussed in this booklet are not the only questions we might ask, but these twenty are certainly important. They each address a biblical subject that invites us to dig into the Scriptures to find the answer. Here, then, are the twenty questions:

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In writing about these questions, I do not pretend to be an authority. I am certainly not infallible, and my knowledge of the Scriptures is not perfect. However, I am glad to offer you, the reader, the results of my study so far. If you and I were sitting at the kitchen table discussing these matters with our Bibles open, I would be more than happy to hear the results of your study as well. In the end, it doesn't matter *who* is right; it only matters *what* is right. Regardless of the adjustments either of us might need to make, the Scriptures should be our authority.

Life requires us to make frequent mid-course corrections. I have had to make many, and some were quite painful (not to mention embarrassing). But if we're not "correctable," there's no hope for us. So if we strive for "consistency," it shouldn't be the kind that comes from never changing our minds. *The only consistency worth having is consistency in following our conscience.* As our conscience grows and becomes better educated, it will move us to make changes. Some of those changes will not be appreciated by other people, perhaps not even by our dearest loved ones. But as Winston Churchill remarked, "The person who never changes his mind never changes anything." If we are known as people who follow our conscience — *even when that makes us look "inconsistent"* — that's a very fine reputation to have.

I encourage you to *look up the passages of Scripture* that are cited in these articles and study them. Whatever help we may receive from other sources, *the important thing is that we study the Scriptures.* It is in God's word that we will find the answers we need.

* * * * *

Whatever may be your reaction to these pages, I would be happy to hear from you. If I can help you personally, in any way at all, don't hesitate to reach out. My contact information is on the copyright page and also the last page of the booklet. I would be happy to hear from you, even if it's just to say hello.

If this booklet was given to you by another person, perhaps they shared their contact information with you. If they cared enough about spiritual matters to share this booklet, I am sure they would be happy to study the Bible with you.

I have a friend who is fond of saying that if we truly want to do what is right, God will see that we get the information we need. It is in that hope that I send these *Twenty Questions* out into the world. If these pages help you, I may never know about it, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that the information was helpful to you — and as a result, you did what was right.

Gary Henry – AreYouaChristian.com

HOW DOES ONE BECOME A CHRISTIAN?

NO ONE WAS EVER A CHRISTIAN WITHOUT *BECOMING* ONE. So “How does one become a Christian?” is a crucial question. Sadly, honest inquirers aren’t always given a good answer these days, and the result is that some may think they have “accepted” Jesus Christ when they have not actually done so.

All of us, this writer included, should be willing to reexamine our convictions in the light of the New Testament. No matter what we’ve believed in the past, the question should be: *is our practice really consistent with the Scriptures?* We must be willing to do what Paul said when he exhorted the Corinthians: “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves” (2 Corinthians 13:5).

So let’s “examine ourselves” in regard to how a person should respond to the gospel. What do the Scriptures teach?

Faith. Jesus said, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Few deny that faith is necessary, but it’s worth asking ourselves whether we really do believe what we say we believe. When the stakes are high and all that we love in this world is at risk, to what extent are we willing — really and truly — to *trust* God? Is there any sacrifice we wouldn’t make in order to put Him first in our lives?

Confession. Jesus taught that we must not only believe in Him privately in our hearts but also confess openly with our words what we believe about Him (Matthew 10:32,33), and Paul wrote, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved” (Romans 10:9,10). To verbally acknowledge that we believe Jesus to be the Son of God is to make what Paul called “the good confession” (1 Timothy 6:12,13).

Repentance. Those who teach that we are saved by “faith only” have trouble with the question of repentance. Repentance (turning away from our sins) is an action that goes beyond faith (in fact, repentance is an outgrowth of faith), so if salvation were by faith only, engaging in repentance would not be essential. However, the New Testament affirms that it is essential. Preaching in the city of Athens, Paul declared that God “commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). And during His own ministry, Jesus had said to some who thought they had no sins they needed to repent of, “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:3).

Baptism. If repentance from our sins is required, so is baptism for the forgiveness of those sins. Peter said it simply on the Day of Pentecost. When his hearers asked what they must do, he told them,

“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38). What could be clearer? Until we have been baptized for the forgiveness of our sins, we are still unforgiven — we have not yet become Christians.

As we repent of our sins and confess our faith, we are taking steps in the direction of forgiveness, but it is not until we submit to the Lord’s command to be baptized that we are forgiven. That being true, it should not surprise us that Paul described those who were “in Christ” as having been baptized into that relationship with Him: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27). If we are “in Christ,” we’ve been baptized into Him.

In another place, Paul wrote, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:3,4).

So baptism is as essential to our salvation as faith and repentance. Without baptism, we’re not yet “in Christ.” It’s the turning point in the process, the defining moment at which we pass from our unforgiven past to our forgiven future. And that’s why in the New Testament, we find people being baptized with a sense of urgency — even in “the same hour of the night” (Acts 16:33).

The teaching of the New Testament on this point is not hard to understand, but nowadays, it will take a bit of courage to stand up for that teaching and admit we believe it.

So let’s make it personal: *what’s your answer to the question of how one becomes a Christian? Does your answer take into account all that the New Testament teaches on the subject?*

WHAT MUST WE DO TO BE SAVED?

IN ACTS 16:30, THE MAN IN CHARGE OF THE PRISON WHERE PAUL AND SILAS WERE BEING HELD ASKED THEM, "SIRS, WHAT MUST I DO TO BE SAVED?" Truly, no one ever asked a more important question.

Paul and Silas answered this question immediately by saying, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household" (Acts 16:31). Some suppose this to mean that salvation in Christ is by "faith only," and they are uncomfortable even talking about the need to "do" anything in order to be saved.

But let's read the rest of this story: "And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God" (Acts 16:32-34).

Having been told to believe in Christ, this man had to be taught what was involved in faith: "they spoke the word of the Lord to him." And having been instructed in the matter of saving faith, "he was baptized at once, he and all his family." Paul's teaching of the word of Christ to this man resulted in his wanting to be baptized into Christ as soon as possible, even before the sun came up.

This sequence of events is exactly what we have in another story, where Philip encountered the court official from Ethiopia: "He told him the good news about Jesus. And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, 'See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?' And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him" (Acts 8:35-38).

In both cases, the gospel of Christ was presented to honest inquirers, and in both cases, after the gospel was explained to them, the individuals wanted to be baptized right away. There is no way around the conclusion that baptism is the final, conclusive step that must be taken before one's sins are forgiven by the grace of Christ.

It is also interesting that in both cases, the individuals "rejoiced" in their new-found salvation after they had been baptized for the remission of their sins (Acts 8:39; 16:34). Even more interesting, it was only after he had been baptized (Acts 16:34) that the Philippian jailer was said to have "believed." And it was only after she had been baptized that Lydia could say, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord . . ." (Acts 16:15).

Make no mistake, faith is the active ingredient in baptism: "buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead"

(Colossians 2:12). And repentance can't be left out of the equation either: "And Peter said to them, '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 2:38).

But let's understand that the question "*What must I do to be saved?*" has a scriptural answer, one that happens to involve *doing* some things. If we're not willing to do the things commanded by the Lord, we need not expect that the gift of forgiveness will be bestowed.

When we accept the initial requirements of the gospel to confess our faith (Romans 10:9,10), repent of our sins (Luke 13:3), and be baptized into Christ (Galatians 3:27), we begin *a life of obedience to the gospel*. Complying with those conditions gives us the hope of heaven, and places us into the realm of grace where God can begin to make us ready for a perfect relationship with Him in eternity.

Are you at the point where you are asking "*What must I do to be saved?*" If you are, then you're ready to hear what the gospel teaches about receiving the forgiveness of your sins. In the New Testament, read the book of Acts and see the pattern of obedience clearly emerge. If you do what those people did, you will be just what they were: *a faithful follower of Jesus Christ*.

ARE THERE ANY CONDITIONS TO GOD'S GRACE?

ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR CONCEPTS IN THE RELIGIOUS WORLD IS "SALVATION BY GRACE." Properly understood, the concept of God's grace is one of the most important doctrines in the Bible. It means that the forgiveness of our sins is a gift. After rebelling against God by the sins we have committed, we do not deserve mercy. There is nothing we could do to earn back God's favor. We are lost, and if we're going to be rescued from our plight, God must graciously do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Salvation by grace is forgiveness on the basis of God's love — *based on Christ's sacrifice for us, God gives us a gift that we could never earn for ourselves.*

Many biblical texts teach that this is the nature of salvation in Christ. One such text is Ephesians 2:8,9: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."

But there is a problem here. Many people go beyond the biblical doctrine of salvation by grace and teach that God's grace is completely *unconditional*: in other words, grace requires nothing that we must do to receive the gift. Those who believe in "unconditional grace" take this idea in two different directions:

(1) Some believe that, in the end, God will save everybody. If salvation is a matter of unconditional grace on God's part, why would He not want to save everybody? This is the doctrine of *universalism*.

(2) Others believe that, despite God's grace, some are going to be lost. But if salvation is a matter of unconditional grace and some are lost, it must be God who decides who will receive His grace and who will not. This is the doctrine of *predestination* or *sovereign grace*.

But the Bible teaches neither universalism nor predestination (at least in the sense of unconditional predestination to salvation). *It teaches that there are conditions attached to the reception of God's grace.* Some individuals will accept those conditions and receive God's gift, but others will refuse those conditions and forfeit the gift they might have received.

On Pentecost in Acts 2, many responded to Peter's sermon urgently. "Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?'" (Acts 2:37). If Peter had taken the modern approach, he would have said, "There is nothing you have to do; salvation is totally by grace." But Peter did not say that. Emphasizing that the gospel must be obeyed, he said, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38).

Repentance and baptism certainly do not earn salvation for anyone. They do not put God in our debt. They are not meritorious works

by which we justify ourselves. They are, however, conditions that must be met before God's gift will be given. And that is why Peter could exhort his hearers to take action immediately to avoid being lost. "And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, 'Save yourselves from this crooked generation'" (Acts 2:40).

In the Old Testament, Naaman, a commander in the Syrian army, is a good example of how a gift may depend on action by the recipient. A leper, he had been sent to Elisha the prophet for healing. Elisha told him, "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean" (2 Kings 5:10). Although reluctant, Naaman finally did what he was told, and when he did he was cleansed of his leprosy. No serious Bible student would say that he would have been healed if he had not done as Elisha instructed him. Yet washing in the Jordan River did not earn him freedom from leprosy, and there was nothing meritorious about his obedience. *The gift was pure grace on God's part — but Naaman would have died a leper if he had not complied with God's instructions.*

Similarly, repentance and baptism do not merit our salvation, but they are nevertheless conditions that God has attached to His gift. Peter could not have been clearer when he said that baptism is "for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). Who is bold enough to contradict the Scriptures and suggest that the gift may be given whether or not one does what God has commanded?

Contrary to what is often alleged, baptism is not a work of human righteousness — it is God's work. Listen to what Paul wrote in Colossians 2:12: "having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead."

So is salvation in Christ by grace? Yes it is! Are there conditions that must be complied with to receive that grace? Yes there are! And these simple terms — applicable to every human being — separate those who have a truly obedient heart from those who do not.

If you believe that Jesus is who He claimed to be — the Son of God who died to make our salvation possible — and you are wondering what comes next, then consider the following texts:

"Repent therefore, and turn back,
that your sins may be blotted out" (Acts 3:19).

"And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized
and wash away your sins, calling on his name" (Acts 22:16).

In baptism, *we die with Christ* (Romans 6:3) and *we appeal to God for a good conscience* (1 Peter 3:21). Is your conscience at peace because you know you've accepted God's grace on His terms? If not, it's urgent that you ask yourself, "Why not?"

HOW DOES ONE ACCEPT GOD'S GRACE?

UNLESS WE BELIEVE THAT EVERYONE IS GOING TO BE SAVED, WE MUST COME TO GRIPS WITH THE FACT THAT SOME ARE GOING TO BE LOST. And if some end up being lost, it's important to ask what separates those who will be lost from those who will be saved. In other words, what are the conditions of salvation? What must we do to *accept the gift* that God has made available in Jesus Christ?

Some say that *faith* is necessary in order to receive the forgiveness of our sins, and this is certainly true. If we turn away from faith in Christ, we reject the salvation that He offers. Jesus said it plainly: "Unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins" (John 8:24). And our faith must not be kept secret but be *confessed* and openly acknowledged. Paul wrote, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved" (Romans 10:9,10).

Others would add *repentance* as a condition of salvation, and this also is true to the Scriptures. It is our sins that have separated us from God, and unless we're willing to turn away from those sins, we will remain under their condemnation. Peter urged one group of hearers, "Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out" (Acts 3:19). To another audience, he said that God "commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30).

Still others say that *baptism* is a requirement, and once again, this is what the Scriptures teach. Outside of Christ, we are lost, and we are not "in Christ" unless we've been baptized into Him. "All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (Romans 6:3). "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Galatians 3:27).

The third position (faith, repentance, and baptism) is the only one that does justice to the *full, complete teaching of the Bible*. Saul (later to be called Paul) is a good example of what happened when people were converted to Jesus Christ in the New Testament. He had been a believer, grieving for his sins, for three days when Ananias arrived and said, "And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name" (Acts 22:16). Saul's sins were not washed away at the point of faith, and they were not washed away at the point of repentance. They were washed away when he — as a penitent believer — obeyed the command to be baptized.

So God's grace is not automatically applied to everybody. To the contrary, *God's grace has to be accepted* — and those who accept it are those who choose to receive it *on His terms*. We must come humbly before God asking, "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30).

Consider the following two points about faith and grace:

(1) *Faith* is the most basic element in our salvation, but Paul said that the aim of the gospel is to produce the “obedience of faith” (Romans 1:5; 16:26), and James said that “faith without works is dead” (James 2:17,26). In the gospel, faith and obedience work together.

(2) *Grace* is what saves us, but grace may be received “in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:10; 2 Corinthians 6:1). If we refuse the grace that God offers, or presume to receive it on anything other than His terms, God’s goodness will have been for nothing as far as we are concerned. We can’t imagine any greater tragedy, and it is heartbreaking to hear Jesus lamenting those in His day who had refused His grace: “How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Matthew 23:37).

We may wish that grace were automatic or unconditional, but it’s hard to see how God could have made it so without taking away our freedom of will. As long as our wills are free, all God can do is invite us, exhort us, and urge us to accept His grace. He will not compel us to be saved against our will. It is, however, His fervent desire that we accept His salvation, and He awaits our decision with the loving heart of a Father (Luke 15:20).

So by God’s grace, our salvation has been made possible. The way back home has been opened up — *and the decision now rests with us whether we will receive God’s gift or refuse it*. It is time for us, as the old hymn said, to “trust and obey.”

“And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name” (Acts 22:16).

WHAT IS THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF FAITH?

A CLEAR DISTINCTION IS MADE IN THE SCRIPTURES BETWEEN TWO KINDS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS — THE “RIGHTEOUSNESS OF LAW” AND THE “RIGHTEOUSNESS OF FAITH.” Paul, for example, said that he had given up the privileges of his previous life “that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (Philippians 3:8,9).

What is the difference between the two?

The *righteousness of law* would be the righteousness we would have before God if we had never sinned. Never having broken God’s law, we would be completely just in His sight. We would be pleasing to Him because we had never done anything to displease Him.

All of us old enough to know right from wrong will have to admit that we no longer qualify for this kind of righteousness. We know we have done things that were violations of our Creator’s will: we have committed deliberate sin and stand before God as those who have turned away from His will. As John wrote, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8).

The good news of the gospel, however, is that God has made another kind of righteousness possible: the *righteousness of faith*. While we can never go back to being people who have never sinned (and having sinned, there is nothing we could do to work our way back into God’s favor), God is willing to accept us (consider us as righteous) based on our faith rather than the perfection of our obedience to Him.

In Genesis 15:6, it was said about Abraham that “he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.” That text is quoted or alluded to four times in the New Testament as an illustration of how we may be righteous today through the gospel of Christ (Romans 4:3-5,20-22; Galatians 3:6-9; James 2:23).

This is indeed good news because it allows us to be righteous before God based on something we can give Him: our faith. If our righteousness depended on sinless perfection, we would be hopelessly lost since we are no longer able to give such a life to Him. But faith is something we can give, and when we make the choice to be people of faith, we can have the confidence that God counts us as righteous in His sight. (Go back and look again at Philippians 3:8,9).

God can only make this wonderful offer to us because His Son has taken upon Himself the penalty for our sins, thereby satisfying the just demands of the law. Christ having died for us, God can consider us just without being unjust to His own law. Paul said it this way in Romans 3:26: “It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

But we need to be careful. Two serious misconceptions of the righteousness of faith are prevalent in the world today:

(1) The fact that God is willing to accept our faith as the basis of our justification does not mean that obedience is not necessary. As people of faith, we will obey God to the very best of our ability. If we do not, we are not people of faith. But while our works are not sufficient to save us, it is still true, as James said, that “faith apart from works is dead” (James 2:17,26). When we are baptized into Christ, we “die” to sin, and Paul asked, “How can we who died to sin still live in it?” (Romans 6:2).

(2) The righteousness of faith *does not mean that repentance and baptism are not necessary as preconditions to the forgiveness of our sins*. It is only “in Christ” that God will accept our faith as our righteousness, and baptism is the door through which we enter this relationship with God. Paul said, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27). And when the hearers on Pentecost asked what they needed to do, Peter told them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38).

Clearly then, the faith that God will accept as our righteousness is a far cry from the mere “belief” that some people consider to be faith. The faith that can save us is the kind of faith that Abraham had: *deep-down, active trust in God* — the kind that unhesitatingly obeys God, even if obedience is difficult and requires great sacrifice. “You see that faith was active along with [Abraham’s] works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’ — and he was called a friend of God” (James 2:22,23).

Wouldn’t you like to lay down the burden of a past that you can never undo no matter how hard you try? Wouldn’t you like to enjoy a forgiveness, a peace, and a righteousness based on something within your reach, something that is possible rather than impossible?

If so, then hear the invitation of the gospel to **believe** that Jesus is the Christ (John 8:24), **confess** your faith in the hearing of others (Romans 10:9,10), **repent** of the sins that have separated you from God (Acts 3:19), and **be baptized** for the forgiveness of those sins (Acts 2:38).

Doing these things will put your feet on the path of faith. You will live a life you’ve never lived before: *a life of genuine trust in God, where you allow Him to lead the way*. And as a Christian, you will look forward to the ultimate goal of faith, which is a perfect, joyous relationship with God in eternity: “Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1 Peter 1:8,9).

WHAT IS THE OBEDIENCE OF FAITH?

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, THE IDEA OF “OBEDIENCE” IS CLEARLY IMPORTANT. Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). And faith, that critical element in the “righteousness of faith,” is always presented as an active response to God rather than mere belief. “For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead” (James 2:26).

In Romans 1:5 (and also 16:26), Paul wrote that the preaching of the gospel of Christ was “to bring about the obedience of faith.” *What would obedience be if it was “of faith,” and how would that be different from any other kind of obedience?*

To start with, we should note that some translations of Romans 1:5 and 16:26 render the phrase “obedience TO the faith.” If this is the correct rendering, the thought is certainly consistent with the teaching of the New Testament. The gospel, or “the faith,” must be responded to; it must be obeyed (Romans 10:15,16). So, for example, we hear in Acts 6:7 that “a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.”

But most translations present Romans 1:5 as the ESV does: “the obedience OF faith.” Taking it this way, the idea is that *our obedience has faith as its source*. In other words, what God desires from us is not a mechanical or ritualistic obedience, much less a grudging obedience or one that is hypocritical. The obedience of faith is a submission to God’s will that springs from faith in God Himself. *We follow God’s instructions because we trust Him.*

If we wish our response to the gospel to be a right response, it must take into account the *vital connection between faith and obedience*. Neither of these without the other is what God desires. Our *faith* must show up in obedience or it is not saving faith (Luke 6:46), and if our *obedience* is not “of faith,” it is not pleasing to God either (Hebrews 11:6). Faith without obedience is useless, but so is obedience without faith. What’s in our hearts and what’s in our actions must match up.

The “obedience of faith” is a powerful expression in the New Testament. In contrast to much that is preached today, the obedience of faith is different in two directions. On the one hand, it is different from the “faith only” doctrine, which teaches that our response to the gospel doesn’t require any obedience at all. But on the other hand, it is different from the view of those who suppose that as long as one does what God says, it doesn’t matter why one does it. In the Scriptures, what God wants is not just faith but the OBEDIENCE of faith — and what He wants is not just obedience but the obedience OF FAITH.

The “faith” required by the gospel is more than merely agreeing to the truth that Jesus is the Son of God. Believing this truth is certainly

required (John 8:24; Romans 10:9,10; etc.), and we must not only believe it but be honest enough to confess it (John 12:42,43). Yet the faith that produces the “obedience of faith” goes deeper than the intellectual acceptance of the facts. It involves *trust* as well as belief.

In 2 Timothy 1:12, notice how Paul expressed his faith. After alluding to his persecutions and the prospect of being put to death by the Roman government, he said, “But I am not ashamed, *for I know whom I have believed*, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me” (2 Timothy 1:12). Paul certainly accepted the truths of the Christian faith, but he also trusted the God those truths were about. “I know *whom* I have believed,” he said.

James Dobson colorfully distinguished trust from mere belief when he said, “Faith in God is like believing a man can walk over Niagara Falls on a tightrope while pushing a wheelbarrow. Trust in God is like getting into the wheelbarrow.” This courageous willingness to “get in the wheelbarrow” is what produces the “obedience of faith,” and it is at the very heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the Scriptures, Abraham is a good example of how genuine trust in God results in obedience. “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going” (Hebrews 11:8). Like all the other examples of faith in Hebrews 11, Abraham’s actions were based on a confidence that God can always be trusted, even when from a human standpoint there seems to be no way God’s promises can come to pass. Unlike mere belief, trust is willing to take risks.

Life frequently confronts us with situations that test our trust in God. It is in those circumstances that we often find out whether our faith is anything more than mere belief. Despite our motto “In God We Trust,” we often don’t trust Him very much, at least not when it really counts. So I recommend to you the definition of trust in God that I heard from Adam Litner, a friend of mine: “unwavering belief that God’s way is always the right way, without exception . . . and that our lives will always be best lived when lived for His glory.”

Where are you in regard to God’s plan of salvation in Jesus Christ?

- (1) Do you *believe* the truth about Jesus enough to *trust* Him?
- (2) Would you have the courage to *confess* your faith openly?
- (3) Do you trust God enough to *repent* of your sins and turn away from the sinful habits that have been your security?
- (4) And are you willing to *be baptized* into Christ? Baptism is an act of trust, a placing of our faith in the promise of God to save us. It is in baptism that we are “raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Colossians 2:12).

These are the initial steps by which we begin living in obedience to the gospel — giving to God the obedience of our faith.

IS JESUS CHRIST THE ONLY WAY TO SALVATION?

JESUS' CLAIMS ABOUT HIS IDENTITY AND MISSION WERE BOLD. When He said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6 NASB), He was making an assertion that may be hard to accept, but His meaning was unmistakable: *He meant that He was the only possible path back to God, the one means designed by God to provide salvation for all mankind.*

John the Baptist: "Behold [Jesus], the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

Jesus: "I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins" (John 8:24).

Jesus: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live" (John 11:25).

Peter: "This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:11,12).

Paul: "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5).

As we said, these statements may difficult for us to hear, especially in today's social environment. But what shall we do? One approach would be to water down Jesus' claim and reinterpret it in a way that is more acceptable to modern sensibilities. However this is not a responsible way to handle an ancient text, whether it is the New Testament or any other document. Even if we disagree with ancient writers, they should be allowed to say what they said. A better approach would be to simply ask: *are Jesus' statements true?* It may be that, despite our negative knee-jerk reaction, this is still (1) what Jesus actually taught, and (2) the evidence supports the fact that His teachings are true. If what Jesus said is correct, it needs to be accepted and acted upon.

Granted, we should take a stand for that truth without being hypocritical, self-righteous, or judgmental. And if we accept the gospel of Christ, our attitude toward those who have not yet accepted it should be one of compassion and humility rather than condescension.

That said, however, we must not evade the force of what the gospel teaches. There is no way around the exclusiveness of the idea that Jesus is "the way, and the truth, and the life." If true, the gospel requires us to discard the familiar image of God as a mountain summit that can be reached by any path one chooses to climb.

But I want to suggest a line of thought that may help with some of our misunderstandings about the idea of God providing just one way.

Think carefully about the difference it makes which view we take about how mankind needs to be "saved."

(1) *Social improvement.* If we think mankind's worst problems are things like social injustice, crime, poverty, and health disparities, there might be room for discussion as to the most expedient way to improve the world. "Making the world a better place" is certainly a project in which all religions can play a role, and it would be a waste of time to debate which one is the most effective. If we envision "God" merely in terms of a worldly utopia or temporal paradise, any religion that advanced the cause of social justice would be helpful to some extent.

(2) *Health and wellness.* Many people are interested in religion for its therapeutic value; they want its help in overcoming their stress and unhappiness, so they can feel better and live longer. And here again, almost any religion, if taken seriously and devoutly, can lend a helping hand (just ask Alcoholics Anonymous). If you think your religion is the only one that can help overcome these kinds of problems, the statisticians and social researchers will quickly prove you wrong.

(3) *Moral instruction.* This is the third reason why many are interested in religion. They believe religion's primary role is to reveal the right way to live. But frankly, most of the major religions agree on the core principles of morality. They vary slightly, but if there was no higher purpose for religion than moral instruction, one might argue that all of the religions contribute something of value.

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However, what if the main purpose of religion is not social improvement, health and wellness, or moral instruction? What if the thing we need to be saved from is *sin* and its *eternal* consequences? That would radically change the question of whether there are many paths to God.

To be sure, the teachings of Jesus will improve social conditions, and they are conducive people's emotional and physical health. As far as morality is concerned, Jesus' teaching was consistent with what thoughtful human beings have known about right conduct since the beginning of time. He did not claim to introduce a moral standard that was new or unique. Instead, He called people back to the standard the human race started out with in "the beginning" (Matthew 19:8).

Our problem is that we've *violated* the standard — and we're cut off from God as a result. Christ claimed that His sacrifice was the only way we could be cured of the cancer that was our real problem: *sin*.

If God is the God described in the Scriptures and Jesus is His Son, God alone has the right to say how we can be reconciled to Him. A partial (or merely "helpful") solution will not do. Either the solution comes down from God and saves us in eternity or it does not save us at all. In the busy religious marketplace, Jesus did not set up a booth where He hawked a new plan for a nicer life. *What He did was die for our sins.*

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO CONFESS CHRIST?

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, WE ARE TAUGHT THAT A PERSON'S FAITH IN CHRIST MUST BE "CONFESSED." What does this mean?

The central fact of the gospel is that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). In addition to believing it in our hearts, we must acknowledge this truth in the presence of other people: "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved" (Romans 10:9,10). To confess our faith, then, is to say in the hearing of others that we believe Jesus is the Son of God. If it is a "crime" to be one of those who believe, we "plead guilty" and do not hide the truth about who Jesus was.

The confession one makes at his baptism is not a one-time act, however; it is the beginning of a *lifetime* of confessing Him. For the rest of his life, the Christian will fly his colors openly, not hiding his identity as one of Christ's people. If we are too cowardly to confess our faith, Jesus was clear about the consequences: "Everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 10:32,33).

But while the remainder of the Christian's life is to be a confession of Christ, it is still true that an initial confession of faith must be made in *becoming* a Christian. Going back to Romans 10:9,10, Paul is talking in that passage about what happens when a person first obeys the gospel. Both faith (in the heart) and confession (with the mouth) are said to be things that are prior to the reception of salvation (read the passage again carefully). They move a person in that direction, but it is only in baptism that a person crosses the line from condemnation to salvation (Romans 6:4-6). In the account of Paul's own conversion, Ananias said to him, "And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name" (Acts 22:16).

Nowadays, the importance of a person's confession prior to baptism is not emphasized very much. Often the act is hurried through, almost as a formality. Perhaps we're in a hurry to get the person baptized, but for whatever reason, we neglect to impress upon the candidate for baptism the importance of what they are doing when they confess, "I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God."

Those words, spoken in the hearing of witnesses, put us on record as being one of the believers — one who has pledged never to renounce or betray the faith. By our confession, we make a public promise of allegiance — *a commitment* — to Christ for the rest of our lives. That's a serious promise. Indeed, it's the most serious promise a person can make.

In the days when the New Testament was written, Christians were sometimes tortured and put to death. So in localities where being a Christian was dangerous, it would have been tempting to be a “secret” believer. But the command to confess one’s faith meant that Christ was to be openly acknowledged. He was to be confessed no less when it was dangerous than when it was safe.

When Jesus was on trial for His life, Pilate asked Him if He was the king of the Jews. In the deadly tension of that moment, most of us would have tried to soften the truth, if not deny it altogether. But Jesus did not conceal His identity; He confessed it — and by the death that resulted from that confession, our salvation was made possible. No wonder Paul described Jesus’ confession before Pilate, and also our own, as the “good confession” (1 Timothy 6:12,13). No more beautiful words ever fell from anyone’s lips than those which acknowledge the truth about Jesus Christ.

It is possible, of course, to confess Christ verbally and not have any real faith in Christ or obedience to Him. In cultures where it is safe (and maybe even popular) to be a Christian, many people say one thing but do something else, proclaiming themselves to be Christians but not living like it in their private lives. This is what we mean by *nominal* (“in name only”) Christians. Jesus anticipated this problem when He said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). And He asked, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?” (Luke 6:46). So if we confess Christ, we had better make sure that our deeds are in harmony with that confession.

Life is hard, and even for those who are serious about their faith, it’s a challenge to keep living consistently with our confession, year after year. The struggle can wear us down. So the writer of Hebrews encouraged his readers to keep going, regardless of the difficulty. To give up would be to renounce what they confessed when they became Christians. He wrote, “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us *hold fast* our confession” (4:14), and “let us *hold fast* the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful” (10:23).

So if you are thinking of becoming a Christian, consider that obeying the gospel will involve *believing* the truth about Christ, *confessing* it in the presence of witnesses, and *holding fast* to it as long as you live. If, as I believe, the good things in life come from making commitments, the greatest commitment of all — the one we make in becoming a Christian — will carry with it the greatest of blessing of all.

I hope you won’t be afraid to confess Christ . . . and keep on confessing Him as long as you live.

HOW DOES ONE ACCEPT JESUS AS LORD?

FEW WORDS ARE MORE FUNDAMENTAL TO THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST THAN THE WORD *LORD*. In fact, “one who has accepted the lordship of Christ” wouldn’t be a bad definition of what it means to be a Christian. But how does one do this? Does it mean simply saying the words “I accept Jesus as my Lord”?

It is true that the gospel requires us to acknowledge our faith verbally, as we saw in the previous article on “confessing” Christ. Prior to being baptized, we must confess with our mouth what we believe in our heart (Romans 10:9,10). But the same thing is true of “accepting” Christ that is true of “confessing” Him: *words alone are not enough*. The words must be a true reflection of what is really going on in our lives. If not, both the “confession” and the “acceptance” are hypocritical. So Paul wrote, “You have accepted Christ Jesus as your Lord. Now keep on following him” (Colossians 2:6 CEV). In other words, if you’ve accepted Christ, *show by the way you live that you’ve accepted Him*.

In the days of the New Testament, the word *lord* was a token of respect. In common usage, it was a polite term, similar to our word *sir*. But in more serious contexts, it had to do with authority. A “lord” was one with the authority to command the obedience of those under him.

In the Scriptures, however, lordship has a more far-reaching meaning. Before His ascension back to heaven, Jesus made an astonishing claim of *ultimate* lordship: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20).

As I say, this was an astonishing claim. Such a thing could never have been true if He were not God, the Creator of the universe. But that is precisely who Jesus was: God, who had come into the world as a human being in order to die for our sins and make our salvation possible (John 1:1-3,14,18; 5:18; etc.). And it was only after Jesus’ resurrection — clearly proving Him to be who He claimed to be — that He made this claim of all-encompassing lordship and sovereignty. Consequently, He is not just *a* lord among men; He is the “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Revelation 19:16). Having created us, there is nothing about us that He doesn’t have the right to regulate. *Our every thought, word, and deed should be under His direction*.

But that is the very problem of sin, is it not? We were created by God, but we have *rebelled* against His lordship, choosing to set up our own “kingdom” and do our own will. At one time or another, every one of us has deliberately rejected God’s authority and said, “I will *not* do Your will. I will do as I please.” That’s exactly what sin is.

Obviously, if the problem of sin is to be overcome, this rebellion must be reversed. It will not be enough for God to simply overlook our attitude; we will have to repent of our self-will, turn around, and commit ourselves to obeying God once again. In other words, we will have to “accept Him as our Lord.” He has always had the *right* to be our Lord, but in obeying the gospel, we *yield* to that lordship, letting Him be the Lord He always would have been had we never rebelled.

To “accept Christ as our Lord,” then, means making this commitment. It means laying down our rebellion and coming back to the rightful King, apologizing for having defected to the enemy and accepting His help in learning how to live under His rule once more.

At what point, then, can we say we’ve “accepted” Christ? Is it at the point of faith? Repentance? Confession of our faith? No, while each of these is important, it is only when we arise from the waters of baptism can it be said that we’ve “put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27), accepting Him as our Lord. Having been “baptized into his death” (Romans 6:3), we’re truly ready to “walk in newness of life” (v.4).

When we’ve accepted the lordship of Christ, every area of our life is to be yielded to His government, not just the “religious” part. There will be no room in the “house” of our heart that is off-limits to Him; we will have given Him permission to govern the most secret of our thoughts and motives, as well as our outward words and deeds.

The apostle Peter wrote to his brethren, “Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts” (1 Peter 3:15 NASB). The CEV paraphrases it this way: “Honor Christ and let him be the Lord of your life.” The idea is that the Christian, having turned away from his previous rebellion and accepted Christ’s lordship, now yields himself to Christ’s will exclusively. Christ is “set apart” as the sole director of his life.

In a predominantly “Christian” nation, many will say they’ve accepted Christ when they haven’t really done so. To them, Jesus would say, as He said two thousand years ago, “Why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do the things which I say?” (Luke 6:46). Paul put it plainly when he wrote, “If you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?” (Romans 6:16 ESV). So whose lordship have we accepted, really and truly? It’s the one whom we *obey*.

Here, then, is a point to ponder: if we claim to have accepted Christ but we deny that we must be baptized to be forgiven of our sins, have we not flunked the test of yielding to His authority right at the start? How can we talk of “accepting Christ as Lord” if, right off the bat, we quibble at the necessity of doing what His gospel commands (Acts 2:38; 22:16)? Are we serious about His lordship or not?

HOW DO WE ACCEPT JESUS AS OUR SAVIOR?

IT IS COMMON TO HEAR PEOPLE SPEAK OF “ACCEPTING CHRIST.” Perhaps you have had someone ask whether you’ve “accepted Christ as your personal Savior.” Rightly understood, these are biblical concepts. But as is often true when ideas pass into the popular culture, the original idea of accepting Christ is quite different from the popular one.

If you wanted to accept Jesus as your Savior and you wanted to do that as people did in the New Testament, what would you do?

First, we should understand that Jesus must, indeed, be accepted. Those who do not accept Him will not receive the blessings of His salvation. The decision of anyone to reject Jesus’ salvation is grievous to Him, of course, but it is a real possibility nevertheless. Hear Jesus, for example, lamenting Jerusalem’s rejection Him: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! *How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!* See, your house is left to you desolate” (Matthew 23:37,38).

What this tells us is that accepting salvation is not a passive matter. It is not as though our salvation has been provided by God (unilaterally and unconditionally) and all we have to do is become aware that we’ve been saved. That certainly was not the case with Jerusalem in the text we just looked at, and it’s not true in our case today. Whatever response God is looking for, if we don’t respond accordingly, we will not have accepted Jesus as our Savior.

Some teach that the only response necessary is simply to *acknowledge* God’s salvation, perhaps by saying a receptive and grateful prayer. But again, this is not consistent with the New Testament record. Saul of Tarsus, for example, had been a believer in Christ for three days, apparently seeking the forgiveness of his sins quite penitently, before Ananias, a Christian in Damascus, was sent by God to tell him: “And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name” (Act 22:16). It is obvious that until Saul had done what needed to be done to wash away his sins, he had not accepted Jesus as His Savior. He was moving in that direction, but until he was baptized into Christ, Christ was yet not his Savior.

None of this contradicts the fact that our salvation is by God’s grace. While baptism is something we must do to accept Christ, it does not earn our salvation. To the contrary, when we make that response to the gospel, based on our trust in God’s promise of forgiveness, the resulting salvation is something that occurs “through faith in the powerful working of God” (Colossians 2:12) and not by our own power.

By our own efforts, we cannot work our way out of the lost condition in which our sins have landed us. “For while we were still helpless,

at the right time Christ died for the ungodly” (Romans 5:6 NASB). But if God has required a certain response from us before His Son can be our Savior, humility on our part will yield to His will in the matter.

Think for a moment about God’s sending of Moses to lead the people of Israel out of their Egyptian slavery. In a sense, Moses was sent to “save” them, and as you may remember, Moses was worried whether they would *agree* to his being their savior (Exodus 4:1). And just as Moses feared, they did resist his leadership. But finally, they agreed to follow him out into the desert, and their “salvation” required a good deal more on their part than the passive acceptance of God’s saving love for them. Had they not done some things which God commanded them to do, it could not have been said that they “accepted” Moses as their deliverer.

Today, we need to be saved from sin much more than Israel needed saving from slavery. Will we “accept” the Savior sent to deliver us? And if we agree to accept Him, will we insist that nothing more is required than passively acknowledging the grace of God?

The New Testament speaks of baptism as the act in which we die with Christ: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” (Romans 6:3). It is also the act in which we “put on” Christ: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27). These two texts emphasize the fundamental change that takes place when a person, at the Lord’s command, is immersed in water for the remission of his sins. Other things are involved in our response to the gospel (belief in the truth about Christ, a rejection of our past sins, and the verbal confession of our faith), but these things point in the direction of the salvation we “accept” when we are baptized. Until we have turned that decisive corner, it cannot be said that we’ve “accepted Jesus as our Savior,” at least not scripturally.

But I hope these ideas are not just abstract theory to you; I hope they are very real and personal. If you have not obeyed the gospel of Christ — and thereby accepted Him as your Savior — my prayer is that you will do so. And when you have done so, I hope you’ll live until you die as one who has accepted Christ, in your deeds as well as your words, keeping in mind Paul’s admonition: “As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him” (Colossians 2:6).

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE BORN AGAIN?

LIKE MANY OF THE OTHER TOPICS WE'VE DISCUSSED, THE "NEW BIRTH" IS OFTEN MISUNDERSTOOD. It is popularly believed that "born-again" Christians are those who have had a spiritual experience, an inner transformation, which their more formalistic brethren have not had.

In the New Testament, however, we find that being born again is an experience common to all who are in the kingdom of God. The new birth is one of the illustrations used to describe what happens when anyone obeys the gospel of Christ. To be sure, some Christians are not very far down the road to maturity. In fact, the thinking of some is so immature, it scarcely differs from how they thought before they obeyed the gospel (1 Corinthians 3:1-3). But all true Christians, the less as well as the more mature, have been born again.

(1) *John 3:3,6-8*. When Nicodemus, a leading Pharisee, came by night to talk to Jesus, Jesus said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (v.3). And when Nicodemus indicated that he didn't see how anyone could be born a second time, Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, *unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God*. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (vv.5-8). According to Jesus, then, a person "cannot enter the kingdom of God" without being "born of water and the Spirit." All of those in the kingdom have been reborn in this way.

(2) *1 Peter 1:3,22,23*. As he began to describe the wonderful hope enjoyed by those who are in Christ, Peter wrote, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, *he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead*" (v.3). A few verses later, he wrote, "Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, *since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God*" (vv.22,23). These Christians had all been born again "through the living and abiding word of God."

(3) *1 John 4:21-5:1*. In this text, John was exhorting his fellow Christians to love one another, and he used the analogy of a family in which the siblings love one another. "And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother. Everyone

who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him.” In the spiritual family of God, all of the siblings have the same Father. They have all been “born of God.” And if they love the Father who begot them, they must love all whom He has begotten: “everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him.” John was speaking of all Christians when he depicted them as having been born of God.

These three texts, then, describe not just some but all who have obeyed the gospel of Christ. (1) They are in the kingdom of God, a relationship to God they could not enjoy without being “born again,” as Jesus taught in John 3:3. (2) God has caused them “to be born again to a living hope,” as Peter wrote in 1 Peter 1:3. (3) And Christians must love all their brothers and sisters in the family of God, a family comprised of people “born of God,” as John wrote in 1 John 5:1. These texts do not refer to a special group of Christians; they describe all who are in Christ.

When we consider the radical difference between life outside of Christ and life in Him, it is no surprise that turning from the former to the latter is described in terms of being “reborn.” To obey the gospel of Christ, receive the eternal hope that comes from the forgiveness of our sins, and begin living under the benevolent rule of our true King is to die and come back to life as a new person. Paul described his own conversion to Christ this way: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

Having become Christians, do we always live consistently with our new birth? No, we do not, and if it weren’t for the grace that is ours in Christ, we would have no hope of eternal life (1 John 1:7-9). But the rebirth is real — and one good way of talking about the challenge before us when we become Christians is to say that *we must now learn to live like the new people we have become*. It’s a gradual (and sometimes painful) process — but empowered by the hope which is at the heart of the gospel, we gladly submit to the process.

So I urge you, open the Scriptures and read 1 Peter 1:3-12 several times, slowly and honestly. And ask yourself, am I among those who have this hope because I have been “born again” (v.3)? If you have not been baptized into Christ’s death (Romans 6:3,4; Galatians 3:27; Colossians 2:12), don’t your opportunity go to waste. You can’t go back and be born again physically, but you can, as Jesus said, be “born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5) and enter the kingdom of God.

IS SALVATION BY FAITH ONLY?

ONE OF THE MOST PREVALENT MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE GOSPEL IS THAT NOTHING MORE THAN FAITH IS REQUIRED IN ORDER FOR OUR SINS TO BE FORGIVEN. We readily admit the importance of faith; indeed, it is at the heart of the response called for by the gospel. But is *all* that is involved? Let's consider this within two contexts, both of which are extremely important:

(1) *Becoming a Christian.* In our initial response to Christ, as we seek to move from condemnation to salvation, is faith the only thing required? Faith is surely the "motive" or "engine" that will move us to do whatever God requires — but what exactly is required?

In the account of the Philippian jailer's obedience in Acts 16:25-34, when he asked Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (v.30), they said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household" (v.31). Some would cite this as evidence of "faith only," but think carefully about the rest of the passage.

Having told the man that he must believe, Paul and Silas then instructed him in the content of that belief: "they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house" (v.32). And the result, in v.33, was that "he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes. And immediately he and all his family were baptized" (v.33). It was only after he had been baptized into Christ that "he rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household." This is consistent with the Ethiopian nobleman's conversion in 8:26-40, where, after being baptized, "he went on his way rejoicing" (v.39).

The parallel between the jailer's conversion and that of Lydia in the same chapter (vv.11-15) is striking. In v.15, we read that "when she and her household were baptized, she begged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay'" (v.15). In both cases, it was only after the individuals had been baptized that they rejoiced (vv.15,33,34). Having been baptized, Lydia could, at that point, truly say, "If you have judged me to be faithful . . ."

In the case of the Philippian jailer, to whom Paul said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved" (16:31), would Paul have taught this man anything less than he had been taught when he was converted? Paul (named Saul at the time) had been a believer for three days in Damascus, praying and fasting, when he was instructed by a Christian in that city, "Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (22:16). Surely Paul would have taught the same thing to the Philippian jailer and his family.

(2) *After becoming a Christian.* Having obeyed the gospel initially, will it be enough for us from that point onward simply to believe the truth and trust that God will save us? No, the Scriptures teach that

if our faith doesn't produce *obedience* to God, it will not save us. Faith is the prime motive in our response to God's salvation (Romans 1:16,17; Galatians 3:7-9; Philippians 3:8,9; etc.), but obedience is still necessary. In fact, Hebrews 11, which is one of the greatest chapters on faith in the Bible, consists entirely of a list of people who *did* things based on their faith. (Would Noah's faith have kept him from drowning if he hadn't built the ark?) Today, just as faith moves us to repent and be baptized (Acts 2:38), it also moves us to obey God in our daily lives after our baptism. Having begun by trusting God enough to obey Him in baptism, the Christian will continue to "walk by faith" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

James made it clear that faith alone is not sufficient in the Christian's life: "So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? . . . You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone . . . For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead" (James 2:17-20,24,26). But what James says about the Christian's life is not surprising, is it? The Christian will have learned right from the start, when he accepted the requirement to be baptized for the remission of his sins, that more is involved in salvation than merely believing.

Jesus, of course, emphasized repeatedly that those who accept His lordship must obey Him:

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21).

"Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?" (Luke 6:46).

"Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me" (John 14:21).

When we stop to think about it, this all makes perfect sense. The thing that got us into trouble was turning our *will* away from God. The main part of our problem, then, is our disobedient attitude — and if the problem is going to be fixed, *our will must be turned back in God's direction*. This process of relearning starts with submitting to the initial requirements of the gospel, including baptism, but it certainly doesn't end there. In Christ, we must learn to relate to God in a better way: a way of life based on the "obedience of faith" (Romans 1:5; 16:26). *In the words of the old hymn, we must learn to "Trust and Obey."*

WHAT IS BAPTISM?

ONE OF THE MOST WIDESPREAD MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT BAPTISM IS ONE CONCERNING ITS “ACTION.” When a person is baptized, what is the physical action that takes place? Many people believe that baptism can be accomplished by sprinkling or pouring water upon a person, but in the Scriptures, baptism was always an *immersion*.

The original Jewish hearers of the gospel would have understood immersion. In first-century Judaism, the *mikvah*, or ritual bath, was a submerging of the whole person in water, and that is still true among Jews today. And ritual immersion was also known to many of the other religions in the first century. That doesn’t make it right or wrong, of course, but most people back then at least would have been familiar with the idea of immersing a person in water for religious purposes.

In ancient Greek, the verb *baptizo* meant “to dip or immerse” (Arndt & Gingrich). Interestingly, a *baptistes* (“one who dips”) was a textile worker who dipped (or “baptized”) the cloth in dye to color it.

In the New Testament, baptism portrays the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ — to be baptized is to “die with Christ.” Paul said, “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4), and he spoke of “having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Colossians 2:12). If baptism was anything less than a “burial” in water, Paul’s comparison would be confusing; the use of this burial analogy indicates that Paul assumed that his readers would know that baptism was an immersion.

When Jesus’ forerunner, John, began teaching, he “was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized” (John 3:23). If people were to be baptized, it’s not surprising that John preached near plentiful water. And “when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him” (Matthew 3:16). The statement that Jesus “went up from the water” would be odd, to say the least, if He had not been in enough water to be immersed.

Similarly, when Philip taught the Ethiopian eunuch about Christ while they were on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, we are told that “as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, ‘See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?’” (Acts 8:36). The next two verses contain these words: “And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they

came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing” (vv.38,39). If they only needed enough water for Philip to sprinkle the Ethiopian’s head, the man probably had enough drinking water in a container in the chariot for that. But when they came to a body of water sufficient for baptism, “they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him.” What happened in this case seems very clear.

Today, when a person learns from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ and that he must be baptized for the forgiveness of his sins (Acts 2:36-41), he will want to begin his life of obedience to Christ by taking seriously what is taught about baptism, the act in which he will “die with Christ.” Having been led to that point by faith (John 8:24), repentance (Luke 24:46,47), and the confession of his faith (Romans 10:9,10), he will want to be buried with Christ in baptism (Romans 6:4). This is a simple but powerful symbol of the death and resurrection of Christ. It points to Christ and His salvation, without which we would be hopelessly lost. And it is nothing less than *the major turning point in a person’s life*. It is no wonder that, in the New Testament, people rejoiced following their baptism!

Whatever may have been your thinking in the past about baptism, I hope that you’ll go back and study every passage you can find in the New Testament about this subject. Like every other subject in regard to our salvation, this is one that deserves our most careful and reverent attention. I pray you’ll find great joy in discovering — and *doing* — the will of God.

IS BAPTISM FOR THE REMISSION OF SINS?

JUST AS THE “WHAT” OF BAPTISM IS IMPORTANT, SO IS THE “WHY.” Despite clear teaching on the subject in the New Testament, many people deny that the forgiveness of our sins is connected to baptism, insisting that if our salvation is by God’s grace, it cannot be contingent on any physical action in which we might engage.

First, we need to keep it clear in our minds that if God commands us to do anything at all (whether it be baptism or anything else), that does not contradict His grace. As our Creator and King, God has the sovereign right to set the terms upon which we can have a relationship with Him, and whatever He might require of us, our salvation is still a gift. No matter what we might do in obedience to Him, that would never put Him in our debt or mean that we had earned our salvation.

Paul described Christians as “having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Colossians 2:12 ESV). Whatever there is in baptism that results in our salvation, it is not a meritorious work on our part. Rather, it is “faith in the powerful working of God.”

Here are a few other translations of Colossians 2:12: “you were raised up with him because of your faith in God’s power” (ERV), “in baptism you were also brought back to life with Christ through faith in the power of God” (GW), “when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God” (NRSV), and “when you were baptized, you were buried together with him. You were raised to life together with him by believing in God’s power” (NIRV). The more we ponder this text, the more powerful Paul’s point becomes: baptism is the act in which God gives us life, but that doesn’t mean it is a legalistic work on our part. *The whole thing depends on our faith in what God does.*

On Pentecost, when Peter had finished his sermon, many in the audience were stricken with the realization of their lost condition and cried out, “What shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). The very question shows that they were believers — but it also shows that they were still lost. And Peter’s reply was not hard to understand: “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (v.38).

Again, let’s look at some other translations, just to make sure we get the point: “Turn back to God! Be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins will be forgiven” (CEV), “Each one of you must turn away from your sins and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins will be forgiven” (GNB), “All of you must turn to God and change the way you think and act, and each of you must be

baptized in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins will be forgiven” (GW), “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (NASB), “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (NIV), and “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven” (NRSV).

If it was not in baptism that people received the remission of their sins, it is hard to explain the urgency with which they were baptized in the New Testament. The Ethiopian official in Acts 8:26-39 did not want to wait until he got back home to be baptized. Traveling in a chariot on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, and having been taught the gospel by Philip as they rode along, he wanted to be baptized as soon as they came to a body of water where that could be done: “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?” (v.36).

The Philippian jailer and his household were baptized in the same hour of the night” (Acts 16:33). And when Ananias was sent to explain to Saul of Tarsus, the previous persecutor of the church, what he needed to do to enjoy salvation in Christ, he told Saul, “And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name” (Acts 22:16).

In our individual situations today, two thousand years after the events of the New Testament, what people did back then ought to be of more than passing interest to us. When those people heard the gospel and wanted to receive the salvation it promised, the answer they got from the apostles of Christ — who spoke with Christ’s own authority — was that they should be baptized for the remission of their sins.

We cannot disconnect salvation in Christ from the command to be baptized without disconnecting ourselves from the teaching of the Scriptures. Rather than doing that, let’s submit ourselves to that teaching, gladly and gratefully.

IS BAPTISM NECESSARY FOR SALVATION?

THERE ARE SOME WHO WOULD SAY THAT BAPTISM IS A GOOD IDEA BUT NOT SOMETHING ABSOLUTELY REQUIRED FOR OUR SALVATION. Embedded in this idea is the belief that one is saved at the point of faith, prior to the time when one is baptized. Baptism, then, is seen as having some purpose or outcome other than the remission of our sins.

As we have seen in the New Testament, however, baptism was presented in the apostolic era as being “for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38). It was only after being baptized for this purpose that people “rejoiced” (Acts 8:38,39; 16:15,33,34).

In Romans 6, the apostle Paul speaks of baptism as dying with Christ. This is a crucial passage, so let’s look at it carefully. “Do you not know that all of us who have been *baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his*” (vv.3-5).

If there was an act which God designed to connect us to Christ’s death, but we took the position that the act was not necessary, should we expect the benefits of Christ’s death. Surely not. But Paul clearly teaches that we are “baptized into [Christ’s] death” (v.3) and only after that are we raised to “walk in newness of life” (v.4). To say that baptism is an optional act, not required for our salvation, is to deny the very meaning which Paul attaches to baptism in this passage.

But if we’re still asking whether baptism is necessary, let’s think about repentance. Is that optional? Would we say repentance is merely “a good thing to do” but not absolutely required? Hopefully not, especially since repentance was at the very heart of Jesus’ proclamation of God’s kingdom (Matthew 3:12; 4:17; Mark 1:15).

The fact is, it’s dangerous, on any topic, to question whether we “have” to do what God has commanded. If there are things He has commanded that He decides on the Judgment Day to simply set aside, that will be His business. He is the King. But for our part, we dare not quibble about His revealed will. Especially in matters where we know full well what the Scriptures teach, we must not hesitate to carry out God’s instructions. We don’t want to be like students in school who refuse to learn anything that’s “not going to be on the test.” All of us need to be characterized by the reverent, obedient attitude of young Samuel, who said, “Speak, LORD, for your servant hears” (1 Samuel 3:9,10).

When the gospel was preached on Pentecost and Peter told those who were listening, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38), many

may have shaken their heads in disbelief and gone on about their business. But some (in fact, a great many) were receptive. Listen to the description: "And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, 'Save yourselves from this crooked generation.' So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls" (vv.40,41). When Peter said, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation," he was speaking to many who had believed the truth of the message that was preached and in godly sorrow had cried out, "What shall we do?" However, not having obeyed God's command to be baptized, their sins had not been remitted. But thankfully, about 3,000 of them *were* baptized. "So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls" (v.41).

We can only imagine the excitement in Jerusalem that evening, when 3,000 believing and penitent people had been baptized into Christ and were now able to give thanks for God's grace.

But that joy was not just for them alone. It can be ours today, in just the same way. May we all do what they did — and rejoice in exactly the same way!

AT WHAT POINT ARE OUR SINS FORGIVEN?

AS WE RESPOND TO THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST, SEVERAL THINGS HAPPEN. At what point in the process can it be said that we have received salvation? This is not an idle question or one that is merely academic. A person who realizes he is lost will be earnestly seeking salvation. In humility, he will want to know what the gospel requires. He will be eager to comply with whatever God has commanded — so that he can rejoice in knowing his sins are forgiven.

So when is it right for us to rejoice? At what point can we have the assurance of our salvation, being glad that we are now “in Christ”?

The concept of being “in Christ” is fundamental. It describes those who, through Christ’s sacrifice, have been reconciled to God. In 2 Corinthians 5:17, for example, Paul can say, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” The expression “in Christ” is even used of congregations that are faithful to Him, as in Galatians 1:22, “I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ.”

Here are a few other texts that use this language:

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

“Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me” (Romans 16:7).

“. . . raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:6).

“To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi . . .” (Philippians 1:1).

“Greet one another with the kiss of love. Peace to all of you who are in Christ” (1 Peter 5:14).

But as we move toward Christ in response to the gospel, is there a decisive event after which it can be said that we are “in Christ”?

“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” (Romans 6:3).

“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27).

Our coming to be “in Christ” at the point of baptism does not detract from God’s grace. Having been baptized, we are not “in Christ” because we earned that blessing. Indeed, the active ingredient in baptism is not what we do; it is our faith in what God does: “having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him

through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Colossians 2:12). Even so, our baptism is still the event in which we passed from condemnation to salvation.

When we look at all the relevant texts in the New Testament, we see that there are four basic elements in how people responded to the gospel in the first century: *faith* (Acts 8:12), *confession of faith* (1 Timothy 6:12), *repentance* (Acts 26:20), and *baptism* (Acts 2:41). But notice that baptism is spoken of in a different way than the others.

**** The other things are described as moving a person *toward* salvation, but baptism is presented as the dividing line that separates the old from the new. Obviously, repentance is something a person must begin to do prior to being forgiven (Acts 26:20). But notice what is said about faith and confession: “. . . if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, *resulting in righteousness*, and with the mouth he confesses, *resulting in salvation*” (Romans 10:9,10 NASB). What we believe must be verbally acknowledged with our lips, but both faith and the confession of that faith move a person in the *direction* of salvation. But it is only after being baptized into Christ that people in the New Testament rejoiced at the forgiveness of their sins.

**** The other things continue as parts of the ongoing life of the Christian, but baptism is a one-time act, a turning point never to be repeated. As a Christian, a person will continue to live on the basis of faith, he will openly confess Christ from day to day, and he will repent anytime he sees that he has sinned. But baptism will always be the point the Christian looks back to as the event in which he began to “walk in newness life” (Romans 6:3,4).

Being baptized into Christ is comparable to Naaman’s cleansing from leprosy in 2 Kings 5:1-14. He didn’t see *why* he should dip in the Jordan River seven times (and doing so didn’t *earn* him good health), but the fact is, Naaman did not receive the promised cleansing until he dipped in the Jordan River, as commanded by the prophet Elisha. A chain of events led him in the *direction* of that, but dipping in the Jordan was the turning point between being a leper and not being one.

Yielding to the Lord requires humility, but as people whose problem is rebellion, humility is what we need the most. And the initial requirements of the gospel, culminating in baptism, are a test of whether the authority of Christ is something we’re ready to accept.

WILL EVERYONE BE SAVED?

IF THERE IS A GOD AND AN AFTERLIFE AWAITS US BEYOND THIS WORLD, THERE ARE ONLY TWO POSSIBILITIES. Either everyone will be with God in eternity or only some will. (Perhaps there is a third possibility, that no one will be with God, but I don't know of anyone who takes that position.) The view that everyone will be saved is called "universalism." Most of us will have a knee-jerk reaction to universalism, either for it or against it, but setting aside our predispositions, what did Jesus and His apostles teach about eternity?

Looking first at Jesus' own teaching, He spoke straightforwardly about the fact that some will be lost. He spoke of hell as a place "where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:48). And in the Sermon on the Mount, He urged His hearers to avoid the path that leads to destruction. "Enter by the narrow gate," He said. "For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few" (Matthew 7:13,14).

We see the same stark alternatives in the writings of Jesus' apostles. Paul, for example, wrote that God will "render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury" (Romans 2:6-8).

Hell is said to be a place "prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41), but if we side with the devil in his rebellion and refuse God's offer of pardon, we will be consigned in eternity to the same place of condemnation as the devil. War is all too prevalent in the world we live in right now, but there is a much larger war going on between God and His spiritual adversaries. The human race having been dragged into the conflict, we have no choice but to take sides — and the first time we ever rejected what we knew to be God's will, we took the devil's side. Mercifully, however, God allows us to come back and be forgiven. But the time for accepting God's reconciliation is right now, while we live in the present world. After death, it will be too late. *At the point of death, whichever choice we made about God in this life will become binding upon us in eternity.* It is a sobering truth to contemplate.

But if God is offering pardon, are there any conditions upon which it must be received? Is there anything human beings must do to be forgiven, such that those who reject those terms will be lost? The answer is yes. God being our Creator, He alone has the right to set the terms of our reconciliation to Him, and His choice was to make reconciliation contingent on *faith in His Son* (John 8:24), *willingness to confess our faith* (Luke 12:8,9), *repentance* (Luke 13:3), and *baptism for the remis-*

sion of our sins (Acts 2:38). The New Testament consistently presents those as prerequisites to salvation in Jesus Christ. They are not hard to understand. And while our very limited human perspective might wish to add some other conditions or take some of these away, this is what the Scriptures teach concerning how a person obeys the gospel initially. And there is no word in the Scriptures concerning any Plan B for those who reject the terms God has offered in Plan A.

Of course, many people couldn't care less about God's plan. It is to be hoped that they will change their minds before their time runs out. For His part, God is grieved when anyone rejects the terms of His pardon. Sorrowing over Jerusalem's rejection of Him, Jesus said, "How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (Matthew 23:37). And concerning the long-delayed return of Christ to judge the world, Peter wrote, "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

It is interesting (but not a very productive use of our time) to think about why God revealed some things to us and not others. But long ago Moses was exactly right when he said, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deuteronomy 29:29).

All of us have a lot to learn — but the Lord expects us to do what is right about what we already know. If a person has read the New Testament even once, he can't claim on the Judgment Day that he never knew what God required people to do to obey the gospel. What keeps us from obedience is not a lack of clarity in the Scriptures. It is a refusal to accept what God has commanded — or worse, a vague hope that God will save us anyway, regardless of our refusal.

Finally, let's go back to the time when the gospel was first proclaimed to the public following Jesus' resurrection. Peter ended his discourse with a passionate plea for the hearers to act decisively on what they had just heard: "And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, 'Save yourselves from this crooked generation.' So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:40,41).

Peter, it would seem, did not have the confidence that many people have espoused today, that everyone in the audience on that occasion would be saved, whether they obeyed the gospel or not.

DID GOD PREDETERMINE WHO WILL BE SAVED?

THE DOCTRINE OF “PREDESTINATION” TEACHES THAT GOD DECIDED BEFORE HE CREATED THE WORLD WHO WOULD BE SAVED AND WHO LOST. According to this view, we do not have a will that is free. It is God who chooses our salvation or condemnation.

Obviously, it is very important whether predestination is true or not. If it is true, the offer of salvation in the gospel of Christ is not really an offer that we may choose to accept or not; our choice only *seems* to be a choice from our perspective, since God has already made the decision. Various theologians have held this view, including Augustine of Hippo (AD 354-430) and John Calvin (AD 1509-1564).

So let us ask whether predestination is true — and let the Scriptures determine our answer.

Predestination is a doctrine which emphasizes the “sovereignty” of God; that is, it stresses the supremacy of God’s will: whatever God wills must come to pass, and no human being has the power to say no.

But surely, it is predestination rather than free will that detracts from God’s sovereignty. *To say that God could not create persons capable of freely rejecting Him is to question His power.*

In the Scriptures, one of the most touching characteristics of God is the fervency with which He appeals to human beings. In many dire circumstances, God is shown pleading with people to let Him save them. But there was always a choice to be made by those needing God’s help: *would they receive God’s grace or not?* The basic situation of mankind is summed up in Paul’s heartfelt exhortation to his brethren in Corinth in which he said, “We appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain” (2 Corinthians 6:1).

But sadly, there are those who teach that God’s grace *cannot* be rejected. Believing we are born with the “original sin” of Adam’s transgression and are so depraved in our nature that we couldn’t even respond to an offer of salvation if we tried, these teachers insist that God must decide who will be saved — and those whom He decides to save, He infuses with the “enabling power” of the Holy Spirit. This grace is “irresistible” by the recipients, or so says the doctrine. God having decided who will be saved, the chosen ones do not have the power to reject the saving influence which God sends upon them.

It is clear, however, that many *have* refused God’s efforts to win their hearts, and their refusal was not just an appearance; it was real. When, for example, Jesus grieved over Jerusalem’s rejection of Him (Matthew 23:37), it is woefully inadequate to say that, since they refused, it must not have really been salvation that He was offering them.

But are there not passages (like Romans 8:33) which speak of God's "election"? Yes, there certainly are, but let's try to think clearly about what God has elected and what He has not.

For example, Paul wrote in Romans 9:10-12 that, before the boys were born, God chose Jacob and not his twin brother, Esau, to beget the family through whom the Messiah would be born. In bringing to pass His plan to provide for our salvation, God obviously chose some, like Jacob and Esau, to play particular roles in the story. *But the eternal salvation of those individuals is another question altogether.*

Paul spoke of the Colossians as "God's chosen ones, holy and beloved" (3:12). Salvation is a matter of God's choice, and His divine prerogative is where the emphasis should always be kept. It was God who chose whom He would save, but what He chose was a *class* of people defined by a *criterion*: the "obedience of faith" (Romans 1:5). This group is open to all who will obey. No one is barred by an eternal, unchangeable edict of God.

In the New Testament, people decided whether they would obey the gospel or not (Acts 2:40,41). Yet if predestination is true and there are no conditions which we may accept or reject, the gospel "call" is not really an invitation. Indeed, the whole enterprise of evangelism is meaningless if God has ordained who will be saved and salvation is not contingent on anyone's decision as to the gospel's requirements.

* * * * *

If the Bible teaches anything about God, it teaches that He acts with justice — He "shows no partiality" (Acts 10:34). Yet the doctrine of predestination denies the impartiality of God, teaching instead that God has favored some with salvation and made it impossible for others to enjoy that blessing.

T. W. Brents was right when he wrote long ago, "If the doctrine . . . is true — that before the foundation of the world was laid, according to an immutable and eternal purpose of His own, without any foresight of faith, good works, or any thing else in man, God unconditionally elected some men and angels to eternal life, and at the same time fore-ordained the residue to dishonor and eternal wrath — then we know not how to avoid the conclusion that He is a respecter of persons."

What God has predetermined is that any who will confess their faith, repent of their sins, and be baptized into Christ will be a part of the people whom He has chosen. May we thank Him for choosing to give us this choice. It was an act of sheer grace on His part.

ONCE SAVED, CAN WE EVER BE LOST?

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, CHRISTIANS ARE ENCOURAGED TO APPRECIATE THEIR SECURITY IN CHRIST, BUT THEY ARE ALSO ENCOURAGED TO BE CAREFUL. After obeying the gospel, we still possess the freedom of our will, and although leaving the Lord would be the ultimate tragedy, it is possible for us, as Christians, to abandon Christ and go back to being lost. There are always two sides to freedom: the freedom to say yes to God and the freedom to say no. Either we have both freedoms or we have none at all. So we find numerous passages in the New Testament urging us to *continue* making the choice to follow Christ.

The apostle Peter wrote, “For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them” (2 Peter 2:20,21). *The last state has become worse for them than the first.* These words would be meaningless if it were not possible for a saved person to return to a lost condition. So despite what the Calvinistic “once-saved-always-saved” doctrine teaches, it is necessary for those who have obeyed the gospel to remain faithful to Christ — or they will forfeit their eternal salvation.

It is sometimes argued that if a person appears to fall away from the faith, he or she was never really saved in the first place. But this doesn’t do justice to the New Testament. There are too many unequivocal texts where people who were in a saved relationship with the Lord either apostatized or were warned against doing so.

As examples, we might think of Simon the Magician (Acts 8:9-24), the heresy in Galatia (1:6-9), the exhortations in Hebrews (3:6,12-14; 4:1,11; 6:11,12; 10:23,29,35-39; 12:1; etc.), Peter’s concern for his brethren (2 Peter 1:5-15; 3:17,18), or Paul’s warnings while in Ephesus (Acts 20:31) — and these are just a few. It cannot be said that these warnings against apostasy were not really warnings or that the people to whom they were addressed were never in a saved relationship with Christ. The scriptural evidence is clear: *after being saved from our sins, we will return to being lost if we do not remain faithful to Christ.*

It is no wonder, then, that we see so many exhortations in the Scriptures to keep the faith.

“Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12).

“Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it” (Hebrews 2:1).

“Christ is faithful over God’s house as a son. And we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope” (Hebrews 3:6).

These exhortations are greatly needed, and we are wise if we recognize their relevance to us personally. We should not be fearful, nor should we doubt our Father’s loving care, but as long as Satan is still in business, we can’t afford to be complacent (1 Peter 5:8-11).

As you can see, then, the bottom line is *freedom of the will*. We are free to choose whether we’ll obey the gospel or not. But having decided to obey, our freedom doesn’t stop at our conversion. At any time, we are free to change our minds and go back to being lost.

Freedom is, after all, a fearful gift. But apparently, God would rather have the love that we can give Him freely than the “love” of robots who have no choice but to do as they are programmed.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1,2)

“You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:17-18).

HOW CAN WE KNOW WE ARE SAVED?

IF A PERSON WANTED TO KNOW WHETHER HE HAD BEEN SAVED FROM HIS SINS, THERE ARE TWO DIFFERENT APPROACHES HE MIGHT TAKE. If he took the subjective approach, he would simply consult his feelings (“Do I have the feeling that I am saved?”). The problem here is that many people have this feeling — sometimes very strongly — when they have not done what the Scriptures teach concerning obedience to the gospel. When it comes to emotions and feelings, there may be no difference between those who are in Christ and those who merely imagine that they are. Indeed, some who are outside of Christ may have stronger feelings of salvation than those who are in Him.

Is there not a more objective way of assessing our salvation? Fortunately there is. *We can look into the Scriptures and determine whether we have or have not done what God commanded to be done for those who seek His forgiveness.* God’s instructions regarding our salvation are not hard to understand. We can know whether we’ve done what people did in the New Testament to receive the forgiveness of their sins — and having done those things, we must learn to trust in God’s promise to save us. His promise can be counted on.

Of course, we may be so intent on seeing ourselves favorably that we twist the Scriptures to make them fit our situation. That is a temptation that confronts every one of us. *But if we accept the Scriptures as our authority, at least we have an objective standard we can go by.* Using that standard, we can do what Paul said: “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves” (2 Corinthians 13:5). Such an examination requires courage as well as honesty, but if we want to be rightly related to God, those are the character traits we must have. We should be praying that God will help us to have them more each day.

Life is hard, as we all know, and after obeying the gospel of Christ, there are going to be times when we won’t “feel” forgiven. What should we do? *We should go back to the Scriptures.* It is only in the Scriptures that we will find a dependable, objective assessment of our relationship to the Lord. Our feelings about our salvation are notoriously fickle; sometimes they err on the low side and sometimes on the high. But God’s promise can be counted on — *and the only thing we know about God’s promise is what we find in the Scriptures.*

Paul spoke of the “hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began and at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior” (Titus 1:2,3). It must be in this teaching that our confidence is grounded — and we must make whatever mid-course corrections are necessary to stay in line with the teaching.

In the little letter written by Jude, he said his readers were “those

who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ: May mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you” (Jude 1,2). Ponder with me the three expressions which Jude uses:

Those who are called. Through the gospel, God calls everyone to accept the salvation that He is offering in Jesus Christ. To obey the gospel is, in effect, to answer God’s call, and to live faithfully as a Christian is to be among the called. It was God alone who had the right to decide what the terms of His salvation would be; on our own, we could never have worked our way back to Him. So when we submit to the terms of His forgiveness in the gospel, we can rejoice in the privilege of being among those whom He has called out of the darkness to be His own possession (1 Peter 2:9).

Beloved in God the Father. While God obviously loves every person He has ever created, He has a very specific love for those who have accepted His plan of salvation, i.e., the individuals who have responded to His love with gratitude, obedience, and faithfulness. In the salutation to his letters, Paul often spoke of God’s love for those whom He has saved: “To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 1:7).

Kept for Jesus Christ. In a world of obstacles and temptations, we could not survive, even after obeying the gospel, if it weren’t for the help God gives us in Christ. Peter wrote of those “who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Peter 1:5). And Jude ended his letter with this: “[God] is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy” (Jude 24). Well might he say, “May mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you.” There is simply no higher joy available to us.

So let us be careful and confident — confident in our carefulness, and careful in our confidence. Don’t listen to anyone who tells you that either of these doesn’t need to be emphasized. Both are necessary if we are to respond rightly when we read in the Scriptures of the salvation God has provided in Jesus Christ.

THE GOSPEL IN A NUTSHELL

SOMETIMES IT HELPS TO SUMMARIZE A SUBJECT. Here is one way the gospel can be described “in a nutshell.”

1. Life and Death (the Problem). Created by God, we were given life, but committing sin, we died, spiritually speaking. As Paul wrote, “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23) — in other words, sin cuts us off from God, who is the Source of everything life was ever meant to be. Alienated from God by our disobedience, we stand under the penalty of eternal death. If our lives in this world come to an end and nothing has been done about our estrangement from God, we will be banished from His presence forever. But God loved us, even in our rebellion, and was not willing to leave us without hope.

2. Death and Life (the Solution). Speaking of Jesus Christ, who was the Son of God, the writer of Hebrews said, “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery” (Hebrews 2:14,15). We can be free of death’s dominion because God came into the world, lived as a sinless human being, and submitted Himself to an undeserved death on our behalf. He took our penalty upon Himself, so that we might be forgiven and released from the grip of death.

3. Dying with Christ (the Response). Christ’s death for us is a marvelous gift of God’s grace. We certainly did not deserve it. But how do we appropriate the benefits of that grace? The answer of the Scriptures is not hard to understand: *placing our faith in the saving death and resurrection of Christ (Acts 16:31), we turn from our sins (Acts 26:20) and submit to baptism in order to receive the forgiveness of our sins (Colossians 2:12).*

Baptism, Paul wrote, makes a connection between us and Christ’s death for us: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:3,4).

So the question — and it is an urgent question — is this: *have you died with Christ in baptism?*

Gary Henry – AreYouaChristian.com

THREE CRUCIAL QUESTIONS

WHY BECOME A CHRISTIAN? HOW DOES ONE BECOME A CHRISTIAN? WHAT ABOUT THE ISSUE OF "CHURCH"?

Depending on how we answer these questions, we will go in very different directions religiously. Let's consider these three topics briefly.

1. *Why become a Christian?* This may sound like a simple question, but the truth is, many people "become Christians" for reasons that are wrong. Some do no more than follow tradition or bow to peer pressure. Others may have been deluded into thinking that Christianity is the path to health or wealth in the here and now. There is, of course, more than one honorable reason to follow Jesus Christ, but one principal reason stands above all the others: *the desire to be forgiven of our sins and be in a right relationship with our God.* Peter put it plainly when he said that baptism is "an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 3:21). When we are baptized into Christ, the blessing we seek, more than anything else, is salvation from our sins.

2. *How does one become a Christian?* When someone says, "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30), he or she deserves a completely truthful answer. Unfortunately, many inquirers today are told, "You don't need to do anything; your faith will save you all by itself." In the New Testament, however, it is clear that people did not expect to receive the forgiveness of their sins until they obeyed the command to be baptized. Saul, for example, had been a fervent believer for three days, but he was still unforgiven when Ananias came to him and said, "And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name" (Acts 22:16). So if you're convinced that you need to respond to the gospel of Christ and are asking how that is to be done, don't be content until you've heard the whole truth on the subject of how one becomes a Christian.

3. *What about the issue of "church"?* Just as many leave out one or more of the initial conditions of God's grace, many diminish the importance of the "together" aspect of Christianity after one has become a Christian. Increasingly, people are content just to be Christians privately, with no responsibilities to others living near them who have obeyed the gospel. But in the New Testament, there was not only a private, individual dimension of the gospel; there was also a collective responsibility.

As John said, “He who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother” (1 John 4:20,21). In the Book of Acts, we see that in every place where people obeyed the gospel, there was a “church” or “assembly” of Christians, a fellowship of believers working and worshiping together by the Lord’s authority and to His glory (Acts 11:26).

All three of the above questions are important. For all three, we need accurate answers — from the Scriptures rather than personal opinion or popular belief.

Wherever you may be in your response to the gospel of Christ, consider all three of these three questions carefully.

Don’t be content until you have obeyed the gospel of Christ as commanded in the Scriptures and have found a group of Christians to work and worship with who are faithfully following the Lord’s authority for His people.

Gary Henry – AreYouaChristian.com

HOW CAN I HELP YOU?

I WOULD BE HAPPY TO PRAY FOR YOU OR HELP YOU IN YOUR STUDY OF THE BIBLE. Just let me know how I can be of assistance. Your communication will be kept private.

Gary Henry
12123 Shelbyville Road, Suite 100-247
Louisville, KY 40243

Web: AreYouaChristian.com
Email: garyhenry@wordpoints.com

One of the remarkable things about the Bible is that it continues to challenge us even after many years of study. So no matter where you are right now in your study, you have my best wishes and prayers. I congratulate on your interest in life’s ultimate concern: *having a right relationship with God.*

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