

Receiving the Gift of
Salvation

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RECEIVING THE GIFT OF SALVATION

by

Eric Lyons and Kyle Butt

Most people would admit that the Bible says eternal salvation is a free gift from God. The New Testament is filled with statements stressing this point. The most oft'-quoted verse in all of Scripture teaches this very fact: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son..." (John 3:16). God did not offer the gift of eternal life to the world because of some great accomplishment on the part of mankind. Rather, as Paul wrote to the church at Rome, "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that **while we were still sinners**, Christ died for us" (5:8). Later, in that same chapter in Romans, Paul spoke of the "**free gift**" of spiritual life through Christ (5:15-21). He wrote to the church at Corinth that it is God "who **gives us** the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:57). And earlier in this epistle, Paul expressed gratitude for the Corinthians and their salvation, saying, "I thank my God always concerning you for **the grace of God** which was **given** to you by Christ Jesus" (1:4). Truly, God gives His grace away to anyone who will humbly and obediently accept it (James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5; cf. Revelation 22:17). It is, as so many have noted, **unmerited** favor.

A CASE STUDY IN “TAKING POSSESSION” OF WHAT GOD GIVES

To better understand the relationship between God’s gifts and man’s reception of those gifts, it is helpful to study one particular gift from God—one that is mentioned in the pages of the Old Testament more times than any other thing that God is ever said to have given. If a person were to open a concordance and look up the word “give” or one of its derivatives (i.e., gave, given, giving, etc.), he would discover that whenever this word is found in conjunction with something God does, or has done, it is used more in reference to the land of Canaan (which God **gave** to the descendants of Abraham) than with any other subject. Although the Old Testament mentions numerous things that God gave the Israelites (e.g., manna, quail, water, rest, etc.), the gift of God cited most frequently (especially in Genesis through Joshua) is that of God giving the Israelites the land of Canaan. He promised to **give** this land to Abraham almost 500 years before his descendants finally “received” it (Genesis 12:7; cf. 13:15,17; 15:7; 17:8). While the Israelites were still in Egyptian bondage, God spoke to Moses, and said: “I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and **I will give it to you** as a heritage: I am the Lord” (Exodus 6:8). After the Exodus from Egypt, God instructed Moses to send twelve men “to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am **giving** to the children of Israel” (Numbers 13:2). In the book of Leviticus, one can read where Jehovah gave the Israelites laws concerning leprosy—laws that He introduced by saying, “When you have come into the land of Canaan, **which I give you**

as a possession...” (Leviticus 14:33-34). During the years of wilderness wanderings, God reminded Israel of this gift numerous times—and it **always** was spoken of as a gift, never as an earned possession.

Notice, however, some of the things that the Israelites still had to **do** in order to “take possession” (Numbers 13:30; Joshua 1:15) of this gift. They had to prepare provisions (Joshua 1:11), cross the Jordan River (Joshua 3), march around the city of Jericho once a day for six days, and seven times on the seventh day (Joshua 6:1-4), blow trumpets and shout (Joshua 6:5), and then utterly destroy all that was in Jericho (Joshua 6:21). They also proceeded to do battle with the inhabitants of Ai (Joshua 8). Joshua 10 records how the Israelites “chased” and “struck” the inhabitants of the southern part of Canaan (Joshua 10:10). They then battled their way up to the northern part of Canaan, and took possession of it, too (Joshua 11). Finally, after the land on both sides of the Jordan had been divided among the Israelites, the Bible records how Caleb courageously drove out the giant descendants of Anak from Hebron. He **seized** the land **given** to him by God (Joshua 14:6-15; 15:13-19; Judges 1:9-20). Such is an overriding theme throughout the first six books of the Bible—“**The Lord gave to Israel** all the land of which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and **they [Israel] took possession of it**” (Joshua 21:43).

Perhaps the fact that God **gave** this land to the Israelites was never made clearer than when Moses spoke to them just prior to their entrance into Canaan.

So it shall be, when the Lord your God brings you into the land of which He swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to **give** you large and

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beautiful cities which you did not build, houses full of all good things, which you did not fill, hewn-out wells which you did not dig, vineyards and olive trees which you did not plant—when you have eaten and are full—then beware, lest you forget the Lord, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.... He brought us out from there, that He might bring us in, to **give** us the land of which He swore to our fathers (Deuteronomy 6:10-12,23).

God did not award this land to the Israelites because of some mighty work on their part. This land, which flowed “with milk and honey” (Numbers 13:27), was not a prize handed out to them because of some great achievement by the Israelites (Deuteronomy 7:7). They did not deserve it. The Israelites did not purchase it from God with any kind of earned income. They did not **earn** the right to be there. God, Who owns everything (Psalm 24:1; 89:11), **gave** it to them as a gift. **It was free**. God described it as a gift when He first promised it to Abraham (Genesis 12:7), and He described it as a gift after Israel inhabited it hundreds of years later (Joshua 21:43). It was unmerited. The Israelites’ acceptance of God’s gift, however, did not exclude **effort** on their part.

When it comes to the **spiritual** Promised Land that God has freely offered to anyone who will “take” it (Revelation 22:17; Titus 2:11; Matthew 11:28-30), some have a difficult time accepting the idea that man must **put forth effort** in order to receive it. Many today have come to the conclusion that effort **cannot** be part of the equation when the Bible speaks of God’s gracious gifts. The idea is: “Since God’s grace cannot be earned or merited, then anyone who claims that human effort

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is involved in its acceptance is in error.” Clearly, though, many scriptures indicate that man’s efforts are not always categorized as works of merit. God **gave** the Israelites freedom from Egyptian bondage, but they still had to put forth some effort by walking from Egypt, across the Red Sea, and into the Wilderness of Shur (Exodus 15:22; Exodus 16:32; Joshua 24:5). The Israelites did not “earn” Canaan, but they still exerted much effort (they **worked**) in possessing it. God **gave** the Israelites the city of Jericho (Joshua 6:2). But He gave it to them only **after** they followed His instructions and encircled the city for seven days (Hebrews 11:30). Furthermore, Israel did not deserve manna from heaven; it was a free gift from God. Nevertheless, if they wanted to eat it, they were required to put forth effort in gathering it (Exodus 16; Numbers 11). These Old Testament examples clearly teach that something can be a gift from God, even though conditions must be met in order for that gift to be received.

This point also can be understood effectively by noting our attitude toward physical gifts today. If a friend wanted to give you \$1,000,000, but said that in order to receive the million dollars you had to pick up a check at his house, take it to the bank, sign it, and cash it, would any rational person conclude that this gift was earned? Of course not. Even though some effort was exerted to receive the gift, the effort was not a work of merit. Similarly, consider the young boy who is on the verge of drowning in the middle of a small lake. If a man heard his cries, and then proceeded to save the boy by running to the edge of the lake, inflating an inner tube, tying some rope around it, and throwing it out to the

young boy who was struggling to stay afloat, would any witness to this event describe the young boy as “saving himself” (or “earning” his rescue) because he had to exert the energy to grab the inner tube and hold on while being pulled onto the bank by the passerby? No. A gift is still a gift even when the one receiving it must exert a certain amount of effort in order to possess it.

“TAKING POSSESSION” OF SALVATION

The New Testament leaves no doubt that the grandest of all gifts (salvation through Christ—a spiritual gift that was in God’s mind “before the foundation of the world”—Ephesians 1:4; 3:11) is not the result of any kind of meritorious work on the part of man. The apostle Paul stressed this point several times in his writings. To the Christians who made up the church at Ephesus, he wrote: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). In his epistle to Titus, Paul emphasized that we are saved, “not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy” (3:5). Then, again, while writing to young Timothy, Paul highlighted the fact that we are saved by the “power of God,” and “not according to our works” (2 Timothy 1:8-9). This truth cannot be overly stressed.

Unfortunately, some have come to the conclusion that man plays no part in his being saved from sin by God. They teach: “Salvation is a gift of God that is from nothing we do ourselves” (Schlemper, 1998). Or, “Salvation is a gift from God—we do nothing to get it” (MacPhail, n.d.). “[W]e do nothing to become

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righteous.... God did all that was necessary in His Son” (“The Godhead,” n.d.).

The truth is, however, when it comes to the gift of salvation that God extends to the whole world (John 3:16), there are requirements that must be met on the part of man in order for him to receive the gift. Contrary to what some are teaching, there is something that a person must **do** in order to be saved. The Jews on Pentecost understood this point, as is evident by their question: “Men and brethren, what shall we **do**?” (Acts 2:37). Saul, later called Paul (Acts 13:9), believed that there was something else he needed to do besides experience a personal encounter with the resurrected Lord on his way to Damascus, for he asked Jesus, “Lord, what do You want me to **do**?” (Acts 9:6). And the jailor at Philippi, after observing the righteousness of Paul and Silas and being awakened by the earthquake to see the prison doors opened (Acts 16:20-29), “fell down trembling before Paul and Silas...and said, ‘Sirs, what must I **do** to be saved?’” (Acts 16:30). If those who responded to these questions (Peter in Acts 2, Jesus in Acts 9, and Paul and Silas in Acts 16) had the mindset of some today, they should have answered by saying, “There is nothing for you to do. Just wait, and salvation will come to you.” But their responses were quite different from this. All three times the question was asked, a command to **do** something was given. Peter told those on Pentecost to “repent and be baptized” (Acts 2:38); Paul and Silas instructed the Philippian jailor and his household to “[b]elieve on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 16:31); and Jesus commanded Saul to “[a]rise and go into the city, and you will be told what

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you must do” (Acts 9:6). Notice that none of them gave the impression that salvation involves us “doing **nothing**.” Jesus told Saul that he “**must do**” something. When Saul arrived in Damascus as Jesus had directed him, he did exactly what God’s spokesman, Ananias, commanded him to do (Acts 22:12-16; 9:17-18). Similar to how the land of Canaan was “received” by an active Israel, so the free gift of eternal life is received by man taking action.

Much controversy within Christendom is caused by disagreement on how much action an alien sinner should take. Since God has extended to mankind an indescribable (2 Corinthians 9:15), undeserved gift, we are told that the acceptance of such a gift can involve only the smallest amount of effort, else one might be accused of salvation by “works of righteous.” Usually, this action is said to involve nothing more than confessing faith in Jesus as the Son of God, and praying that He will forgive sins and come into a person’s heart (see “Prayer of Salvation,” n.d.). This, we are told, is man’s way of “taking possession” of God’s grace. Allegedly, all one must do in order to lay hold on the eternal life that God freely gives to all is to

[a]ccept Christ into your heart through prayer and he’ll receive you. It doesn’t matter what church you belong to or if you ever do good works. You’ll be born again at the moment you receive Christ. He’s at the door knocking.... Just trust Christ as Savior. God loves you and forgives you unconditionally. Anyone out there can be saved if they accept Christ, now! Let’s pray for Christ to now come into your heart (see Staten, 2001).

The prayer that the alien sinner is urged to pray, frequently goes something like this:

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Lord Jesus, I need You. Thank You for dying on the cross for my sins. I open the door of my life and receive You as my Savior and Lord. Thank You for forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. Take control of my life. Make me the kind of person You want me to be (see McDowell, 1999, p. 759).

According to The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association Web site, in an article titled, “How to Become a Christian,” “[w]hen you receive Christ into your heart you become a child of God, and have the privilege of talking to Him in prayer at any time about anything” (“How to Become a Christian,” n.d.). This is what many within Christendom believe one must do to take possession of God’s grace. The overriding thought seems to be, “There can’t be much involved in getting saved, because God saves, not man. We have to make it as easy and painless as possible so that no one will accuse us of ‘salvation by works.’”

Contrary to the above statements, the New Testament gives specific prerequisites that must be followed before one can receive the atoning benefit of Christ’s blood (Revelation 1:5; 1 John 1:7). These conditions are neither vague nor difficult to understand. A person must confess faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God (John 8:24; Romans 10:9-10; 1 Timothy 6:12), and he must repent of his past sins (Acts 26:20; Luke 13:3; Acts 2:38). Although these prerequisites are slightly different from those mentioned above by some modern-day denominational preachers, they are genuinely accepted within the Protestant world. By meeting these conditions, most people understand that a person is merely receiving God’s grace (by following God’s plan). Few, if any,

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would accuse a man who emphasizes these prerequisites of teaching “salvation by works of merit.”

However, the Bible discusses yet another step that precedes salvation—a step that has become controversial within Christendom—water baptism. It is mentioned numerous times throughout the New Testament, and both Jesus and His disciples taught that it **precedes** salvation (Mark 16:16; Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 2:38). The apostle Paul’s sins were washed away only **after** he was immersed in water (Acts 22:16; Acts 9:18). [NOTE: Even though it was on the road to Damascus that Paul heard the Lord, spoke to Him, and believed on Him (Acts 9), Paul did not receive salvation until he went into Damascus and was baptized.] The book of Acts is filled with examples of those who did not receive the gift of salvation until after they professed faith in Christ, repented of their sins, and were **baptized** (Acts 2:38-41; 8:12; 8:26-40; 10:34-48; 16:14-15; 16:30-34; 18:8).

Furthermore, the epistles of Peter and Paul also call attention to the necessity of baptism (1 Peter 3:21; Colossians 2:12; Romans 6:1-4). If a person wants the multitude of spiritual blessings found “in Christ” (e.g., salvation—2 Timothy 2:10; forgiveness—Ephesians 1:7; 2:12), he must not stop after confessing faith in the Lord Jesus, or after resolving within himself to turn from a sinful lifestyle. He also must be “baptized **into** Christ” (Galatians 3:27; Romans 6:3) “for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38).

So why, one might ask, if so many passages of Scripture teach the necessity of baptism, is there so much controversy about baptism being a condition of salvation? Several reasons could be mentioned here.

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One reason is that the thief on the cross was saved, yet he might not have been baptized. Thus, some would say we do not have to be baptized to be saved. (For a full refutation of this line of reasoning, see Miller, 2003.) Another idea that is extremely popular (and has been for some time) is the idea that baptism is a “work.” And, since we are not saved by “works” (Ephesians 2:8-9), then, allegedly, baptism cannot be required in order to receive (or “take possession of”—Revelation 22:17) salvation. Notice how some religionists have expressed these sentiments.

- In Part three of a series of articles on baptism, called the “FUD Series” (FUD standing for Fear, Uncertainty, and Doubt), Darrin Yeager wrote: “The act of baptism is a work (or ritual). Paul makes clear the point works do not (and cannot) save us. Even the faith we have is a gift of God. Since works cannot save us, baptism plays no part in the salvation of the believer” (2003). Yeager concluded this article by saying: “Its [sic] tragic baptism has become such a point of contention in the church. Considering the whole counsel of God, several points become clear.” Included in those points was: “Baptism is a work, and the Bible is clear works do not [sic] save us.... [B]aptism is absolutely, positively not required for salvation.”
- In an article titled, “What Saves? Baptism or Jesus Christ?,” Buddy Bryant cited Titus 3:5, and then wrote: “Baptism is a work of righteousness and we are not saved by works of righteousness which we have done” (Bryant, n.d.).
- Under the heading, “Water Baptism is not for Salvation,” one church Web site exclaimed: “Water baptism **is** a ‘work of righteousness’... Our sins were not washed away by water, but by the Lord Jesus Christ...” (see “Water Baptism...,” n.d.). Similarly, another church Web site ran an article titled, “Does

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Water Baptism Save?,” declaring: “Water baptism is a **work** (something that man does to please God), and yet the Bible teaches again and again that a person is not saved by works” (see “Does Water...,” n.d.).

These statements summarize the feelings of many within Christendom concerning baptism: “It is a ‘work,’ and thus not necessary for the person who wants to be saved.” The truth of the matter is, however, when careful consideration is given to what the Bible teaches on this subject, one will find no discrepancy between the idea that man is saved “by grace...through faith” (Ephesians 2:8-9) and not by works, and at the same time is saved **following** baptism.

Part of the confusion concerning baptism and works is the result of being uninformed about the biblical teaching regarding works. The New Testament mentions at least four kinds of works: (1) works of the Law of Moses (Galatians 2:16; Romans 3:20); (2) works of the flesh (Galatians 5:19-21); (3) works of merit (Titus 3:4-7); and (4) works resulting from obedience of faith (James 2:14-24; Luke 17:10; cf. Galatians 5:6). The first three works mentioned here certainly do not lead to eternal life. The last category frequently is referred to as “works of God.” This phrase does not mean works **performed by** God; rather, the intent is “works **required and approved by** God” (Thayer, 1977, p. 248; Jackson, 1997, 32:47). Consider the following example from Jesus’ statements in John 6:27-29:

Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life.... Then they said to Him, What shall we do, that we may work the works of God? Jesus answered and said

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to them, This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.

Within this context, Christ made it clear that there are works that humans must do to receive eternal life. Moreover, the passage affirms that **believing itself is a work** (“This is the **work** of God, that you **believe** in Him whom He sent”). It therefore follows that if one is saved **without any type of works**, then he is saved **without faith**, because **faith is a work**. Such a conclusion would throw the Bible into hopeless confusion.

Will anyone step forward and claim that faith is a meritorious work? Can a person “earn salvation” by believing in Christ? Few, if any, think that belief is a work of merit. Although it is described in the Bible as being a “work,” we correctly understand it to be a condition upon which one receives salvation. Salvation is still a free gift from God; it is the result of His grace and Jesus’ work on the cross, not our efforts.

But what about baptism? The New Testament **specifically excludes** baptism from the class of human meritorious works unrelated to redemption. In fact, the two books in which the apostle Paul condemns most vehemently the idea of salvation by works—Romans and Galatians—are the very books that relate the fact that water baptism places a person “into Christ” (Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27). Also, the fact that baptism is not a work of merit is emphasized in Titus 3:4-7.

For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another. But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing

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of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace, we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

This passage reveals at least three things. First, we **are not saved** by works of righteousness that we do by ourselves (according to any plan or course of action that we devised—see Thayer, 1977, p. 526). Second, we **are saved** by the “washing of regeneration” (i.e., baptism), exactly as 1 Peter 3:21 states (see also Ephesians 5:26). [NOTE: Even Baptist theologian A.T. Robertson believed that the phrase “washing of regeneration” refers specifically to water baptism (1931, 4:607).] Thus, in the third place, baptism is excluded from all works of human righteousness that men contrive, but is itself a “work of God” (i.e., required and approved by God) necessary for salvation.

When one is raised from the watery grave of baptism, it is according to the “working of God” (Colossians 2:12), and not any manmade plan. Although many have tried, no one can suggest (justifiably) that baptism is a meritorious work of human design, anymore than he can logically conclude that Naaman “earned” his physical cleansing of leprosy by dipping in the River Jordan seven times (see 2 Kings 5:1-19). When we are baptized, we are completely passive. If you really think about it, baptism is something done **to** a person, not **by** a person (thus, one hardly can have performed any kind of meritorious “work”).

TAKING POSSESSION OF SALVATION “BY FAITH”

The Bible, in a multitude of passages, affirms that people are saved by, because of, on account of, or through their faith. Paul wrote to the Roman Christians: “Therefore, having been justified by faith (Greek *pistis*), we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1). A few chapters earlier, Paul declared: “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith (*pistis*) apart from the deeds of the law” (3:28). The writer of the book of Hebrews concluded that “without faith (*pistis*) it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe (*pisteuo*) that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (11:6). In Ephesians 2:8-9 we read: “For by grace you have been saved through faith (*pistis*), and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.” With this tiny sampling of verses about faith, it is easily seen that every person who is saved must have faith. But what is biblical faith?

The word translated “faith” in each of the above verses derives from the Greek noun *pistis* (the verb form of which is *pisteuo*). Respected Greek scholar Joseph Thayer said that the word *pistis* in the New Testament is used of “a conviction or belief respecting man’s relationship to God and divine things, generally with the included idea of trust and holy fervor born of faith and conjoined with it” (1977, p. 512). When the verb form *pisteuo* is used “especially of the faith by which a man embraces Jesus,” it means “a conviction, full of joyful trust, that Jesus is the Messiah—the divinely appointed author of eternal salvation in the kingdom

of God, conjoined with obedience to Christ” (Thayer, p. 511).

The word *pisteuo* often is translated by the word “believe.” For instance, in Acts 10:43, the apostle Peter wrote of Jesus: “To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes (*pisteuo*) in Him will receive remission of sins.” The apostle Paul wrote: “It pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe (*pisteuo*)” (1 Corinthians 1:21). Paul, in Romans 10:11, made a similar statement when he declared: “For the Scripture says, ‘Whoever believes (*pisteuo*) on Him will not be put to shame.’”

These verses, taken by themselves, seem to suggest that any person who maintains a mere mental conviction that Jesus is the Son of God has eternal life. Many people (and denominations) have taken such a position. Baptist scholar L.S. Ballard, in his debate with Thomas B. Warren, affirmed this position: “The Scriptures teach that faith in Christ procures salvation without further acts of obedience” (Warren and Ballard, 1953, p. 1). Herschel Hobbs declared: “Instantaneous salvation refers to redemption from sin (Acts 2:21; Romans 10:10). This experience occurs immediately upon one’s believing in Jesus Christ as one’s Saviour” (1964, p. 90). Albert Mohler, in discussing his particular denomination, stated: “We cherish the gospel of Jesus Christ as the means of salvation to all who believe. We know that there is salvation in the name of Jesus and in no other name. Sinners come to Christ by faith, and are justified by **faith alone**” (2001, p. 63).

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It is to those last two words that we must direct our attention—“faith alone.” Mohler (and most of the denominational world) teaches that a person can be, and is in fact, saved by faith alone, or faith only. This idea of “faith only” was popularized by Martin Luther in the sixteenth century. The Catholic Church of Luther’s day had grown corrupt, and was prescribing a host of unscriptural ways to obtain forgiveness. Forgiveness could be obtained, according to the Catholic Church, by purchasing “indulgences,” and a soul could be “bought” out of Purgatory if the proper amount of money flowed into the Church’s coffers. In reaction to this “works-based” plan of forgiveness, Martin Luther developed his idea of a “faith-only” plan of salvation. He took this idea so far, in fact, that when he translated Romans 3:28, he inserted the word **alone** into the text so that it would read, “We reckon therefore that a man is justified by faith **alone** apart from the works of the law,” even though the word **alone** is not found in the original text (see Lewis, 1991, pp. 353ff.). Luther’s “faith only” doctrine has become a principal tenet in the thinking and teaching of most denominations.

Interestingly, even though Martin Luther often taught that salvation is based on faith alone, and is not received based upon a person’s meritorious works, he did not take “faith alone” to mean that mere mental assent to Christ’s deity was sufficient to obtain salvation. Luther’s idea of faith alone does not conform to the modern-day idea that baptism is a work, and cannot be required for salvation. According to Luther:

[I] affirm that Baptism is no human trifle, but that it was established by God Himself. Moreover, He earnestly and solemnly commanded that we must

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be baptized or we shall not be saved.... The reason why we are striving and battling so strenuously for this view of Baptism is that the world nowadays is full of sects that loudly proclaim that Baptism is merely an external form and that external forms are useless.... Although Baptism is indeed performed by human hands, yet it is truly God's own action (1530, pp. 98-99).

Four primary lines of reasoning show that the Bible does not teach a "faith only" or "belief only" plan of salvation. First, numerous passages insist that other requirements besides belief in Christ are necessary to obtain salvation. Second, biblical faith involves not only mental assent, but also obedient action to God's commands. Third, the book of James explicitly says that no man is justified "by faith only." And fourth, the Bible contains examples of people who believed (*pisteuo*) in Jesus, yet who still were lost.

First, numerous Bible passages insist that something other than a mere belief in Christ is necessary to obtain salvation. Concerning confession, Paul wrote: "For with the heart one believes to righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made to salvation" (Romans 10:10). In Luke 13:3, Jesus declared to His audience: "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." The inspired historian Luke, in the book of Acts, recorded that God had "also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life" (Acts 11:18). After healing the lame man, Peter instructed his audience to "repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out" (Acts 3:19). We see in these verses that belief, confession, and repentance are required of all who desire to obtain salvation through Christ.

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Another item that the New Testament writers included as necessary for salvation is obedience. Hebrews 5:9 states: “And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him.” Peter made the statement, “For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?” (1 Peter 4:17). In the second epistle to the Thessalonians, Paul forewarned that Christ one day will execute judgment on those who “do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:8).

The list of things required of a person in order to obtain salvation could go on: hope (Romans 8:24), baptism (Acts 2:38; 1 Peter 3:21), and love (1 John 4:7-8) are just a small sampling. The point is that none of these, in and of itself, saves anyone. Faith without confession does not save. Confession without hope cannot save. And obedience without love is powerless to obtain salvation. The “faith only” doctrine is in error because it bases its entire case for salvation on one aspect listed in the New Testament. Using that type of logic, a person could turn to 1 John 4:7-8—“Beloved let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God”—and say that love is the only thing necessary for salvation—apart from faith or repentance.

In several of these verses, we see the New Testament writers using one or more figures of speech. For instance, the figure of speech known as synecdoche, in which a part of a thing is used to describe the whole, is used often in passages that discuss salvation. Dungan wrote:

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This is many times the case with the salvation of sinners. The whole number of conditions are indicated by the use of one. Generally the first is mentioned—that of faith—because without it nothing else could follow. Men were to call on the name of the Lord, in order to be saved (Romans 10:17); they must believe on the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 16:31); they must repent of their sins (Acts 17:30); they must be baptized in the name of the Lord (Acts 22:16). But it is common to have one of these mentioned, without any statement to the presence of any other (1888, p. 305).

E.W. Bullinger, arguably the most respected scholar in the world on figures of speech in the Bible, specifically mentioned 1 John 4:15 as an example of a biblical idiom. He commented that the phrase, “to confess,” in this verse means more than a simple verbal statement. The phrase “is used of abiding in the faith, and walking according to truth” (1898, p. 828).

In truth, it would be possible to go to any number of verses and pick out a single thing that the verse says saves a person. According to the Bible, love, repentance, faith, baptism, confession, and obedience are but a few examples of the things that save. However, it would be dishonest, and poor Bible scholarship, to demand that “only” repentance saves, or “confession alone” saves, or that “baptism by itself” has the power to save. In the same sense, one cannot (justifiably) pick the verses that mention faith and belief, and demand that a person is saved by “faith only” or “belief alone.”

Second, the biblical use of the word faith involves much more than mere mental assent to a certain fact. It also involves obedience to God’s commands. Recalling Thayer’s definition of the word, faith is “a conviction, full

of joyful trust, that Jesus is the Messiah—the divinely appointed author of eternal salvation in the kingdom of God, **conjoined with obedience to Christ**” (1977, p. 511). Throughout the New Testament, we see this definition of “obedient belief” used by the inspired writers. In 1 Peter 2:7, the apostle wrote: “Therefore, to you who **believe**, He is precious; but to those who are **disobedient**, ‘The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.’” In this verse, Peter used disobedience as the opposite of belief. The Hebrews writer also equated unbelief and disobedience. In Hebrews 3:18-19, the Israelites were not allowed into the Promised Land because they “did not obey” (3:18). But the next verse states: “So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief” (3:19). And Hebrews 4:6 also declares that they “did not enter because of disobedience.”

Repeatedly, faith is coupled with action in the New Testament. In Galatians 5:6, we read that “faith **working** through love” is the process that avails for salvation. Hebrews 11, recognized by Bible students as “the faith chapter,” shows this action process by using Old Testament examples of individuals who pleased God. By faith, Abel “offered” (vs. 4); by faith, Noah “prepared” (vs. 7); and by faith, Abraham “obeyed” (vs. 8). Verse 30 of this chapter demonstrates perfectly the relationship between belief and action. The verse states: “By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they were encircled for seven days.” Joshua and the Israelites believed that God would give them the city of Jericho, but that belief was effective only **after** they “encircled” the city for seven days.

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Another good example of the biblical use of “belief coupled with action” is found in Acts 16. Paul and Silas were in prison, and were singing hymns when an earthquake loosed their chains. The Philippian jailer in charge of the prison thought his prisoners had escaped, and was about to kill himself, when Paul and Silas stopped him. Immediately, the jailer inquired: “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (vs. 30). They replied: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household” (vs. 31).

Then 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 stripes. And immediately he and all his family were baptized. Now when he had brought them into his house, he set food before them; and he rejoiced, **having believed** in God with all his household (vss. 32-34).

When the jailer asked what he needed to do to be saved, Paul and Silas told him to “believe (*pisteuo*) on the Lord Jesus Christ.” Yet the passage does not say he “believed” until after he had been baptized. His belief was coupled with obedience. A similar situation is found in Acts 2. In that chapter, Peter’s listeners asked him, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” (vs. 37). “Then Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins’” (vs. 38). A few verses later, we read that about three thousand souls were obedient to Peter’s plea and were baptized. Then, in verse 44, the Bible describes the obedient group of followers by saying, “Now all who believed were together.”

But some object to this biblical usage, and maintain that such a use contradicts passages like Romans 3:28

and Ephesians 2:8-9, which teach that a person is not saved by works. First, Romans 3:28 does not separate faith from all works; rather, it states: “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds **of the law.**” The “law” discussed here is the Law of Moses, as is shown by Paul’s references to circumcision in verse 30. This passage does not say that faith saves apart from all works, but apart from works of the Law of Moses. Ephesians 2:8-9 states that a person is saved “by grace through faith...not of works,” yet verse 10 says Christians are created in Christ Jesus “for good works,” and the rest of the chapter discusses how the Jews and the Gentiles were both justified because the “law of commandments” (the Law of Moses) had been abolished (2:15). No person has ever been righteous enough to earn his or her salvation. Nor had any person been able to comply fully with the Law of Moses in order to earn salvation. But that does not mean that faith “apart from all action” saves a person. In fact, just the opposite is the case.

The second chapter of the book of James deals a crushing blow to the doctrine of “faith only.” Verses 14-26 systematically eliminate the possibility of a person being saved by “faith only.” James wrote to the Christians, asking, “What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?” These rhetorical questions demand a “No” answer. Then, in verse 17, he declared: “Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” He went on to say that Abraham “was justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar. Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith

was made perfect?” (vss. 21-22). Of course, Abraham did not earn his salvation, nor was he saved because of a sinless adherence to the Law. On the contrary, he was saved by “offering” and “working” exactly as God commanded him. Abraham first showed his active faith when he obeyed God’s call to leave his homeland (Hebrews 11:8). He continued to show his active, living faith when he offered Isaac. Throughout his life, he was saved because he obeyed the “works of God”—works that God approved in order to obtain salvation.

James further commented: “You see then that a man is justified by works, and **not by faith only**” (vs. 24). It is interesting to note that this is the only place in the entire New Testament where the words “faith only” are found together, and the verse **explicitly states that a person is not saved by faith only**. James concluded his chapter on faith with this statement: “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.” Faith without the “works of God” is a dead faith that cannot save. Abraham was justified after he “offered,” the walls of Jericho fell by faith after they were “encircled,” the Philippian jailer’s belief was not complete until he was “baptized,” and Noah’s faith caused him to “prepare.” It is the case that if the Israelites had not walked around Jericho, the walls would not have fallen, regardless of their belief. It is the case that if Noah had not “prepared” the Ark, he would not have been saved from the Flood, regardless of what he believed about God’s warning. And it is the case that if a person does not confess Christ, does not repent of his sins, and is not baptized for the remission of those

sins, then that person will not be saved, regardless of what he or she believes about Christ.

In order to prove this last statement, we move to the fourth objection regarding “faith only”: the Bible refers to individuals who believed (*pisteuo*) that Jesus was the Son of God, yet who still were lost. In Mark 1:21-28, the Scriptures record an instance in which Jesus was confronted by a man with an unclean spirit. Upon contacting Jesus, the spirit “cried out, saying, ‘Let us alone! What have we to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Did You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God’” (vss. 23-24). No one would argue that the demon was saved just because he believed that Jesus was the “Holy One of God.” Why not? For the simple reason that, although the unclean spirit acknowledged the deity of Jesus, he was not willing to penitently obey Christ. James, in his moving chapter on faith, said as much when he wrote: “You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?” (2:19-20).

The inspired apostle John documents another example of a group of people who “believed in” Christ, but who were lost in spite of their belief. In John 12:42-43, the text reads: “Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed (*pisteuo*) in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.” Is it the case that these rulers of the Jews were saved because they believed in Jesus, even though they were too scared to

confess him? To ask is to answer. They were lost, even though they “believed (*pisteuo*) in Him.”

CONCLUSION

The Bible nowhere teaches that a person can be saved by “faith only.” No mere mental consent to the deity of Christ can save (Matthew 7:21). True biblical faith in Christ is belief in His deity, **conjoined with** obedience to His commandments. Saving faith always has been made complete and living only through obedience to God’s commands. It is a living faith that “works through love” to accomplish the “works approved by God.” It is a living faith that brings about repentance, confession, submission to water baptism for the forgiveness of sins, and love for God and one’s fellow man. Similar to how Israel received the Promised Land from God after following His instructions, today, any alien sinner can “take possession” of the free gift of salvation at any time by taking these steps.

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