

HOW TO LEAD PEOPLE TO CHRIST: PART 2

OUR INVITATION TO RESPOND¹

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In my previous article I discussed getting the core of our message to men clearly in mind. Our objective is to lead them to believe in Christ to provide their eternal salvation. The gospel message about His death, burial, and resurrection is the normal context for our presentation of this core objective.² But at the end of the day, anyone who trusts Christ for eternal life is born again.

In this article I will discuss the process of seeking a response of faith from those with whom we share our good news.

I. BELIEVE THAT JESUS DIED ON THE CROSS

In recent years I have become aware of a way of presenting the gospel invitation that troubles me. I believe I have heard it from my earliest years, and I admit it didn't really bother me for a long time. Now it does.

I have heard people say this: "In order to be saved you must believe that Jesus died on the cross." In the context of our present discussion, I mean that this is their summary of the requirement of faith. It is not just one item, among others, to be believed. Whenever I hear that nowadays, I get extremely uncomfortable.³

For one thing, is there anyone anywhere in a Christian church (unless it is radically liberal) who *doesn't* believe that Jesus died on the cross? For that matter, even some really liberal

¹This article appeared in the Spring 2001 issue of *JOTGES*.

²Editor's note: He repeatedly links the gospel message with believing in Christ for eternal life. And he says the gospel message is "about His death, burial, and resurrection." That is certainly not *a crossless gospel*. To charge him with that is both dishonest and disrespectful.

³Editor's note: Here's another place where shoddy scholarship has led some to "quote" the two words "extremely uncomfortable" and not the whole paragraph. It saddens me that people with a high regard for truth feel free to misrepresent the view of my longtime friend and mentor.

theologians would consider that a true statement, although they might balk at the doctrine of the resurrection. You see why I am uncomfortable, I hope.⁴

Now I know that the statement I am evaluating leaves a lot of things unspoken that are still implied by the speaker. Most of the time people who say you are saved by believing that Jesus died on the cross mean that He died for our sins. Indeed the phrase “for your sins” is often added. But even with that addition, there is still unspoken material that the person usually has in mind.

They usually mean to say, for example, that this belief in Christ’s death is all that is necessary for salvation. Thus they are normally proclaiming salvation by faith alone. Also unspoken, but usually implied, is the idea that Christ’s work on the cross is sufficient to provide for our salvation. Thus they mean to say that we are trusting in the sufficiency of His work of atonement.

Let me be honest. I don’t like this way of presenting a gospel invitation.

But before I go further, I also want to say that I believe that this kind of presentation has been used by God to the actual salvation of souls. But that doesn’t make it the best way of reaching people or making the truth plain to them.

The very first disadvantage of this kind of invitation to faith is that it cannot be found in the Bible. Just think for a minute of John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47; Acts 16:31, and so on, and not a one of these verses invites us to get saved by believing that Jesus died on the cross. Why is it that we like to verbalize our message in ways that the Bible does not do? What is wrong with biblical language?⁵

The associated question is this: what is wrong with *our language*? The simple fact of the matter is that the statement I am criticizing is technically incorrect. People are not saved by believing that Jesus died on the cross; they are saved by believing in Jesus for eternal life, or eternal salvation.

If we say it the biblical way, we will be able to support our claim by direct biblical statements. But suppose a person I am

⁴ Editor’s note: In fairness, this paragraph should be cited and dealt with if anyone wishes to explain what Zane is “uncomfortable” about.

⁵ Editor’s note: While there may be texts that mention Jesus’ finished work on the cross, His deity, His perfect humanity, His bodily resurrection, and justification by faith alone in Him alone, none say one must believe all those truths to be born again.

witnessing to says, “Where does the Bible say we are saved by believing that Jesus died on the cross?” What am I going to do then? In that case I would be compelled to take him to a number of Scriptures and try to combine them to prove my point. But even then, I would not really have a statement from the Word of God that exactly verified the point I was making.

I would like to see grace people abandon this form of invitation to faith. Let us always point men to Christ Himself as the object of faith, rather than to some concept that must be theologically clarified before it can really be understood.

II. DOING THE TWO-STEP

Here is another technique that bothers me. Many good grace people employ what I would call a two-step approach to faith. First they invite people to believe the basic facts of the gospel, and then they ask them to appropriate this truth for themselves. In describing this second step, they often prefer the word *trust* to the word *believe*.

I happen to think that people who take this approach to evangelism are sometimes running scared. They do not want to be accused of making faith mere intellectual assent. Thus they try hard to make clear that just believing the facts doesn’t save us. According to them appropriating those facts for ourselves—that is, trusting Christ for our own salvation—is the crucial issue.

This approach to things opens the door for the famous illustrations about the chair, or the elevator, or something similar. Here is an elevator, they would say. Do you believe it can carry you up to the top story of the building? If the answer is yes, the next question is: what do you need to do now to get to the top story? The answer is supposed to be “trust” the elevator by getting onto it.

In the distant past I used to use such illustrations myself. I confess this fact with real embarrassment.⁶ Illustrations of this type do show considerable creativity. But I am afraid that the

⁶ Editor’s note: See p. 135 where Zane said about those who “are sorely tempted to make the gospel more complicated than God makes it”: “We have every right to be embarrassed by this tendency on our part.” Here Zane confesses he is personally embarrassed because he formerly did just that!

creativity here is badly misused. What is created is another idea that is absent from the Bible.

Where in the NT do we find any such presentation as this? Sorry, my friends, it just isn't there. And if you read part 1 of this article, you will know one of the reasons why it is not there.

You see, as we noted previously, the facts surrounding the gospel message—such as the death and resurrection of Christ—are important facts for what they tell us about the reasons for trusting Christ. But believing these facts doesn't save anyone. People are only saved when they believe that Jesus gives them eternal life the moment they believe in Him for that.

Let's return for a moment to that deserted island in the Pacific Ocean that I invented in my previous article. My hypothetical unsaved man has just read the words of Jesus in John 6:47, "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has eternal life." All this person needs to do is to believe that statement and eternal life is his. There is no two-step process here at all.

The issues involved in eternal salvation are significantly muddied by the two-step approach I am discussing. The two-step approach seems to imply that two acts of faith are essential to one's salvation. The first of these is belief in the facts, the second is an act of personal trust. So this approach ignores *the instrumental value of the facts of the gospel in bringing men to faith in Christ*, and it tends to elevate them to the level of a preliminary condition which must also be followed by a second step, namely, trust.⁷

Notice how the approaches I have objected to so far tend to blur the necessary focus on the Person of Christ as the object of faith. In the case of "believe that Jesus died on the cross" the focus is on an action He performed (admittedly an indispensable one). In the two-step scenario we approach Christ first by believing certain facts about Him. The simple truth is that Jesus can be believed for eternal salvation apart from any detailed knowledge of what He did to provide it.

In other words, the sufficiency of Christ is the true focus of the faith that brings salvation. I am contending here that until we have that concept clearly in mind, we will be vulnerable to making appeals to faith that tend to cloud the issues rather than

⁷ Editor's note: The connection between the facts of the gospel and faith in Christ is clearly stated here by Zane.

clarify them. If anybody in the world should be able to present a crystal clear gospel message and a clear appeal to faith, it ought to be grace people like ourselves.

But in a lot of cases we are not doing nearly as good a job as we should.

III. ASK JESUS INTO YOUR HEART

I am not going to say much about the famous invitational phrase, “Invite Jesus into your heart.” I suspect that most *JOTGES* readers would not be tempted to use this phrase in leading people to Christ.

It has often been pointed out that this phrase is not biblical and this fact is reason enough to leave it alone. Of course, we could also note that a person who used it could have a Lordship message in mind. He could mean that we are to invite the Lord in to take charge of our lives.

However, we should remember also that people have gotten saved this way too. If they are being told to believe in Christ for eternal life and are told that when Jesus comes in, He gives it to us, they are being told the truth. When I believe in Christ, He does come in and He Himself *is* eternal life (1 John 5:20). Thus as 1 John 5:12 says: “He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.”

But even after saying that, the unbiblical character of the phrase, “Invite Jesus into your heart,” is too heavy a burden to bear. Our own terminology is never better than the Bible’s. Never! And if we think so, we are kidding ourselves. And probably also confusing people.

IV. COMMIT YOURSELF TO CHRIST

Even less needs to be said about the phrase, “Commit yourself to Christ,” and its many variant forms. Such a phrase could mean entrust your eternal destiny to Him. But it *could mean* a lot of other things too, including surrender of the life in the Lordship Salvation sense.

What’s the point of employing phrases that are not only unbiblical but liable to misrepresentation and misunderstanding?

V. WHAT ABOUT “TRUST CHRIST”?

I know that many grace people like to invite the unsaved to “trust Christ” for eternal life. I really don’t have a strong objection to this phrase and occasionally use it myself when I want to offer a synonym for belief. But I never use it as my exclusive, or even pre-eminent, term for the faith that brings salvation.

However, I do resist the idea that is sometimes advanced that *trust* is a better term than the word *belief*. Of course, *trust* is often a synonym for faith in English usage. But often the English word *trust* has a diminished force that becomes equivalent to, “I just have to hope he will do it.” In that kind of statement, the speaker is expressing a significant degree of uncertainty. This is not what we mean by faith.

I may even use the word *trust* of someone I don’t really trust. I may say, “Jim asked me for twenty dollars to pay off a bill and I was afraid he might use the money on something else. But I said to myself, ‘Maybe he does want to pay a bill.’ So I gave him the twenty and decided that I would just have to trust him to do what he said. I hope he will.”

Presumably all of us recognize that this use of trust is perfectly acceptable and fairly common. Of course, the word *believe* can be used that way, too. I may say, “I believe he will come,” when I am not really certain that he will. Usually when we use the word this way, we signal our doubt by a tonal inflection: I *believe* he will come. But it does seem to me, at least, that the word *trust* more easily expresses some lack of certainty, as when I say, “I trust he will come.” I think an element of doubt is indicated just by using the word *trust* in this kind of statement.

However, uncertainty is far from being the normal implication of the word *trust*. In *The American Heritage Dictionary* (2nd college edition) in the discussion of trust in relation to synonyms like “*faith, confidence, reliance, dependence,*” the statement is made that all “these nouns reflect a feeling that a person or thing will not fail in performance. *Trust* implies depth and assurance of such feeling, which may not always be supported by proof” (p. 1300). So the note of complete confidence normally belongs to the word *trust*, just as it does also to faith or the verb *believe*.

The fact remains, however, that no English translation that I am aware of has opted to use *trust* as a replacement word for *believe* in any significant number of contexts. It just so happens

that *believe* works better where the text is specifying the *content* of belief. For example, in 1 John 5:1, we get, “Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God.” It would sound strange in English to say, “Whoever trusts that Jesus is the Christ is born of God.” The English word *believe* has the distinct advantage of working well in almost all the salvation verses. Thus the word *trust* is only helpful if we are looking for a synonym to assist the unsaved person to understand what it means to believe.

But since our English Bibles use the word *believe* consistently and constantly, I think we are better off using the word people find in their Bibles. *To trust* may be a synonym for *to believe* but there are no real grounds for preferring it when we do evangelism. If for some reason or other we are afraid of the word *believe*, we ought to re-examine our fear and get past it.

And, as I have already said, the use of *trust* to express the second part of a two-step process of believing, has no foundation in Scripture. I would certainly urge that we firmly reject any alleged distinction between *believing* and *trusting*, which is thought to favor the word *trust* over the word *believe*. That would amount to a misuse of one or both of these words.

VI. INVITING PEOPLE TO BELIEVE

So now let’s talk about leading a person to faith in Christ. In my discussion to this point, I have largely been clearing away brushwood. I have been trying to point out some of the mistakes that are made in inviting people to believe. Now let’s consider this from the positive standpoint.

Let’s suppose I have been talking to “Ralph,” an unsaved young man. I have given him the gospel about the death and resurrection of Christ. I have emphasized the point that the Lord Jesus, by His death on the cross, has completely satisfied God in regard to Ralph’s sins. Christ has paid for all the sins Ralph would ever commit from the day of his birth to the day of his death. Thus Jesus has purchased Ralph’s way to heaven.

The one thing Ralph needs now is eternal life. People who don’t have this go to hell according to Rev 20:15. Without new birth we are unable to enter the kingdom of God despite Jesus’ death for our sins (John 3:3). And the alternative to eternal life is to perish (John 3:16).

However, I tell Ralph, eternal life is available on one condition alone, and that condition is faith in Jesus. I now turn to verses like John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47; and especially John 6:35-40. I spend time on each of these verses, but I particularly want to focus on John 6:35-40. Let me now give my presentation to Ralph in the first person. I speak as follows:

“Ralph, notice how Jesus stresses the fact that believing in Him has permanent results. In verse 35 He insists that the person who comes to Him for the bread of life will never get hungry for that bread again. And the person who believes in Him for the water of life will never get thirsty for it again.

“Let me put it to you this way, Ralph. If a person could lose the bread or water of life after coming to Christ for it, he would be hungry or thirsty again. But notice! Jesus says that can’t happen.

“He says the same thing in a different way in verse 37. There He says that if a person comes to Him, He will never throw him out.

“Look also at verses 38-39. Here Jesus says that He came down from heaven to do His Father’s will and that His Father’s will is that Jesus should lose none of those that the Father has given Him and that He should raise them all up on the last day.

“And then notice how He repeats this idea in verse 40. Everyone who believes in Him gets eternal life and will be raised up at the last day.

“Notice, Ralph, that our resurrection at the last day depends on Jesus doing God’s will. If I believe in Jesus for eternal life, I get it and He does the rest. He does God’s will, so He will never throw me out. He will raise me up at the last day. I will never again hunger for the bread of life. And I will never thirst for the water of life. Do you think you understand this, Ralph?”

Hopefully, Ralph says that he does. If he says he doesn’t, I will ask him, “What seems to still puzzle you, Ralph?”

At this point, experience suggests that I will often get a question like this: “Do you mean that if I believe in Jesus for eternal life, that I can go out and do anything I want and still go to heaven?”

I am always pleased to hear this question, because it signals to me that the person is getting the idea that this is a gift and that it is not withdrawn if we behave badly.

My usual way of responding to the question is that being born again is like being born into a family. After that, we are always members of that family, even if we are scoundrels. But if we have good parents, they are not going to let us run wild. They will discipline and correct us and do their best to get us on the right path. Then I point out that, after we get eternal life, God is our heavenly Father and He is the best Parent we could imagine. He will not let us run wild. He will spank us, if need be, and may even take our physical lives away. But Jesus will never cast us out of God's family.

So far as my own experience goes, I have never had anybody not find this an adequate answer. It seems to clear things up for people, while still maintaining the truth of a passage like John 6:35-40.

So if I have successfully answered Ralph's questions, and he tells me he understands what I have been saying to him, I can get to the bottom line. Here is one approach that I feel comfortable about:

“Okay, Ralph. You say it's all clear to you. And maybe as we talked, you not only understood Jesus' promise, but you also believed it. If you have believed, then you now have eternal life. Do you remember how we went over John 5:24? Well if you have heard Jesus' word and believed it, that verse says you have eternal life and that you will never come into judgment before God to decide your eternal destiny. You have already passed from death to life.”

At this point, of course, I can ask him if he *does* believe. If he says yes, I can also ask, “Then do you know for sure that you have eternal life and will be with the Lord Jesus forever?”

If he also responds affirmatively to this, and gives me no reason to doubt his veracity, I can and should regard him as saved. If, in fact, he does believe the things we have discussed from God's Word, then on the authority of God's Word he most certainly *is* saved.

Notice please! I have not asked him to pray, or to make a decision for Christ, or to do any of the many other things people often ask the unsaved to do.

All I have done is to ask if he has understood the truth we have discussed, and I have asked if he believes it. I absolutely insist that this is all the personal worker needs to do. I am encouraging the unsaved person to believe, but I can't make him do that.

If he does believe, a prayer is unnecessary. If he doesn't, a prayer will be confusing since I may direct him to say things he can't yet understand or believe, because God has not yet opened his heart.⁸

I should know about this problem. You see, when I was a little boy, I went forward in a meeting and said a prayer before I really understood what I was doing. Actually I was saved years later. But that prayer confused me, because I spent years wondering if I got saved when I prayed it. The pastor even thought I had because he came to visit my mother and told her so. But I wasn't sure at all.

I now realize that no one is saved by praying a prayer. They are saved when they understand God's offer of eternal life through Jesus and believe it. That's when people are saved. And that's the *only* time when people are saved. All of the excess baggage that we bring into our encounter with unsaved sinners is just that, excess baggage!

In this brief make-believe encounter with Ralph, I tried to give him something to believe about Jesus Christ. I wanted him to realize that you could believe Jesus' promises about eternal life and that when you did, you were saved forever.

That's all I basically wanted. Everything I might have included in my presentation leading up to the issue of faith was designed to prepare the way for that faith. I work on the conviction that if a person understands God's provision for salvation through the cross of Christ, it will be easier for him or her to believe in Jesus for eternal life.⁹

But the bottom line is this: I want people to know that the moment they believe in Christ for this free gift, they are saved and saved forever.

Let me add one final word. I find this a most liberating approach to evangelism. I have done my part if I have presented the message clearly. But faith in the heart is the work of God's

⁸ Cf. Acts 16:14.

⁹ Editor's note: He has certainly repeated this point many times in the two articles, yet critics of his view rarely mention this. Why?

Spirit and not a function of my technique or of my evangelistic dynamism.

The simple Word of God responded to in simple faith: that's what leading people to Christ is all about.