



**DEAD FAITH,
SAVING FAITH,
GOD'S WILL**
and More

ZANE C. HODGES

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by

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Forewords

When I was in the fourth grade, before the advent of personal computers and mobile phones, I began having problems seeing the chalkboard. I was seated at the back of the classroom and frequently had to walk to the front of the class in order to see what the teacher had written. Not wanting to wear glasses, I was in a state of denial regarding my fuzzy vision.

Eventually, a school vision screening detected my poor eyesight and instructed me to visit an optometrist. I recall my shock when the only letter I could make out on the eye chart was the big letter *E* at the top of the chart, and even that was fuzzy. Finally, I received a much-needed pair of glasses, and my fuzzy world instantly came into focus. My performance at school improved now that I could easily see what the teacher was writing on the chalkboard.

I had a similar experience with understanding what James 2:14-26 teaches regarding a faith that is “dead” because it lacks works, and the inability of such a faith to “save” someone.

In 1987, I received the gift of everlasting life when I understood and believed the truths of John 3:16 and Ephesians 2:8-9. I didn’t encounter James 2:14-26 until some time later. I immediately recognized that the passage could not contradict the clear truth of John 3:16 and Ephesians 2:8-9: Salvation is by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone for the free gift of eternal life, without the need for any good work. However, I incorrectly assumed that “save” when used in the Epistle of James refers to eternal salvation, so I resorted to the common misunderstanding that James 2:14-26 teaches that “true saving faith” results in good works. In other words, the existence of saving faith is proved by external good works.

I reconciled this understanding with John 3:16 and Ephesians 2:8-9 by placing a very low bar for the amount of good works required to evidence true saving faith, while letting passages such as John 3:16, Acts 16:30-31, and Ephesians 2:8-9 be determinative regarding the question of how one is saved eternally. I had a fuzzy understanding of James 2:14-26.

In 1992, after reading *Absolutely Free!*,¹ I ordered *Dead Faith: What Is It? — A Study on James 2:14-26*, a 32-page booklet published by Zane Hodges’s publishing company, Redención Viva. I recall how excited I was as my out-of-focus understanding of James 2:14-26 began to disappear, and a new, clear understanding came into focus as I learned what the passage actually teaches. In the Epistle of James, being “saved” is not about eternal salvation, but about saving our temporal life here and now. A “dead faith” is not a non-existent faith, but a faith that has become useless, lifeless, and without vitality. A dead faith that doesn’t work cannot save our lives here and now. The booklet *Dead Faith: What Is It?* is the first chapter of this book.

Other chapters deal with areas that are also subject to fuzzy

¹ Zane C. Hodges, *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1989).

Foreword

misunderstandings. Chapter 2, taken from Zane's message given at the Grace Evangelical Society's 2005 National Conference, continues the discussion of James 2. In James 2, what is "justification by works" and what kind of works would constitute such justification? Are we justified by works before men through a godly lifestyle?

Chapters 3 and 4 are based on two messages given at Jansen Bible Church in Nebraska in 1990, not long after the publication of *Absolutely Free!* in 1989. These two messages deal with subjects that confuse many: saving faith, lordship salvation, discipleship, and repentance. These messages reinforce the contrast between the absolutely free gift of everlasting life received solely by faith in Jesus Christ for that gift and the costly road of discipleship required for the successful Christian life and an abundance of eternal rewards.

Chapter 5 comes from a chapel message given in the early 1970s at Dallas Theological Seminary, where Zane was a New Testament professor. This message impacted both students and faculty as it challenged the often fuzzy understanding of God's will. Where can we find guidance from God today? Does God guide us through our feelings or a sense of inner peace? Does God give us freedom to make decisions in our lives, including important decisions such as whether to enter into full-time ministry, or whom we should marry?

Chapter 6 is from one of Zane's last public messages,² given at the Grace Evangelical Society's 2007 National Conference. In "What Is Living Water? Water Producing Water," Zane looks back at some revisions to his understanding of Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman in John 4. What is the *living water* spoken of in John 4? How had the Samaritan woman already asked for the living water from the Lord Jesus Christ?

Zane's teachings have helped me go from a fuzzy misunderstanding to a clear, focused understanding of many Biblical truths. It is my hope that this book will help you, likewise, to come to a clearer understanding of these truths. A clear understanding of these truths can have a practical application to our Christian walk. It is my prayer that these messages will be a blessing in your understanding of the Scriptures and that they will lead you to a closer walk with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Michael Lii
President
Zane Hodges Library

² Zane Hodges went home to be with the Lord Jesus on November 23, 2008.

Foreword

Dear Friends,

This book brought back to mind how I first became acquainted with the teachings of Zane Hodges. I was raised in a Christian home, and my father was my pastor. I was familiar with the gospel from my earliest days. I cannot remember a time during those early days when I was not filled with the great joy of the assurance of my salvation, that I didn't believe the gospel.

Unfortunately, after first believing the gospel and being assured of my eternal destiny, my great joy faded as I was taught that I had to have a life change in order to prove my salvation. If these changes did not occur, it would be evidence that I was not truly born again. The root problem was that I was being directed to good conduct as the basis for assurance of salvation.

My hope was that making the ultimate commitment to serve Jesus would ostensibly bring about that assurance that I lost. This prompted me to go into ministry, but it was a failed effort. I ended up dropping out of Bible college, believing that I was hopelessly lost.

In an extended conversation with a pastor friend, Kirk Muller, Kirk suggested that I get a couple of books by Zane Hodges which resulted in clearing up everything for me. Those books were *The Gospel Under Siege* and *Grace in Eclipse*. I highly recommend these books to this day.

I eventually invited Zane to Jansen Bible Church in 1990. He preached two messages that are the basis of chapters two and three of this book: 1) "What Is Saving Faith?" and 2) "What Is Discipleship?"

May you be greatly encouraged by this book. For those who lack assurance of their salvation, may these two chapters in particular help you find or regain true assurance of your salvation through Jesus' promise of eternal life for all who believe in Him. May the Lord bless you richly!

Paul Carpenter

Pastor Jansen Bible Church, Nebraska (1988-2025)

Chapter 1

Dead Faith – What Is It?¹ A Study on James 2:14-26

Many Christians are sure they know what “dead faith” is. “Dead faith,” they would say, “is the kind of faith that doesn’t save anybody from hell.” And they might add, “It is the kind of faith that doesn’t produce the good works that prove a person is a true Christian.”

Of course, these opinions are usually thought to be based on the teaching of James 2:14-26. After all, that is the New Testament passage — and the *only* New Testament passage, by the way — which speaks of a dead faith. For many Christian people, the views expressed above are the only ideas about James 2:14-26 which they have ever seriously entertained. It is a major thesis of this chapter that those views cannot be sustained from the very passage which they are supposed to reflect.

But there is more. Our examination of James 2:14-26 will also attempt to show that not only do these well-known opinions miss the point James is making, but they also make his actual teaching hopelessly obscure to the average reader. This is a way of saying that these popular views don’t just narrowly misconstrue James’s meaning. They miss it by a thousand miles!

In other words, to read James 2:14-26 correctly requires more than fine-tuning our previous conceptions about the text. It means discarding those conceptions completely and starting *all over again* from an entirely new vantage point. It means replacing our old pair of spectacles with a brand-new pair in which the lenses are “ground” to the optical prescription that correctly perceives this inspired passage of God’s Word.

Theological Tradition

Some readers may be put on guard by the assertions we have just made. They may be inclined to feel that to suggest a new understanding of a well-known text is to call into question the historic convictions of Christian people down through the centuries. Surely, after many centuries of Christian teaching, the Church will not just now discover the true meaning of an important Biblical passage, will it?

Ironically, such sentiments are likely to be expressed these days by many who call themselves Protestants. It is probably fortunate that these modern Christians were not around in the days of Martin Luther or John Calvin! They might well have discouraged those theological pioneers from expressing views which clashed with the church consensus of their own time. Indeed, it was the Emperor Charles V who was supposed to have said of Luther at the Diet of Worms, “A single friar who goes counter to all Christianity for 1,000 years must be wrong!”

Yet today many who feel they could have stood shoulder to shoulder with

¹ This chapter was originally published by Redención Viva in 1987 as a booklet titled, *Dead Faith: What Is It? A Study on James 2:14-26*.

Luther at Worms do not accept Luther's principle of authority. They are reluctant to adopt any position which does not have a strong theological tradition behind it. And in feeling this way, they have actually surrendered one of the greatest convictions of the Reformation, namely, the supremacy of an appeal to Scripture over against the tradition of the church.

"But," someone will object, "would God allow His truths to be lost to the Church at large over so long a span of time?" In reply, one may ask a counterquestion: "Why was there need for the Reformation in the first place? Would not the opponents of the Reformers have had just as much right to allege this principle against the new teachings?" In fact, as we know, the authorities of the pre-Reformation church did exactly that.

Accordingly, there can be no valid appeal to theological tradition — even post-Reformation theological tradition — against arguments that are basically about what the Biblical text actually says. All post-Reformation Christians should disallow such appeals. We therefore invite the reader to think about one fundamental question only: What do the Scriptures say?

James 2 – A Storm Center

But having said all this, one must also add that there is no such thing as a truly traditional interpretation of James 2:14-26. Instead, it is unmistakable that there is actually no consensus about the meaning of this passage — even among Protestants!²

Naturally, there are those who construe James to be saying that salvation from hell (justification) is conditioned on works as well as on faith.³ Others maintain that justification is based on faith alone, and cannot be lost. However, they also say, if good works do not follow one's professed conversion, this lack of works demonstrates that such faith was a "dead faith" and, hence, that person was never justified at all.⁴ Most of the widely held views of James 2 are variations on these two

² (After the first reference to an author's work in this chapter, later references to the same work usually use only the author's name and the page numbers.)

For a survey of views under a special set of categories, see W. Nicol, "Faith and Works in the Letter of James," in *Essays on the General Epistles of the New Testament*, Neotestamentica 9 (Pretoria: The New Testament Society of South Africa, c 1975), 11-19. See also pp. 19-23. For the views of the Reformers themselves, see the interesting survey by Timothy George, "A Right Strawy Epistle": Reformation Perspectives on James," *Review and Expositor* 83 (1986): 369-382.

³ For example, more than 100 years ago, Barnes wrote, "... and as the Holy Spirit saw that there would be danger that in later times the great and glorious doctrine of justification by faith would be . . . abused, it was important that the error should be rebuked, and the doctrine should be distinctly laid down that good works *are* [italics his] necessary to salvation." (Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament: James, Peter, John and Jude* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, reprint ed. 1951 (orig. ed. n.d.)], 42). Even though this view is wrong, its candor is refreshing. Indeed, the prima facie impression the text makes on any reader who feels that eternal salvation is under discussion is precisely the view Barnes has expressed. Equally frank are the statements of Nicol: "Logically, then, good works must be a condition of justification ..." and, "From this it is clear that Paul might say: you must do good works, otherwise in the end God will not justify you." See Nicol, p.22. Thus does Nicol bid farewell to the Reformation!

⁴ This view is never more succinctly put than by Glasgow: "We are not saved by our good works, but if we are saved, we will do good works. Good works are not the ground of our salvation, but they are the outgrowth of it." (Samuel McPheeters Glasgow, *The General Epistles: Studies in the Letters of James, Peter, John, and Jude* [New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1928], 29). But Glasgow's statement ill

popular ideas.

Obviously, all the views cannot be right. In fact, it is entirely possible that none of them are!

It is the thesis of this chapter that the latter is in fact the case. Not only is there no commonly accepted interpretation of James 2:14-26 in post-Reformation Protestantism, but indeed all of the major ways of reading this text are wrong. *And not simply wrong, but seriously so.* So incorrect are these views that if James himself had heard them, he would have been both astonished and appalled!

This is a serious charge. We will support this charge in what follows. But for now, it is sufficient to observe that James 2:14-26 remains a storm center in Christian thought. None of the common views can safely be affirmed to have any necessary prior claim on our consideration. Only a view that unmistakably grows out of the Biblical text itself can have final authority for the discriminating Christian reader.

A Starting Point

Not surprisingly, all of the common views claim to have the support of the Biblical text. Clearly, however, James could not be teaching all of them. In fact, as we have suggested, he may well have been teaching *none* of them! Therefore, the question we must ask is, “What does the text of James actually say?”

We propose that the answer can only be found by passing the traditional method of studying this passage. We must take as our starting point the *conclusion* that James reaches at the end of his discussion — what we may call his “bottom line”!

In other words, we want to begin with the last verse of the passage, that is, with James 2:26. It is surprising to discover how small a role this particular verse plays in all of the writings on James 2. Yet its occurrence at the climax of James’s remarks ought to be given its rightful weight. There is a sense in which, with this verse, James interprets all that he has said before, for he writes:

For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also. (James 2:26)

One immediately notices here that James draws an analogy between dead faith and a dead body. But this transparent fact has not been properly treated by expositors. Obviously, if one encounters a dead body, one assumes that it has died. To put it another way, this is a body that was once alive. This strongly implies that James can conceive of a “dead faith” as having once been alive. In other words, a person’s faith — like his body — can die.

If the objection is raised that we carry the analogy too far, the reply should be, “Why?” Is there anything in the rest of the passage that shows that dead faith is not

conceals the harsh fact that in this view, good works are, after all, a *condition* of final salvation, even though they may not be called a “ground” in the sense of “cause,” for when an end cannot be achieved apart from certain things being done, those “things” logically become conditions for the end in view. To deny this is to engage in a semantic game. Our point, in fact, is explicitly admitted by Samuel T. Logan, Jr., in “The Doctrine of Justification in Jonathan Edwards,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 46 (1984): 26-52. Note particularly pp. 42-48.

like a dead body in having once been alive? The answer is that there is absolutely nothing in this context that shows that the analogy does not hold at this basic level.

It follows that the view that a dead faith has never been alive is not derived from the text itself. Such a view, in fact, is really a begging of the question. Those whose theology does not permit the thought that a living faith may die are committing the common error of reading their own assumptions back into the text. But nothing shows that James held this view, and the analogy of a dead body strongly implies that he did not believe that “dead faith” had never been alive. Otherwise, the analogy would be weak and inappropriate to the subject matter.

Equally surprising is the fact that James is comparing faith to the body, while comparing works to the spirit. Who would not be tempted to reverse this comparison?⁵ “After all,” we feel inclined to ask, “is not faith the animating principle, or spirit, which leads to the outward manifestation of good works?”⁶

The answer is, “No!” At least it is “No” within the framework of this passage. The point James is making is that works are actually the key to the vitality of faith.⁷ His point is not that a vital faith is the key to works!

Yet this latter view is held by many readers of the passage. They have concluded — without help from the passage itself — that James must be talking about the necessity of having a living faith if we are going to produce good works! But on the contrary, as James’s analogy shows, he is writing about the necessity of having works if our faith is to stay alive!

In other words, a body dies when it loses the spirit that keeps it alive. In the same way, a person’s faith dies when it loses the animating factor of good works!

Following these observations, it should be clear that something is radically wrong with most of the popular readings of the passage. James says that works are the secret of a vital faith, and not the other way around. To make the passage say something else is to render the closing and climactic analogy of James 2:26 startlingly inept and confusing.

That James’s conclusion is neither inept nor confusing is clear for all who hold to the verbal, plenary inspiration of Scripture.

⁵ For example, Hort wrote: “The paradox must be intentional. The opposite is what most would be tempted to say: but it would be only superficially true.” (Fenton John Anthony Hort, *Expository and Exegetical Studies: Compendium of Works Formerly Published Separately: The Epistle of James* [reprint ed., Minneapolis: Klock and Klock: 1980], 66). See the remarks of James Hardy Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1916), 225.

⁶ Amazingly, this inversion of the idea is actually made by one commentator, who writes: “The spirit animates the body. In like manner faith must animate the works of life!” (O. P. Eaches, *Hebrews, James, and I and II Peter*, Clark’s Peoples Commentary [Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1906], 237).

⁷ For a strained attempt to handle the comparison of faith to a dead body without conceding that works are the animating, vitalizing factor, see R. A. Martin, *James*, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982), 35-36. Martin reads into the passage the ancient way of deciding whether a body was dead or not, as though James had said, “We can know a body is dead when it has no breath (spirit)”!

For Christian Consumption?

The realization that James's closing analogy implies that a living faith can die leads directly to another important question: Are the warnings of this passage aimed at Christians?

Here, of course, some of the common understandings of the text would respond affirmatively. All of those who hold that a Christian may forfeit his eternal salvation are comfortable with the view that the passage is a warning to believers to maintain themselves in a state of grace. Also, those who do not allow that a living faith can ever die feel compelled to apply the warnings to falsely professed Christians rather than to true believers.

But this latter view again begs the question. There is nothing in James's text to suggest that he directs his warnings about a dead faith at those who were never really saved at all. On the contrary, James addresses himself to people he calls "my brethren" (2:14). Earlier in the chapter, he speaks of them as possessing faith in Christ (2:1) and warns them not to mix it with partiality toward men. Still earlier, he describes his readers as born from above (1:16-18). The suggestion that James thinks of some of his readers as possibly unconverted is *totally unfounded* in this epistle.⁸

Consequently, the passage can be taken as a piece of Christian teaching addressed to people James regards as his Christian brothers. Once this is realized, the point of the analogy between dead faith and a dead body becomes plain. Christian people need to maintain good works in order to keep their Christian faith alive and vital.

Or, to put it another way, unless we act on our faith and live it out, our creed rapidly decays into mere dead orthodoxy. Good works are the "spirit" which animates the entire "body" of our Christian convictions. Without such works, our faith dies.⁹ But does this lead to loss of eternal salvation?

Faith Can't Save Him, Can It?

It is certainly true that many readers have been convinced that the passage bears on our eternal destiny because of James's words in verse 14. There he writes:

⁸ Dibelius affirms: "But in all of the instances [in James] which have been examined thus far what is involved is the faith which the Christian has, never the faith of the sinner which first brings him to God The faith which is mentioned in this section can be presupposed in every Christian . . . [James's] intention is not dogmatically oriented, but practically oriented: *he wishes to admonish the Christians to practice their faith, i.e., their Christianity, by works*" [italics his]. As far as it goes, a better statement cannot be found in the literature on James 2. (Martin Dibelius, *James: A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, rev. Heinrich Greeven, trans. Michael A. Williams, ed. Helmut Koester, Hermeneia [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976], 178).

⁹ Appropriate are the words of Gaebelein: "And there is a sense in which faith is a body, as in a system of doctrine or 'body' of truth. When so regularized and systematized it comes alive, James reminds us, only by being put into practice, acted upon, done." (Frank E. Gaebelein, *Faith That Lives* [Chicago; Moody Press, 1955], 72).

Dead Faith

What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? (James 2:14)

The really crucial statement here is the question, “Can faith save him?” The Greek of this question, however, is best rendered, “Faith can’t save him, can it?” In other words, James expects his readers to reply, “No, faith can’t save him.”¹⁰

From this question, it becomes apparent that James is not discussing a doctrine of salvation which is based only on faith. For this reason, many interpreters have seen James as standing in opposition to the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith alone. Clearly, however, the kind of salvation James describes *does not* come by faith alone. If we must assume that Paul and James are discussing the same basic issue, then we are compelled to see them in conflict with one another.¹¹

Of course, many expositors would not concede this point. They would maintain that Paul and James can, in fact, be harmonized.¹² But in the light of the question James has articulated in 2:14, with its clearly expected negative response, all harmonizations with a doctrine of *sola fide* (faith alone) are awkward and forced. Moreover, the remainder of the passage, with its emphasis on works, creates transparent obstacles to the harmonization process.¹³ The absence of a universally or commonly accepted view of James 2 is in no small degree due to the failure of interpreters to really get rid of the apparent clash between Paul and James.

Not surprisingly, a kind of desperate effort has been made to avoid the impact of the question in James 2:14 by translating it, “That [that kind of] faith can’t save him, can it?” But this is an unjustified exaggeration of the so-called “article of previous reference” in Greek and has nothing whatever to commend it here except the theological preconceptions that created this translation to begin with. With abstract nouns like *faith* and *love*, the article is perfectly normal when the noun is used as a subject.¹⁴ Precisely the kind of construction we have in 2:14 is found with

¹⁰ See Lorenzen, “The original Greek makes it clear . . . that the rhetorical question calls for a negative answer: No! Faith without works cannot save! Works are necessary for salvation.” (Thorwald Lorenzen, “Faith without Works does not count before God! James 2:14-16,” *Expository Times* 89 [1978]: 231.

¹¹ Lorenzen, for one, surrenders the process of harmonizing Paul and James. (Lorenzen, p. 234).

¹² Among many in recent years who support the view that James and Paul can be harmonized are: G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The General Epistles: James, I Peter, Jude, II Peter* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon, 1965), 27-31; Leslie Mitton, *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 103-108; D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Epistles of James: Tests of Living Faith* (Chicago, Moody Press, 1979), 174-175; and R. A. Martin, *James* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982), 28-29, 33-36.

¹³ Some indeed have sought a reconciliation between James and Paul in terms of differing concepts of works. Some time ago, Lenski expressed a distinction that has often been asserted in one form or another since then. He states: “Paul and James deal with different kinds of works. Paul deals with law-works, which have nothing to do with true Gospel-faith...James deals with Gospel-works, which ever evidence the presence of Gospel-faith...” (R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and of the Epistle of James* [Columbus, Oh.: Lutheran Book Concern, 1938], 587). But this distinction cannot be substantiated and smacks of special pleading. Moreover, the distinction has recently been trenchantly criticized and rejected by Moo. See Douglas J. Moo, “‘Law,’ ‘Works of the Law’ and Legalism in Paul,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 45 (1983): 73-100.

¹⁴ For a relatively deft handling of the matter of the article, see J. P. Lange, *The Epistle General of James* in his *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Critical, Doctrinal and Homiletical, with*

the word *patience* in James 1:3, 4. But no one wants to render 1:4 as: “But let that patience have its perfect work.” Thus, also, in First Corinthians 13:4, where articles occur with *love*, no one proposes to translate: “*That* love suffers long and is kind; *that* love does not envy; *that* love does not parade itself...” The attempt to soften the blow of James’s question in 2:14 by introducing a “*that*” before *faith* is a form of special pleading which can summarily be rejected.¹⁵

No, the meaning of James’s question is obvious. Faith does not save in the particular sense in which James means *salvation*. But what exactly is that sense?

Salvation in James

One of the least examined preconceptions which has affected the interpretation of James 2 is the assumption that his use of the word “*save*” must refer to one’s eternal destiny in heaven or hell. But this is a risky assumption, as all observant readers of the Greek New Testament will know.

The Greek verb used in James 2:14 (*sōzō*) has a wide range of possible meanings, which run the gamut from physical healing and rescue from danger to spiritual deliverances of various kinds, to preservation from final judgment and hell. It is the interpreter’s duty to examine each text where this verb occurs to ascertain its exact sense. In some places its sense is obvious, and in some it is not. Here it is not.

The rest of the epistle, however, is very helpful in determining James’s meaning. In the concluding verses of his letter, James writes:

Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.
(James 5:19, 20)

Special Reference to Ministers and Students (New York: Charles Scribner, 1869), p. 82. He reduces the nuance to “*thus* [italics his] faith surely cannot save him.” He adds further, “The reference therefore is simply to the faith in question, and the explanations of Theile (false faith), Pott (faith only) and similar ones are exegetical.” This precision is lost by many modern writers, although it may now be argued that even this kind of “fine-tuning” overloads the semantics of the text. When James uses the word *endurance* in 1:3 without an article (as an object) and follows it immediately in 1:4 with an articular form (used as a subject), no one feels the need to comment on this. Nor should they feel this need in 2:14 with *faith*. Overrefinement in matters grammatical, however, is an academic vice that dies hard!

¹⁵ A. T. Robertson, *Studies in the Epistle of James* (Nashville: Broadman, n.d.), p. 94 n. 2, assigns to the article “almost the original demonstrative force.” But this is *terribly* unlikely here when it is not even true later in the passage where the article appears with *faith* at 2:17, 20, 22 (twice) and 26. Any student of the original language can examine James’s text and see for himself that the article occurs with *faith* only when *faith* is a subject or has a possessive word qualifying it (as in verse 18). Otherwise, there is no article. There is no reconditte significance to the use of the article in 2:14! Quite rightly, Dibelius, p.152, rejects the special stress on the article: “Here Jas uses the article before ‘faith’..., but this is not to be read “*this* faith,” as many interpreters from Bede to Mayor have argued. Jas is not speaking of any particular brand of faith... The only attributive which is expressed . . . is this: faith which ‘has’ no works. But this is still the Christian faith and not an ‘alleged, false faith.’” So much for building theology on an undetectable grammatical nuance.

Here the meaning of the verb “save” is plain. It refers to preservation of the physical life from death.¹⁶ Indeed, the Greek expression *sōzein tēn psuchē* (“to save the soul”) is a standard and normal way of saying “to save the life.” Furthermore, there is no text in the Greek Bible where it can be shown to have the meaning “to save the soul” from hell. First-century readers, therefore, are not likely to have read the phrase in that sense.¹⁷

This should be kept in mind in James 1:21, where it would have been better to translate: “. . . receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your lives.” In the larger context, James has been talking about the death-dealing consequences of sin (1:13-15). Here, he suggests that the antidote to that kind of consequence is the life-saving capacity of God’s Word (1:21).

In speaking this way, James is firmly in the tradition of the Jewish wisdom literature, notably the book of Proverbs. Many of the proverbs affirm the death-dealing effect of wickedness and the life-saving effect of righteousness. For example:

The fear of the Lord prolongs days,
But the years of the wicked will be shortened. (Proverbs 10:27)

As righteousness leads to life,
So he who pursues evil pursues it to his own death. (Proverbs 11:19)

In the way of righteousness is life,
And in its pathway there is no death.
(Proverbs 12:28)

The law of the wise is a fountain of life,
To turn one away from the snares of death. (Proverbs 13:14)

He who keeps the commandment keeps his soul (life),
But he who is careless of his ways will die. (Proverbs 19:16)

Against this background, it is obvious what James means in 1:21 when he says that God’s Word “is able to save your souls (lives).” But equally obvious is the point he goes on to make in the following verses, when he writes:

But be doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the Word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a

¹⁶ Ropes writes of 5:20: “Note how here, as in 1:15, death is the result of sin.” Ropes, 315.

¹⁷ Even our Lord’s metaphor about saving/losing the life (Mt. 16:24-26; Mk. 8:34-37; Lk. 9:23-25) is best understood as founded on the literal meaning of the Greek phrase, which is quite plain in a text like Mark 3:4 (“to save life or to kill”). For lucid Old Testament examples of the sense “to preserve the life,” see the following texts where the Greek version of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) used the Greek phrase we are discussing: Gen. 19:17; 32:30; 1 Sam. 19:11; Psalm 109:31; Jer. 48:6. For the present writer’s treatment of the Lord’s metaphor about saving/losing the life, see *Grace in Eclipse* (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1985), 27-33.

forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does. (James 1:22-25)

The resemblance of all this to James 2:14-26 is striking. In 1:21-25, the inspired writer is saying that the readers will be “*saved*” (that is, their lives will be saved) if they are doers rather than just hearers of God’s Word. And in 2:14-26, as one can now see, he is saying that they will be “*saved*” (in the same sense), not by what they believe (faith) but by what they do about what they believe (works).

Thus, the word “*saved*” in 2:14 is most naturally construed in the same basic sense as that found in 1:21 and 5:19, 20.¹⁸ It has nothing to do with the issue of eternal destiny at all, but deals instead with the life-preserving benefits that obedience brings to the Christian and which cannot be experienced by mere hearing or by faith alone.¹⁹

A New Perspective

Once this point is perceived, a whole new perspective is opened up on James 2:14-26. To understand this famous passage, one must forget the issue of eternal salvation. It simply is not the point under discussion. James is writing about the temporal life and the preserving of it.

All of the common contemporary readings of this passage come to grief on this simple mistake — they’ve got the wrong subject! But, as students of the art of interpreting literature will realize, this is one of the most devastating of all interpretive errors. Obviously, no text can be read correctly when the writer’s real subject is not perceived!

It follows that all efforts to apply the passage as a whole to the issue of one’s eternal destiny lead only to misunderstanding of the author’s message. This erroneous perspective has produced many awkward attempts at harmonization with Pauline doctrine and, even worse, it has created bad theology. Ironically, the supposed teaching of James 2:14-26 has been used to develop a faith/works synthesis which neither Paul nor James ever believed or taught.

It is not too much to say that the misreading of James 2:14-26 is one of the most tragic interpretive blunders in the history of the Church. It is a misreading which has played a major role in obscuring the simple message of the Biblical gospel. And whereas the Scriptures invite us to trust Christ and to find assurance of eternal salvation in the promises that God makes to the believer, this false conception of James 2 has been used to encourage people to find assurance in their good works. Moreover, while the Scriptures enjoin faith in Christ, this false view encourages

¹⁸ In connection with James 4:12, Laws points out that James echoes the Old Testament description of God as One who “kills and makes alive.” She cites Deut. 32:39; 1 Sam. 2:6-7; and 2 Kings 5:7. (Sophie Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, Harper’s New Testament Commentaries [New York: Harper & Row, 1980], 188). This is congruent with the observations made above about the word to *save* in other passages of James.

¹⁹ James 2:14-26 is also treated as unrelated to the question of eternal destiny by R. T. Kendall, *Once Saved, Always Saved* (Chicago, Moody Press, 1985), pp. 170-172, 207-217. Although Kendall relates 2:14 to the saving of the destitute poor person described in verses 15, 16, his perspective on the passage is as close as anyone’s to the present writer’s.

people to try to have faith in their *faith*!

“How do I know I have really believed in Christ?” many have found themselves asking. The answer often given, on the basis of James 2, is: “If you have good works, you can know that you have true or living faith.” But this approach is catastrophic in its effects. The Bible never invites people to believe that they believe. It invites them to believe!

Thus, one result of misreading James 2:14-26 has often been to render the concept of saving faith so abstruse and mystifying that one cannot certainly know whether he, in fact, really believes. But this is absolute nonsense! The Bible does not give the slightest encouragement to such confusion. If I have trusted Christ as my Savior, I can know that I have trusted Him just as surely as I can know whether or not I believe there is a China or that the earth orbits the sun.²⁰

To invent a new and unique psychology for saving faith is not only absurd on its face, but it is absolutely contrary to the Scriptures themselves.²¹ When Jesus asked the former blind man, “Do you believe in the Son of God?” and then identified Himself as this very Person, the response was a simple, “Lord, I believe!” (John 9:35-38). The man did not say, “I think I believe,” or “I hope I have believed,” but simply, “I *believe*”! In other words, this one-time blind beggar believed and knew he believed at the same moment.

And so does everyone who puts his trust in Christ! To say otherwise is an affront both to Scripture and to common sense. And all too often the supposed justification for this absurdity is a reading of James 2:14-26 which has nothing whatever to do with what the inspired author is actually saying.²²

Taking a Fresh Look

If we can free ourselves from the tyrannical grip of a heaven/hell mentality

²⁰ There is nothing better in print on the relationship between everyday faith and saving faith than Gordon H. Clark, *Faith and Saving Faith* (Jefferson, Md.: The Trinity Foundation, 1983). It should be read from cover to cover!

²¹ The frequent assertion that James is contrasting two kinds of faith was far from obvious to earlier Calvinist expositors. So Manton wrote that “certainly” James “meaneth a pretence of faith, otherwise there would be a direct contradiction [with Paul]...” See Thomas Manton, *An Exposition on the Epistle of James* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, reprint ed. 1968 [orig. ed., 1693]), 232. This is also the view of Calvin himself, who writes that James means, “Unless you show fruits for your faith, I shall say that you have none.” (*Calvin’s Commentaries: A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke, Volume III: and The Epistles of James and Jude*, trans. A. W. Morrison, eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972], 284). See also p. 283: “Just remember, [James]... is disputing with those who pretend insincerely to faith but are entirely without it.” Today the Calvinist exegetical tradition on James 2:14-26 is trapped in quasi-psychologizing about faith, but this quagmire is not to be blamed on writers like those just quoted.

²² Even though he holds that final salvation is in view, Nicol is absolutely correct when he writes: “James’ point is not that faith without works is not faith; as faith he does not criticize it but merely stresses that faith does not fulfill its purpose when it is not accompanied by works.” See Nicol, p. 16. See his whole discussion here, especially the statement: “Our conclusion is that in this pericope James is not discussing different kinds of faith — as the Reformed scholars we have cited assert; he emphasizes that those who believe must also do good works” (pp. 16, 17). Plummer writes, “But St. James nowhere throws doubt on the truth of the unprofitable believer’s professions, or on the possibility of believing much and doing nothing.” (Alfred Plummer, *The General Epistles of St. James and St. Jude* [New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1905], 137).

when we read James 2, then for the first time we can really hear the text speak, and we can profit from its highly practical message. To the extent, however, that we do not break out of the old mold entirely, to that extent we may hear the false echoes and resonances of our previous point of view. The reader is therefore urged to leave all preconceptions behind and to listen to the text in a fresh way altogether.

As an aid to this method, we shall begin with a slightly expanded paraphrase of James 2:14-17, which we express as follows:

What good does it do, my Christian brothers, if someone among you says he has faith and yet does not act on that faith? Faith certainly cannot preserve his life, now can it? It would be the same thing as if one of you spoke to some Christian brother or sister who was destitute of the necessities of life and you said, “Go home peacefully and get warmed and filled.” But if you did not give them the very things they needed for bodily life, what good would it do? Would their lives be saved by your confident words? In the same way, when faith stands all by itself, because you fail to act on it, your inactive faith is as dead as your useless words to your destitute Christian brother. It has no life-preserving power at all!

A point often overlooked in these verses, but which the paraphrase seeks to bring out, is the close link between “*saving*” (in the sense of saving the life) and the illustration of the destitute brother or sister. The fact that life-preservation lies at the core of the illustration is apparent, and this shows how meaningful this section is when read outside the heaven/hell misconception. One’s destiny in heaven or hell is not the issue anywhere in these verses, or in the passage as a whole.

Likewise, once the true subject matter is perceived, the appropriateness of applying the word “*dead*” to inactive faith is transparent. A faith which cannot preserve the life from death is itself functionally dead!²³

The Objector

Following this introductory section (2:14-17), a second unit introduces the words of an imaginary objector to James’s ideas. Commentators have long found these words difficult to integrate into the argument of the passage. On the one hand, their full extent has been subject to question, and on the other hand, their point has often seemed obscure and remote from the argument of the text.²⁴

It may be suggested, however, that the words of this new speaker (verse 18) ought clearly to go down through verse 19, since verse 20 evidently begins James’s

²³ See the quotation from Nicol in previous footnote.

²⁴ Sanguine indeed is the opinion of Cantinat that, though verses 18-19 are very difficult — perhaps the most difficult in the New Testament — these difficulties do not greatly affect our comprehension of the text! The exact opposite is the case: These difficulties, if left unresolved, significantly block our understanding. (Jean Cantinat, *Les Épîtres de Saint Jacques et de Saint Jude* [Paris: J. Gabalda, 1973], 10).

reply.²⁵ It may be suggested further that the thrust of these words is clearer when (as in a large majority of the Greek manuscripts of this epistle) we read “by” in verse 18 in place of the word “without.”²⁶

With these provisos, if the objector’s words are read as high irony, their thrust will be clear. A paraphrase of the objector’s remarks in verses 18-19 may be offered as follows:

But someone is going to say, “All right then! Let’s say that you have correct beliefs and I have correct actions. Go right ahead! Take some belief of yours and make it visible by means of your actions. And if you can do that (but, of course, you can’t!), then I will take my actions and will make my belief visible through them (utterly impossible!). Oh, I know! You’ll claim that your faith in the unity of God is demonstrated by your good conduct.²⁷ I disallow that claim. The demons also believe the same thing you believe, and they don’t do good! They only tremble!”

No doubt James had heard a similar piece of argumentation at some time in a real-life situation. But the ironical tone in which he casts the imagined objector’s thoughts was familiar in the diatribe style of the literature of his day.²⁸ This supposed

²⁵ The evident unity of verses 18-19 as constituting the words of a single speaker is heavily attested in the literature. Many of those who have accepted this unity, however, have regarded the speaker not as an objector but as a pious ally who takes James’s point of view. But this explanation is rightly dismissed by Davids because “no one has yet been able to find a case where this common stylistic introduction did not introduce an opposing or disagreeing voice.” (Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982], 124). Among those treating the two verses as a unity are: Robert Johnstone, *Lectures Exegetical and Practical on the Epistle of James*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, c 1888), 188-190; R. W. Dale, *The Epistle of James and Other Discourses* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1895), 70, 71; so, apparently, R. J. Knowling, *The Epistle of St. James*, Westminster Commentaries (London: Methuen, 1904), 56-59; Joseph B. Mayor, *The Epistle of James*, 3rd ed. (London: MacMillan, 1910; reprint ed., Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1977), 101; and more recently, Christiaan E. Donker, “Der Verfasser des Jak and sein Gegner: Zum Problem des Einwandes in Jak 2 18-19,” *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 72 (1981): 227-240; and Francois Vouga, *L’Épître de Saint Jacques* (Geneve: Labor et Fides, 1984), 87.

²⁶ The case for our understanding of these verses is more fully argued by the present author in “Light on James Two from Textual Criticism,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 120 (1963): 341-350. As can be seen from the previous note, the decision to treat verses 18, 19 as from a single speaker is not based on whether *by* or *without* is to be read in verse 18.

²⁷ The Greek phrase (*kalos poieis*) is here taken in the sense of “do good,” “do right,” which seems the most appropriate sense in Mt. 5:44; 12:12; Lk. 6:27. It is also viable in Acts 10:33 (“you did the right thing to come”) and even in James 2:8 (“If you keep the royal law... you are doing what’s right”). Attention should be given also to the secular examples cited by Mayor, p. 101. In Hellenistic Greek one would be unwise to insist pedantically on the *good/well* differentiation so dear to strict English grammarians!

²⁸ The use of the challenge to “show me” in an ironical sense is well documented by Dibelius, pp. 154-155, n. 29. Especially parallel to James is a passage from *Ad Autolykus* 1.2, in which the Christian apologist Theophilus writes: “But even if you should say, ‘Show me your God,’ I too might say to you, ‘Show me your Man and I also will show you my God.’” But this same ironic and unfulfillable demand is frequent in Epictetus, for example in the biting scorn of *Discourses* 3.22.99: “Who in the world are

second speaker in the dialogue heaps scorn on the idea that faith and works have a dynamic relationship in Christian experience, as James has suggested, in the preceding verses, that they have.

“How can faith be dead without works?” the objector is saying, in effect. Faith and works are two distinct entities, he continues, and the former does not have a demonstrable connection with the latter. Even if a God-fearing Jew claimed that his morality was rooted in his conviction that “God is one” (cf. Dt. 6:4), that claim was easily refuted. Demons held the same creed, and its only result was that they trembled. Obviously, then, all efforts to correlate conduct with creed were futile. So, at least, this objector wishes to affirm.

It is quite evident that this reading of James 2:18-19 is a far cry from the outlook of those who see a heaven-or-hell issue in this passage. The demons, we are often told, have a dead faith and illustrate how such faith is impotent to save from hell. But on our reading, the statement about the faith of demons is made by an *objector* to James’s teaching. In that case, it can hardly be utilized as a valid spiritual insight! Besides, nobody has ever been saved from damnation by believing in the unity of God. Even pious, but unconverted Jews believed that!

The problem here is really quite simple. The format of verses 18-20 shows clearly that the objector’s remarks are not concluded until the end of verse 19. Verse 20 is a more or less stylized way of beginning a reply.²⁹ The reply itself extends through verse 22, where the Greek verb for “do you see” is singular, and the reply concludes with verse 23. Only with verse 24 (“you see then”) does the author return to a plural to address his entire audience.

But none of this has anything to do with eternal damnation. That subject is not even *the objector’s* point! The issue is something altogether different: Are faith and works in the Christian’s daily experience dynamically related? Does faith really die without the sustaining energy of works? Such thoughts, the objector is saying, are contrary to reality. He maintains that there is no visible, verifiable connection between faith and works, and all efforts to demonstrate that connection are in vain.

The Reply of James

The fact that verse 20 is indeed the commencement of James’s refutation is signaled, as we have said, by the stylized opening formula: “But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?” (verse 20). And with this opening remark, the inspired writer continues the thought he had expressed in verse 17 and to which the second speaker had objected in verses 18-19. “The objection is foolish,” says James, “and faith without works really does die.”

Does the objector really want to know this? James wonders. (The author had no doubt met some truly closed minds on this subject!) Well, the proof of James’s

you? The bull of the herd or the queen of the beehive? Show me the symbols of your rulership!” For additional examples, see Dibelius.

²⁹ Note this same format in Paul: 1 Cor. 15:35, 36 — (Objector) “But someone will say, ‘How...?’” (Response) “Foolish one, what you sow...”; and Rom. 9:19, 20 — (Objector) “You will say to me then, ‘Why does...?’” (Response) “But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed...?” The use of such structural markers as “but someone will say” and sharp-toned epithets directed at a senseless or ungodly interlocutor are well-known features of the diatribe style so prevalent in James’s and Paul’s day. For references, see Mayor, 99 and 102; Ropes, 208 and 216; Davids, 123 and 126.

point was readily available in a classic Old Testament text in which it would be sheer blindness not to acknowledge the obvious relation of faith to works. The incident, of course, was the high point of Abraham's obedience to the Lord — the offering of Isaac, his son, as a sacrifice to God.

This case study in the cooperation of faith and works was ideal for James's purposes. Both he and any Christian who might hold the objector's views would agree on one thing: Abraham was most certainly justified by faith. But could not anyone who sees this much see, as well, that Abraham was also justified by works? Indeed, was not the faith by which he was initially justified transparently enriched by his great act of obedience?

These thoughts are expressed by James in verses 20-23. A paraphrase of his words might be as follows:

O senseless man! Do you really want to know that faith is genuinely dead without works? Take our father Abraham as an example. Isn't it obvious that he was vindicated by his works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? Can't you see for yourself that his faith was cooperating with his works, and his faith was actually matured by those works?

And was not all this an appropriate fulfillment of the divine declaration by which he was originally vindicated in God's sight; for the Scripture says that "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness"? But now, in offering up his own son, this original divine acceptance of Abraham was substantiated and verified in the eyes of men who appropriately called him "the friend of God."

This is a masterful response to an objection that James's readers must have heard, or else James would not have raised the issue in the first place. If one could not see the dynamic interaction between faith and works in Abraham's famous act of obedience, he could not see it anywhere.

Faith truly found, in Abraham's case, an indispensable ally in works. And Abraham's justifying faith, which included an implicit belief in the resurrecting power of God (Romans 4:17-19), was strengthened by an act which stretched that faith to its uttermost limits. For now, Abraham was able to believe explicitly that God could even raise up this son whom he was just about to kill (Hebrews 11:17-19).

No matter how one might meditate on this supreme crisis in the life of the patriarch, the conclusion was inescapable. The whole incident was a symphony in which the twin themes of faith and works were manifestly interwoven into a single harmonious refrain. And as clearly as faith had generated obedient activity, so too had obedient activity generated a richer faith.³⁰ But if Abraham had not acted, the danger to the continuing vitality of his faith was easy to see.

But this is all James wishes to say. There is no discussion here at all about the question of how a man can be declared righteous before God. In fact, the truth that

³⁰ About the statement in verse 22 ("by works faith was made perfect"), Adamson aptly observes: "The force of the statement seems to be that faith is fulfilled, strengthened, and matured by exercise." (James B. Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976], 130.

Abraham was justified by faith is taken for granted and treated as common ground between James and his imagined objector (who no doubt represented views held by at least some Christians). What is at issue, rather, is *post-justification faith*.

This point is so obvious it ought not to need to be made. Yet it is commonly overlooked. Paul's great text on Abraham's justification (Gen. 15:6) is quoted as a "given" in the Abrahamic story. But the incident with Isaac occurred long afterward, as every one of James's readers would know. But James artfully finds in this later faith a "filling full" of the earlier faith. Abraham's original justifying faith "was made perfect" ("was brought to maturity") by this later act of obedience which leaned so heavily on Abraham's original conviction about the promise of God.³¹

The point for the readers of James is plain: Like Abraham they too have been accounted righteous before God by faith. Yet that original confidence in God can be expanded and developed by a life of active obedience. Abraham's submission to God in his greatest trial was ample proof of that. But the converse is also obvious. Not to permit our faith to develop and grow through an obedient life is to court spiritual hardening. Like a body which has lost its animating spirit, a workless faith in a Christian's experience is a telltale sign that his faith has lost all its vitality.

But about the whole idea that false professions of Christianity are detected by the absence of good works, James says absolutely nothing at all!

Justification by Works

James is now ready to continue addressing all of his readers. Of course, in reality, he has been writing to them all along. The objector is a mere foil into whose mouth James could put the spiritually crass ideas that he wishes to refute, and thus he can avoid charging any of his readers with holding them. Presumably, however, if any of James's readers had been tempted to agree with the objector, those persons would now think better of espousing such views. And with this refutation out of the way, James is ready to round off the whole discussion with his concluding remarks.

These remarks (verses 23-26) may be paraphrased in this way:

In conclusion, then, as you all can see, a man can be vindicated by works as well as being vindicated by faith. To illustrate: Was not Rahab the prostitute obviously vindicated by her works when she actively aided the spies to escape? Isn't that how she herself survived when everybody else in her city died? The point is plain: When Christian faith is disconnected from our works, it has no more vitality and life-preserving power than does a corpse which has been disconnected from its dynamic, life-giving spirit.

Two points must especially be noted in this significant conclusion. First, neither in these verses nor in those above does James ever speak of justification by

³¹ Hort, p. 64, explains "the Scripture was fulfilled" (verse 23) as follows: "The Divine word spoken is conceived of as receiving a completion so to speak in acts or events which are done or come to pass in accordance with it. The idea of filling, or giving fulness to, is always contained in the biblical use of fulfilling, though not always in the same sense." See also the stimulating discussion of Adamson, pp. 130-132.

faith *plus* works. Instead, he speaks always of justification by works (verses 21 and 24a) or of justification by faith (verse 24b).

Verse 24 simply means that justification by faith is not the only kind of justification there is. James and his readers indeed agreed that justification before God is by faith alone. But some of his Christian readers might not have realized that one could also be justified by *works*, as had both Abraham and Rahab.³²

Interestingly enough, the Apostle Paul would not have disagreed with this. Indeed, in Romans 4:2 he writes:

For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something of which to boast, but not before God. (Romans 4:2)

No doubt Paul had encountered the thought that there was a sense in which Abraham truly was justified by works, and he does not dispute this idea. But he insists that such a justification would not be “before God”!

With this, of course, James’s teaching is perfectly harmonious. Abraham was indeed justified by faith long before the incident with Isaac. But that incident, in its own good time, demonstrated to men that Abraham was on good terms with God, and so they called him “God’s friend.” On the level of practical performance, men saw him as a righteous person.

And so it can be with us as well. In fact, Jesus Himself taught,

You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. (John 15:14)

Here, one cannot help but note that friendship with our Lord is based on obedience to Him, just as Abraham’s friendship with God was based on obedience. But this is an issue quite separate from that of salvation from hell. Clearly, it is related to the Christian’s experience of intimacy with God (see John 14:21-23).

Justification by faith, Paul teaches us, gives us a righteous standing before God. Justification by works displays our practical righteousness in such a way that we are vindicated before people. They can see by our works that we are in vital touch with our Maker and that we are on intimate terms with Him. Or, to put it another way, they can see our faith in God through our obedience to Him.³³

³² The word *alone*, or *only*, in Greek is adverbial in form and ought not to be construed as a modifier of *faith* in the sense of “by faith alone.” This point is often ignored by writers. However, Lange grants that the Greek word for *alone* might be connected with the word *justified* in the sense of, “not only by faith but by works a man is justified,” but he argues that in fact it ought to be joined “adjectively” with the word *faith*. See Lange, p. 87. But in the New Testament, when the word *monos* (“alone”) modifies a noun, it normally has formal concord with the noun. The adverbial use is the only natural one here, i.e., “You see then that a man is justified by works, and not only (justified) by faith.”

³³ Here we find ourselves comfortably in concert with John Calvin: “James did not mean to teach us where the confidence of our salvation should rest — which is the very point on which Paul does insist. So let us avoid the false reasoning which has trapped the sophists, by taking note of the double meaning: to Paul, the word [justification] denotes our free imputation of righteousness before the judgment seat of God, to James, the demonstration of righteousness from its effects, in the sight of men; which we may deduce from the preceding words, *Shew me thy faith, etc.* In this latter sense, we may admit without controversy that man is justified by works, just as you might say a man is enriched by the purchase of a large and costly estate, since his wealth, which

But James does *not* say that justification by faith cannot exist apart from justification by works. Nor does he imply this. To read such an idea out of James's words is possible only if we have first read our own idea into the passage. If any reader thinks he detects such an implication here, let him look again. This idea is not to be found anywhere in this text, and indeed not to be found anywhere else in the Bible.

But the second striking feature of James's conclusion is that, with the story of Rahab, James returns to his fundamental theme of saving the life (2:17). Clearly, this Gentile woman was in many ways a striking contrast to Abraham. But she was also like Abraham in that she acted on what she believed. Moreover, she was vindicated for all time and eternity as a woman with a vital, active faith in God.³⁴

But Rahab also furnishes still another illustrative element which is not found in the Abrahamic incident. Rahab literally saved her own life (and her family's) by acting upon her true convictions and assisting the Israelite spies. Had these men not escaped their pursuers, Rahab would have died with the rest of Jericho's inhabitants. But by acting on her faith — in the very process of being justified by her works — she actually saved her own life!

James's readers could do the same thing if they were committed doers of the Word and not merely hearers (and believers!) of that Word (see 1:21-25). When it came to avoiding the death-dealing consequences of sin (1:13-15), it was certainly important to believe what one heard from the Scriptures. Surely no one was likely to act on something he did not believe. But it was not enough just to believe. One had to obey as well. If it was a case of escaping physical death, which sin could so greatly hasten, faith alone could not save anyone. But faith that *worked* could. And this is the practical and crucial truth of which Rahab's action is the climactic illustration.

Conclusion

It is doubtless a tribute to the tenacity of inherited ideas that the real message of James 2:14-26 goes largely unheard in the Church even today. But this sad fact is also an alarming reminder that the natural instincts of man gravitate almost without prodding to those views of eternal salvation which are inseparably interwoven with an insistence on good works.

The sheer, unadulterated saving grace of God has always been such a dazzling, blinding light to men that even after they have believed it, they often harbor the secret opinion that there has to be a "catch" somewhere. Indeed, the Galatians

beforehand he kept out of sight in a strong-box, has become well known." This is superbly put and immensely superior to most modern treatments of this issue. (*Calvin's Commentaries*, 285-286.) Likewise very edifying are the comments of J. N. Darby: "James, remark, never says that works justify us *before God* [italics his]; for God can see the faith without its works. He knows that life is there. It is in exercise with regard to Him, towards Him, by trust in His word, in Himself, by receiving His testimony in spite of everything within and without. This God sees and knows. But when our fellow creatures are in question, when it must be said 'shew me,' then faith, life, shows itself in works." (J. N. Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible: Colossians — Revelation*, new ed. rev. (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, reprint ed., 1942), 361).

³⁴ An indirect testimony to the depth of her vindication before men is to be found in the significant role Rahab played in pious Jewish legend. For specifics, see Laws, p.137. Thanks to James, her name lives on today in Christianity as a challenging role-model for every born-again believer who, though already justified by faith, also aspires to be justified by works.

Dead Faith

suspected that there was such a catch not long after Paul had left them (Galatians 1:6-9).

But James 2:14-26 is *not* that catch! Contrary to the opinions that have been relentlessly repeated down through the years, James does not in any way insist on the presence of good works as a necessary (or inevitable) part of God's gracious deliverance of men from eternal damnation. Indeed, no writer has stated the truth that new birth is a divine gift more eloquently than James (1:17, 18), and he is quite comfortable with the thought that Abraham was justified by faith unmixed with works. But James does pointedly insist that, after God's gratuitous justification has been received, the faith of a justified man needs to be kept vital and dynamic by good works.

This is not to say that the failure to perform good works will result in the loss of original justification. James never suggests any such idea as that. James does say, however, that even justified believers can be led astray on a pathway that ends in death (see 5:19, 20). To avoid that outcome, faith must be kept alive and vital by faithfully acting in obedience to God's Word.

This is practical advice, to say the least. But it is advice for Christian people for whom the issue of heaven or hell has already been settled. To use James 2:14-26 to unsettle that issue for the modern Christian reader is a most serious error. Admittedly, this error is widespread and will no doubt have an audience in the Church until the Lord returns. But it is comforting to know that the teaching will be totally and irrevocably forgotten as soon as the redeemed meet their Redeemer face to face. And far outlasting the feeble and inadequate ideas that are drawn from misreading the message of James 2 will be the song of the eternally saved:

To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood .
.. (Revelation 1:5)

Let it be said plainly: Where the message of the cross is clearly understood, the blood of Christ is more than sufficient to give peace to the believer. Those who must look at their works to be sure that their faith is real, have not yet clearly understood the Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is not faith in our *faith* that assures us that we are eternally saved. It is faith in *Him* who loved us.

Chapter 2

What Is Justification by Works?¹ Once Again: James 2

What else can I possibly say about a passage on which I have written so much?²

However, if I have nothing left to say, it is not because I have exhausted the passage. It is only because I have exhausted *my knowledge* about the passage. But I do have something new to say.

In case you are concerned, I am not about to shift back toward the traditional view of James 2. That view has bedeviled the Church for too long, and the sooner everybody forgets it, the better. (Unfortunately, they may not forget about it until after the Rapture!) But I am not moving back toward the traditional view. If anything, I am moving farther away.

Before preparing this morning's paper, I looked over my discussion of James 2 in the commentary I did for Grace Evangelical Society ("GES"). I do not think I am going to contradict that commentary. However, I *do* think I am going to say something the commentary doesn't say.

In fact, I think I am going to say something quite important for a fuller comprehension of James 2.

I. The Lifestyle Error

In grace circles, I think we understand that justification by works is not a condition attached to justification by faith. Justification by works is an independent consideration. To be sure, in order to experience it, we must be justified by faith. But it is not an automatic outcome of justification by faith.

On the other hand, if you ask a GES member to define *justification by works*, he might say something like this:

We are justified by works when our lives exhibit the reality of our faith.

A definition like this contains an implicit mistake. In oral communication I have probably made that mistake myself. The mistake is to think that *a general lifestyle* of good works produces justification by works. Today I am going to maintain that James himself would be amazed that we got such an idea out of his text!

In my judgment, James knows nothing of such an idea.

¹ Based on written paper prepared for a morning message presented at the Grace Evangelical Society National Conference in 2005.

² Zane Hodges's published works dealing with the Epistle of James can be found in *The Gospel Under Siege*, 2nd edition (Dallas, Texas: Kerugma, 1992); and *The Epistle of James: Proven Character Through Testing* (Irving, Texas: Grace Evangelical Society, 1994).

Here I think we can detect the subtle influence of the contemporary debate about the significance of our lifestyle. To some, a godly lifestyle is a necessary product of regenerating faith. To grace people, it is a way of manifesting our relationship to God.

But when we conclude that a general lifestyle of holiness justifies us by works — either before God or before men — we are not speaking the language of James 2.

II. When and How

Let's begin by asking a simple question. James tells us that both Abraham and Rahab were justified by works. The question, then, is this:

When and how were Abraham and Rahab justified by works?

As a matter of fact, James answers this question explicitly in both cases. Listen to his familiar words:

Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? (James 2:24)

Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? (James 2:25)

Did you see anything in those verses about lifestyle? If you did, your vision is better than mine. I'm sorry, folks. It's just not there.

What is there? Very simple: In both cases we have the *precise occasion* on which these famous people were justified by works, and we have the *precise reason* why they were justified. Lifestyle is totally irrelevant to James's idea.

Abraham was justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar. Rahab was justified by works when she received the spies and sent them safely away. That is what James says, and that is all he says.

And what he says is enough.

III. A Series of Actions

Bear in mind that in both of these Old Testament stories, the obedience that Abraham and Rahab exhibited involved a series of actions.

Think of Abraham's case. According to Genesis 22:2, God spoke to Abraham as follows:

Take now your son, your only son Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.

Notice the things Abraham is asked to do: (1) Take your son. (2) Go to the land of Moriah. (3) Offer him as a burnt offering. (4) Do it on the mountain that I point out to you. Please remember that the Greek word *εργον* (*ergon*) means “a deed” or “an action.” To use BDAG’s³ semantic domain, an *ergon* is “that which displays itself in activity of any kind.” Therefore, a series of *εργα* (*erga*, “works”) were involved in Abraham’s obedience to God on this occasion.

The same is true of Rahab. James, in fact, makes this explicit. Rahab did two basic deeds (*erga*) on the occasion in question. These were: (1) She received the messengers. (2) She sent them out another way.

The bottom line is the same in both cases. The “works” James has in mind were the *erga* that Abraham and Rahab did on the occasions that James is referring to. These are the “works” by which they were justified — these and no others.

This is why I say that James has nothing whatsoever to say about the general lifestyles of Abraham and Rahab. If we claim that lifestyle is the point, we are making a claim that the text contradicts. These two Old Testament worthies were justified by works performed on one occasion, and one occasion only.

Of course, we know a lot about Abraham’s lifestyle in general. It is easy to read that idea into the text here, even though we do so without warrant from James. But Rahab is another case altogether. What do we know about Rahab’s lifestyle after Joshua 2? The answer to that question is: *nothing at all*.

Clearly, from James’s standpoint, the “works” in question were performed on the occasions he is describing.

IV. Correct Connections

Please keep in mind another simple fact. It is often overlooked. The fact is this: James refers to justification by works only in James 2:20-26. Please notice the range of verses. I did not say James 2:14-26, but James 2:20-26. Here, and only here in his epistle does James refer to this idea.

I submit to you today that it is a serious interpretive mistake to think that “justification by works” is in any sense part of the main theme of this epistle. It is no more a part of the main theme than is the idea of visiting “orphans and widows in their trouble,” which is mentioned only in James 1:27.

But please notice. I am not saying that either of these ideas is totally unrelated to James’s main theme. Both are obviously connected to that theme. But the Epistle of James is not really about visiting orphans and widows, as important as that idea may be. Neither is the Epistle of James about justification by works.

I know that this last statement may be hard to take in. We have so often thought about the Epistle of James in connection with its treatment of works that we have unconsciously accepted the proposition that justification by works is central to the epistle.

³ BDAG is an anagram from the names **B**auer, **D**anker, **A**rndt, **G**ingrich, used to refer to: Bauer, Walter. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Edited and revised by F.W. Danker. Translated and adapted by W.F. Arndt, F.T. Gingrich, and F.W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

Justification by works is certainly an important idea. But James's epistle is not basically about that. James's real theme is about enduring and profiting from our trials.

We are all too often the victims of the "hot-button" theological issues. When we think of James, we think of the faith/works issue. And when we think of that issue, we think of justification by works, as if it were James's most crucial idea. But when we think that way, we are not thinking exegetically.

What is the role of "justification by works" in James? Simply put, its role is to answer the imaginary objector who speaks in verses 18-19. That is its correct connection to James's text.

V. Shutting the Objector Up

This is not the place to go into a detailed explanation of James 2:18-19, which contain the words of the "objector." I have tried to do that in my commentary.⁴

Let me simply remind you that the objector does not believe there is any intrinsic connection between faith and works. Human beings and the demons can both believe in the oneness of God, but their response to that truth can be widely different. A human being may be motivated to do good because of this belief, but the demons only tremble. They certainly don't do good. How in the world, then, can James claim that faith is somehow dead apart from works?

James's response begins, of course, in verse 20. "But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?" Verses 20-26 are therefore James's answer to the objector.

Let me try to explain this answer as follows. James is saying something like this:

There are certain times in the experience of men and women of faith when a failure to act would demonstrate the deadness of their faith. But on those occasions, the appropriate actions manifest the vitality of the faith that is in their hearts.

Let me elaborate on this just a bit. If God had asked Abraham to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice and Abraham had said, "There is no way I can do that to my son," would we not say that Abraham's faith had no vitality and life? If it was challenged by God's command and it could not have responded, it was at that moment a dead letter. It was moribund and lifeless.

On the contrary, Abraham's actual response testified to the vitality — to the "aliveness" — of his faith in God.

The same was true of Rahab. Her city and its inhabitants were threatened with extinction by the forces of the God of Israel. She and her family would also perish. Even if she believed in the God of Israel, if she had refused hospitality to the spies, she would have signed her own death warrant. In that case, her faith would have been dead, and she herself would soon have been dead as well, along with her family.

⁴ Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistle of James*, *op. cit.*

But her faith was alive and active, and she pleaded for the life of her family and herself (Joshua 2:12-13). And she got her request on the condition that she did not betray the spies to their pursuers (Joshua 2:14). Thus, as James says, she “sent them out another way” (James 2:25). She kept her end of the bargain. Her faith had been active and *alive*, and thus she and her family remained *alive*.

Thus, Rahab, like Abraham, was vindicated — that is, justified — by her actions. Both she and Abraham manifested the “*aliveness*” of their faith. And if the objector couldn’t see that, he really was a numbskull!

VI. The Special Moments of Faith

Let’s face it. There are many actions that we perform as a result of our faith in God. But not all of these actions are an obvious manifestation of our faith.

Let me illustrate. Suppose I hear that my neighbor is sick in the hospital, so I go to see him there. If I were not saved, I might do the same thing simply as a neighborly action. But because I am a Christian, I go to see him out of my Christian concern and looking for a possible chance to give him spiritual help. But suppose I don’t get a chance for that. Perhaps the patient is drowsy from medication, or something else prevents me from saying anything particularly Christian. Yet, even so, my visit is still the result of my faith.

But externally, it looks just like something an unsaved man might do. The faith is in my heart, but it is not visible. My visit to the hospital doesn’t result in justification by works.

You see, James needed to show the objector that there really was a visible connection between faith and works. He didn’t need to prove that *there was always a visible connection*. There isn’t always a visible connection. So, he needed cases where the visibility of faith in action was unmistakable.

He found those cases in Abraham and Rahab.

Listen closely. James wasn’t concerned about general lifestyle questions in this section of his epistle. He was only concerned to show that faith could be visibly manifested so that the person who had it could be vindicated — justified — by his or her actions as a man or woman of faith.

That’s what he *needed* to show. That’s what he *did* show. And that’s *all* he showed!

VII. Conclusion

Could justification by works occur more than once in a person’s life? It certainly seems so. But James is not interested in that point. James is only interested in showing that there *can be* a vital connection between what we believe and what we do. The objector doesn’t think so, but the objector is wrong.

Our faith is dead, however, when we fail to act on it.

If Abraham or Rahab had failed to act, they would still have had faith in the true and living God. But on the occasions in question, their faith would have been lifeless and unproductive.

Suppose I believe the Bible when it says that adultery is a sin. And suppose, despite that belief, I go out and commit adultery. At that point, is my belief in the truth of God's Word about adultery dead or alive?

You answer that question. And as you do answer it, recall the story in which the wife of Potiphar is trying to seduce Joseph.

She says, "Lie with me."⁵

Joseph replies, "Look, my master does not know what is with me in the house, and he has committed all that he has to my hand. There is no one greater in the house than I, nor has he kept back anything from me but you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?"⁶

And then one day she "caught him by his garment, and said, 'Lie with me.' But he left his garment in her hand, and fled... outside."⁷

Remarkable manifestation of faith, don't you agree? I would say that in this narrative, Joseph's faith was very much alive. He is a giant of faith in this incident, and his actions proved it. I would also say that by his actions in this story, Joseph was *justified by works*!

⁵ Genesis 39:7

⁶ Genesis 39:8-9

⁷ Genesis 39:12

Chapter 3

What Is Saving Faith? What Is Lordship Salvation?¹

Ever since publishing my book, *Absolutely Free!*,² we've had a little insiders' joke that we hoped that the purchasers of the book would not mistake the title of the book for its price. When our little company³ sent out its first flyer to potential customers, we got a note back from a lady. And I kid you not, she said this, and I think she was serious. She said, "I think it is terrible to charge \$14.95 for a book called *Absolutely Free!*"⁴ She said, "I'm not a perfect Christian, but at least I don't lie."

We were properly chastened, but went ahead, however, and sold it for \$14.95, because *Absolutely Free!* references the gospel and not the cost of the book itself. What we're talking about and what we will be talking about is a message that is genuinely absolutely free.

What Is Lordship Salvation?

Perhaps it would be best to begin with a definition of terms. Since our topic is lordship salvation, it would be sensible to start with a definition of *lordship salvation*. What do we mean when we talk about lordship salvation?

Well, basically — and as I have defined it in *Absolutely Free!* — I suggest that a definition of *lordship salvation* would be as follows:

Lordship salvation is the view that a commitment to obedience is necessary for true conversion. Lordship salvation is the view that a commitment to obedience — whether that commitment is made implicitly or explicitly varies with the particular lordship⁵ teacher — but basically they all have in common the understanding that a commitment to obedience is a necessary part of the conversion experience.

So we would say that lordship salvation involves a commitment to obey.

¹ Chapter 3 is based on two messages given at Jansen Bible Church, Nebraska in 1990. Material has been rearranged from chronological order for clarity.

² Zane C. Hodges, *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1989).

³ Redención Viva Publishers.

⁴ \$14.95 was the initial list price for the 1989 hardcover edition of 238 pages published by Redención Viva and Zondervan.

⁵ Zane usually used the single word *lordship* to refer to *lordship salvation* as a noun, and as an adjective for the theology and the people who hold to that position.

Is Lordship Salvation Versus Free Grace an Important Issue?

Now we might easily ask the question, and this is my second major consideration, “Is this important?”

Before going further, my answer to the question, “Is this important?” is “Yes, yes, yes, and yes!” But it is surprising, as I travel around the country and as I talk to people both in Dallas and elsewhere, how many people there are who would like to hold the opinion that this is not an important issue. I have been asked more than once by individuals a question of this sort: “Don’t you think that you and Dr. John MacArthur are really saying the same thing, only you are saying it in a slightly different way?” Or, to put it another way, “Don’t you think there is no real substantive difference between what you’re saying and what lordship theology is saying?”

In answer to a question like that, I usually like to start by referring the questioner to a section in John MacArthur’s book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*.⁶ Very early in his book, he makes the observation that he *used* to think that the two sides were engaged in a merely semantic debate — that is that it was just simply a discussion over how we articulated the gospel — but that he has come to change his mind and that, as a matter of fact, he has now concluded that the two sides are talking about two different gospel messages.

And so I usually say to the questioner, “That is one of the very few places in Dr. MacArthur’s book where I thoroughly agree with him.” What we are engaged in here is not a semantic discussion, not a quibbling about the way in which we express the gospel, but a substantive difference in our understanding of the gospel message — so substantive, in fact, that we would say that the two sides are saying something entirely different — that they are presenting different gospel messages.

Now, even though there is a reluctance in some quarters to accept this fact, I would like to point out to you that the man in the street who doesn’t trouble himself about the niceties of theology can understand perfectly the difference between the two views. I have written, in defining *lordship salvation*, that lordship salvation is the view that a commitment to obedience is necessary to conversion.

Over against lordship salvation stands what we are coming to call the Free Grace position. That is, that salvation is simply God’s bestowing a free gift upon everyone who will receive it in simple faith. So, the difference, fundamentally, is between a commitment that we make to God, according to lordship salvation, and the reception of something that is absolutely free.

The man in the street can understand this with many simple illustrations. For example, suppose I am in a car dealer’s office, and the car dealer says to me, “I have a Cadillac Eldorado⁷ out there, a brand new Eldorado. I’m going to give it to you as a free gift, and here are the keys. All you need to do is accept this gift, and the car is yours. No strings attached.”

That’s one thing. But suppose the car dealer says to me (and car dealers have

⁶ John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988).

⁷ Luxury car manufactured by the Cadillac division of General Motors from 1952 until 2002.

said trickier things than this, I can assure you), “I’m going to give you this Eldorado, and it’s not going to require you to put anything down. I’m giving it to you freely. Only, before you pick up the keys and go out and drive it, please sign this contract with me that you will be making payments on a regular basis for the next 10 years.”

Well, I would draw the conclusion — and the man in the street would draw the conclusion — that the first offer is the offer of a true gift, and the second offer is the offer of a contract. I give you this in return for you giving me that. When we talk about the difference between lordship salvation and the Free Grace position, that’s the kind of difference we’re talking about.

The salvation that is offered in the Bible is totally free. Revelation 22:17: “Whoever desires, let him take of the water of life freely.” But lordship theology is calling the sinner to enter into a contract with God. God will give them salvation upfront if the sinner is willing to commit himself to lifelong obedience. But if the sinner is not willing to make that commitment to God, God is not willing to give him a free salvation.

That’s why the term *absolutely free* is so good here. You know, ever since writing *Absolutely Free!*, every time I hear the words *absolutely free* on the radio or on television, my ears prick up. I’ve always heard them, but now they come to me with special force. It is surprising how many advertisers use the phrase *absolutely free*, because the word *free* in the marketplace has become encumbered with the suspicion that some hidden clauses are there — that it’s not totally free, that it’s being presented as free, but it’s really going to cost you something.

We’re going to give you a free book if you buy a book. But what you’re really doing is getting two books for the price of one. You’re not getting something that is absolutely free. So, it is important for us, I think, to realize that the offer of salvation that is presented in the Word of God is unencumbered by conditions. It is not a contract into which the sinner enters with God. It is the sinner coming in all of his sinfulness and all of his desperate need and all of his horrible guilt to a Savior who has a free and full salvation to offer him on the basis of faith, and faith alone.

Needless to say, how we understand the gospel will obviously affect how we present the gospel. We’re talking about whether this is an important issue. It is an important issue because it’s not a semantic problem. It is really the articulation of two entirely different concepts of how men are saved. And depending on which of these concepts you yourself believe in, that will determine the way in which you are presenting the gospel to the unsaved world. To put it another way, it will determine whether your presentation of the gospel to unsaved men is really the Biblical gospel or whether it is not. That’s important, don’t you agree?

So we must understand that the discussion that we are engaged in is not a trivial peripheral discussion. It comes to the very heart of what Christianity is all about. It comes to the very heart of the revelation that God has made of Himself in Jesus Christ. It is central to our understanding of God and of the Bible. Yes, and yes, and yes! It is important!

Two Basic Issues: Saving Faith and Discipleship

It seems to me that although many kinds and qualities of discussion are involved in the whole debate, we can actually resolve the lordship debate into two fundamental issues around which most of the other things cluster. These are, first of

all, the nature of saving faith. What is *saving faith*? The second major area, it seems to me, is the nature of discipleship.

Almost everything that comes up in the discussion about lordship salvation can be categorized under one of those two areas. I would like to discuss with you the issue of the nature of saving faith. In the following chapter, I will discuss: “What is the nature of discipleship?”

What Is Saving Faith?

The first thing that I think we might say about this subject is that, in a sense, the question, “What is saving faith?” is almost absurd. It is almost absurd to ask the question, “What is faith?” or “What is saving faith?” for the simple reason that we all know what faith is, that we all understand what faith is about, that we talk about faith in everyday life. We use faith in everyday life.

As a matter of fact, in our normal intercourse with other individuals and situations, we are in no doubt as to what we’re talking about when we talk about *faith, trust, belief*, etc. Somehow or other, when we move into the realm of Biblical discussion, when we move into the realm of theological discussion, we frequently check all of our common sense at the door, and now we begin to create the monstrous questions and issues which really ought not to exist in our minds in the first place. The Bible takes for granted, basically, that we understand what faith is, that we understand what it means to believe something.

If we were simply content to stay with the common sense meaning of *faith*, we wouldn’t have any problem here. But unfortunately, in Evangelicalism today, there are a lot of things said about faith which are very confusing, and many things said that are very mistaken, indeed.

If we want to define *faith* in terms of the Bible, then perhaps as good a passage as any would be to define it in terms of 1 John 5:9-13. On the basis of this text, we might suggest that from the Biblical standpoint, *faith* is accepting or receiving God’s testimony as true, or, to put it more simply, *faith* is believing what God says. That’s what it is.

In 1 John 5:9a, we read:

If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater;

Notice what the Apostle John says there: If we receive the witness of men, we can receive the witness of God, because God’s witness is greater. Not because faith is greater, but because the witness is greater. If we can believe men, we can believe God. That is what the writer of 1 John is saying.

In 1 John 5:9b-10, we read:

for this is the witness of God which He has testified of His Son. He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself; he who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has given of His Son.

Saving Faith and Lordship Salvation

Notice how simple that is. “If you believe it,’ he says, “it’s in your heart. If you don’t believe it, you’re telling God He’s a liar. You’re contradicting God.” In 1 John 5:11:-13, we read:

And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.

Nothing complicated about this. Here is what God has to say. His witness is much more to be accepted than the witness of men. When we do accept it, it is with our hearts that we accept it. When we do accept it, we are acknowledging that what God says is true, namely, that He’s given us eternal life in His Son, and that the possessor of that Son is the possessor of eternal life. And on the basis of our faith, we can know that we have eternal life. Nothing complicated, nothing abstruse, nothing mysterious about that. To even raise the question, “What is faith?” is, in a sense, almost absurd.

Nevertheless, it is urgently important for those who hold to lordship theology to redefine *saving faith*. So what lordship salvation does is to redefine *faith* as a “commitment to obey” instead of “an acceptance or acknowledgment of the truth. If the simple common sense understanding of *faith* were allowed to stand, there would be no room whatsoever for lordship theology, because there are any number of texts in the Bible, as you know, that predicate salvation on faith alone:

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.(John 3:16)

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life. (John 5:24)

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life. (John 6:47)

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved. (Acts 16:31)

Where is lordship theology in those verses if the simple, straightforward definition of *saving faith* is allowed to stand? It’s not there.

It therefore becomes incumbent upon lordship theology to redefine *saving faith* — and to define *saving faith*, not only in terms of belief, but in terms of commitment, surrender, or repentance. The exact way in which the redefinition is carried out will vary from lordship person to lordship person. But fundamentally, redefinition is what is taking place.

Wherever repentance is made a part of saving faith, wherever commitment is made a part of saving faith, wherever surrender is made a part of saving faith, what

is really occurring is that the Biblical concept of *faith* is being redefined in terms of the theology that the interpreter brings to the text. I don't think it is going too far to say that if we would allow the Bible in all of the verses that speak of this issue and predicate salvation on faith alone — if we would allow the Bible to speak for itself, the Church would not be plagued with the doctrine of lordship theology. It is only when we begin to entertain the idea that there is some need for a redefinition of *saving faith* — it is only then that the door is opened to lordship thought.

Assurance and Saving Faith

Now very closely related to what I've just said about the lordship redefinition of *saving faith* is also another factor, and that is that from the biblical point of view, assurance is part and parcel with saving faith. The theologians would say assurance is of the essence of saving faith.

What this simply means is this: When we believe the gospel, we know that we are saved. We know that we are saved because, you see, the gospel is that the Lord Jesus Christ offers us salvation on the basis of faith alone. When I put my confidence in that offer, then I know, on the basis of God's own declaration, that I'm saved. "He that hears My word and believes the One who sent Me..." — has what?: "...has everlasting life and will not..." — what?: "will not come into judgment, but has passed..." — what?: "has passed from death into life."

You cannot believe John 5:24 without believing that you have eternal life, that you will not come into judgment — that you have already passed out of death into life. That's part and parcel of the message.

I like to refer to that lovely exchange in John 11:25-27 between the Lord Jesus Christ and Martha. You remember our Lord's famous words:

"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die." (John 11:25-26a)

Then He says to Martha — notice the extreme simplicity of this:

"Do you believe this?" (John 11:26b)

And Martha gives Him what I have sometimes called a full-fledged Johannine confession of faith. She says:

"Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world." (John 11:27)

How interesting, because when we get to John 20:31, John says:

But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life through His name.

What Martha is saying in response to our Lord's question, "Do you believe this?" is, "Yes, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, the One who is to come into the world."

Now look at those verses very closely. Notice the emphasis that Jesus has. It is not only an emphasis on what He is: "I am the resurrection and the life." It is also an emphasis on what He guarantees to every believer: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live."

Jesus is saying, "I guarantee resurrection to the one who believes in Me. Even if he dies, he shall live again. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. There is a sense in which, when you get what I have to offer you, there's no death because I give everlasting life. There's no end to that life."

In other words, this is Jesus' exposition of what it means for Him to be "the resurrection and the life." He guarantees resurrection. He guarantees unending life to every believer.

When He says to Martha, "Do you believe this?" there's no way for Martha to believe that without knowing that she had the same guarantee herself. Jesus did not say to her, "Whoever, with the exception of Martha, believes in Me is guaranteed resurrection and life," but, "Whoever believes in Me...Do you believe this?" Martha responds with, "Yes." Already — by the very nature of the expression of the gospel that Jesus has given — by believing this gospel, Martha also has believed that she possesses eternal life and will be resurrected someday by Jesus Christ.

It follows therefore, as certainly as day follows night, that to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ is to know that you are saved when you do so. That is to say, "assurance is of the very essence of saving faith."

In lordship theology, however, not only has *saving faith* been redefined, but it has been separated from assurance. According to lordship theology, it is possible for me to have believed and yet not to know whether I have believed or not, and therefore not to know whether I'm saved or not. And then I am sentenced to the exhausting and impossible process of trying to prove to myself that I have believed by the kind of life that I've lived. Lordship theology teaches that if you have really believed, you will live the life that reflects the genuineness of your Christian faith, and you will live it all the rest of your life.

Therefore, the grounds of assurance in lordship theology is not to be found in the Person of Christ, not to be found in the author of the gospel, and not to be found in the words of Scripture. Assurance is to be found in ourselves. Stripped of all of its verbiage, we are taught to look at ourselves for assurance.

We "baptize" that into Christianity to say, "I'm looking for the work of God in me." But the work of God in you is always going to be flawed by you. So really, what you are looking for is to see God through the distorted reflection of an image of yourself. There is no assurance in that kind of a process. According to lordship theology, there should not be any absolute assurance at all until the day of death. And even in the day of death, we may question whether anyone is going to be able to see enough in themselves to be absolutely sure that they are saved. Bottom line: There is no assurance of salvation in lordship theology because it theology arbitrarily redefines *saving faith* and arbitrarily divorces assurance from saving faith.

History and Assurance

How did all of this come about? Let me give you a historical note. In the endnotes in *Absolutely Free!*,⁸ you will find me referring to two books. One by a man named R. T. Kendall⁹ and another by a man named M. Charles Bell.¹⁰

The book by Kendall is entitled, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*. The book by M. Charles Bell is entitled, *Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance*. Both of these men support with extensive quotation from John Calvin's material as well as from the writings of later Reformed theologians. They support the thesis that John Calvin himself held to a doctrine of unlimited atonement—that is that Christ died for everybody and that one could look to Christ in faith and be assured of his salvation by looking at the One whom God has made his substitute for sin.

In other words, John Calvin held that assurance was of the essence of saving faith. However, according to Kendall and Bell, beginning with Theodore Beza who succeeded Calvin in Geneva, and beginning in the English tradition with a man named Perkins, a new point of view came into existence. This new view was that Jesus had only died for the elect. Jesus had only died for those who would ultimately get saved.

Therefore, it was now impossible for the unsaved sinner to look to Christ and know that Christ had died for him, because he couldn't know that Christ had died for him till he himself knew that he was elect, since Christ had only died for the elect. That led to what Kendall calls the "reflex action" of saving faith. No longer could I look outward at Christ. No longer could I look outward at the cross and find assurance of my salvation. Now I had to look inward to see if the kind of faith that I had was the faith of the elect of God — whether, in fact, my works verified that I was indeed a believer in Jesus Christ.

Now these later Calvinists also introduced a further complication that was a disaster pastorally. They taught that it was possible for an unsaved man to believe temporarily. That is to say, a person who was not saved, in some sense or other believed, and for a while he might have evidences in his life that appeared to be the evidences of genuine saving faith. But after a while, down the road somewhere, he lost his faith and he lost all those evidences. So now we have the parishioners coming to their Calvinist pastors and asking a question like this: "I think that I have believed, and I think that I have in my life the fruits of the Spirit. But how do I know that my faith and my fruits are not the faith and fruits of a reprobate, and that all I have, really, is the temporary faith of one who is non-elect?"

The Calvinist pastor had no answer for that. If the Calvinist pastor had been perfectly honest, he would have had to say to the individual, "Wait and see." That's all he could say. Now according to Kendall and Bell, this departure from John Calvin in terms of limiting the atonement to those who would ultimately be saved — namely, the elect — and focusing our assurance on the fruits of the Spirit within us, led to a horrible consequence in which the grounds of assurance and the joy of salvation were

⁸ Endnotes 7 and 8 of Chapter 2 of *Absolutely Free!*

⁹ R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: University Press, 1979).

¹⁰ M. Charles Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance* (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1985).

swept out from under the feet of those who heard and believed this teaching.

All that lordship theology does in our own current day and time is to popularize this kind of Calvinist thought, this kind of Reformed theology. It's important for us to understand that what we are confronting today in terms of lordship theology is not something that is brand new. It has been around for a long time, and the Church has had to confront it repeatedly. I might even say that, in essence, the Church confronted it in the Reformation, because as you know, the doctrine of Roman Catholicism is: no assurance and you have to look to the fruits of grace in your life.

What the Reformers did was to rebel against this in the light of Scripture and to return to the doctrine of *sola fide*, "faith alone." By faith a man is justified apart from works. Now it has proved difficult for men to retain the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone. Periodically, the Christian Church tends to slip and slide back toward fundamental Roman Catholic theology because, basically, lordship theology is simply a contemporary articulation of the idea that I cannot be saved apart from good works or apart from keeping God's law or keeping God's commandments. Put it any way you want to, that's the bottom line. That is why lordship doctrine is so dangerous, so destructive to the spiritual vitality of Christians, and so confusing to the lost who need to be told of the unconditional grace of God and of the salvation that is freely given through faith in Christ.

Assurance as a Reason for Living a Godly Life

Over and over again the New Testament writers appeal to the assurance which they know their readers possess in order to use it as a basis for Christian exhortation. We might think for example of 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, where Paul is warning the believers against immorality:

Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit *who is in you*, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.

Paul does not say, as many lordship people would say, "If you get into immorality, that will raise a question as to whether you really belong to God." He goes at it in exactly the opposite direction. He says, "Don't you folks realize that as Christians, the Holy Spirit is in you? Don't you realize that your body is the temple in which God dwells? Don't you realize you don't belong to yourself? Don't you realize you're bought with the price of the blood of Christ? Don't you realize all these things?" says Paul. "Therefore, glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's." It is the assurance of salvation by grace through faith alone which is the only firm and solid platform for a life of obedience to God. Only after I know that I am saved can I properly relate myself to the lordship of Jesus Christ in my life.

What Is the Distinction Between *Faith and Saving Faith?*

Why do I use the special term, *saving faith*? The reason is this: There are many things that we can believe about God that do not save us. We are not saved, for example, by believing that God exists, though that's real faith when we do believe that He exists. We are not saved by believing in the Trinity, although it's real faith to believe that there is a Trinity. We're not saved by believing that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, although that's a tremendous act of faith in our day and time. We are saved, however, by believing that Jesus Christ offers eternal life freely and gives it freely to the believer. So by *saving faith*, I mean faith that is focused on the truth of the gospel that saves us, rather than faith that is focused in some other way, which may be perfectly legitimate faith, but which is not saving faith, in the sense that believing this or that does not bring us into the kingdom of God. So that's what I meant by *saving faith*.

In *Absolutely Free!* I try to define *faith* and *saving faith* this way: Faith is accepting God's Word to us as true. That's a general definition of *faith*. *Saving faith* is accepting God's Word to us in the gospel as true, because what saves us is belief of the gospel.

That is why, for example, in James, chapter 2, it is totally irrelevant to talk about the demons having a faith that doesn't save. What we have in James 2 is what I think is an objector to James saying, "You believe that God is one. The demons also believe and tremble." And people have jumped to a conclusion by saying, "Look! The demons have a faith that doesn't save them!"

My response to that is nobody is saved by believing in the oneness of God. Nobody. Every Orthodox Jew in James's time would have believed that. They weren't saved by believing the oneness of God, and the demons are not saved by believing that. And the demons *cannot* believe that Christ is offering eternal life to them on the basis of faith for the simple reason that Christ is not offering eternal life to them on the basis of saving faith.

But the demons can truly believe many things. They believe that God exists, and they're scared because there is no salvation offered to them — only eternal damnation. So even in James 2, we can see that there are other kinds of faith besides the kind of faith that is focused on the gospel. There are many things on which we can focus our faith, and should, and after we are saved, then the whole Christian life is lived by faith, in the sense that there are all sorts of things that I need to believe about God to live victoriously. Right here and right now, in the midst of my problems, I've got to believe that God is going to keep His word to me and help me. That's faith. That doesn't save me. I'm already saved. But that's faith.

Conclusion

We have defined *lordship salvation* as the view which holds that some commitment to obedience is a necessary part of true conversion. Lordship people believe that you cannot get saved unless you in some way or other either implicitly or explicitly commit yourself to obedience to God. They expect you to follow through on that, and if you do not, they will indicate that they do not believe that you are saved.

Saving Faith and Lordship Salvation

Over against this is the Biblical view that salvation is a free gift, that we are saved by grace through faith, that God offers us the gift, and that we receive it by simple faith in Christ alone. The bottom line of this chapter is this: There should be nothing complicated about our understanding of “saving faith.”

We have an understanding of *faith* that is perfectly correct in everyday life. In our usage of that word between ourselves, we know what it means to believe something. We know what it means to trust someone. We have a very valid and correct understanding of what *faith* is. If we turn to the Bible, we discover that the same concept of faith that we use in everyday life is what applies in the Bible. But, if we were seeking a Biblically phrased definition, we might say that *faith* is taking God’s Word for things. It’s accepting God’s Word as true. *Saving faith* is accepting God’s Word in the gospel as true. In other words, it is believing the things or the message that must be believed in order to be saved.

There are many things that we do believe and should believe because they’re true: The existence of God, the deity of Christ, the Trinity, creation, and the inerrancy of the Bible. It is by faith that we accept all of these things. But none of these things by themselves are the gospel. The gospel is the presentation of the offer of eternal life that is given freely to everyone who will trust in Christ. When we believe that message, when we accept that message as true, then we have believed on Christ to eternal life.

Lordship salvation however abandons both the common sense and the Biblical definition of *saving faith* and moves into a rearticulated and redefined view of faith, which introduces such extraneous ideas as repentance, surrender, commitment, and so on. So bottom line: One of the major issues in the lordship salvation controversy is the nature of saving faith. The simple Biblical view is that saving faith is accepting God’s Word in the gospel as true.

Chapter 4

What Is Discipleship? What Is Repentance?¹

A second issue that arises prominently in the lordship salvation discussion is the issue of the nature of discipleship. What exactly is *discipleship*?

Lordship Salvation View of Discipleship

Let's begin with a statement of the lordship salvation view. What is the lordship salvation view of discipleship? Basically, the lordship salvation view of discipleship is that *discipleship* equals "to be a Christian." That is to say that all Christians, in the lordship view, are disciples. If you are not a disciple, you are not a Christian. Therefore, the call to discipleship is equivalent to the call to salvation. Or we might say that the gospel is wrapped up, also, in all of the invitations to become disciples of Jesus Christ.

I am a little surprised that in so many quarters in the Evangelical church, this proposition has gone unchallenged. It seems to me that when we begin to examine the Scriptures, it is confronted with a very difficult—I would say not only difficult, but insuperable—problem.

Let me just articulate it this way. We take a passage like Luke 14, and we put it over against a passage like John 4. You remember Luke 14:26:

"If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple."

A little later in the passage, in Luke 14:33:

"So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple."

It is clear from that passage, if nothing else is clear, that discipleship is very demanding. The conditions for effective long-term discipleship are very tough. They're very real and they're very heavy.

When we move from a passage like that, however, to a passage like John 4:10, we are struck with the difference. Jesus says to the woman at the well:

"If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water."

¹ Chapter 4 is based on a message given at Jansen Bible Church, Nebraska in 1990.

Not a word about forsaking her family. Not a word about giving up everything that she possessed. What He says to her is, “If you just knew what I had to offer you, and if you just knew who I was, you would ask Me for this, and I would give it to you.”

Now, if ever an individual was a candidate for reformation, this woman was. She’d had five husbands, and the person she was living with was not even her husband. She was apparently living with a married man, and her life was filled with sin. Nowhere in the exchange between Jesus and the woman at the well is there any call to this woman to give up her lifestyle. It doesn’t mean that Jesus wasn’t interested in her lifestyle. It simply means that when He was discussing the water of life with her, her lifestyle was not the issue. The issue was the gift that He had to offer and whether or not she would receive it by faith.

Now when we put these two passages, these two kinds of passages, side by side, I maintain that even the casual reader would say, “These passages are different.” There’s a contrast between these passages. On the one hand, Jesus is talking to the woman about what is apparently a free and unconditioned gift if she’s just willing to accept it. On the other hand, in the discipleship passages, He’s talking about something else. He’s talking about something that is stringently conditioned, whose conditions are enormously difficult for the average person to contemplate.

How, then, can we say that Luke 14 is talking about a free gift? Well, obviously we can’t say it and deal squarely with the text. This leads lordship theologians to make a very odd statement, and Dr. John MacArthur in his book, *The Gospel According to Jesus* does make this statement. Basically, he says that salvation is free and costs you everything.² Now that’s double-speak. That’s talking out of both sides of the mouth. Something cannot be free and at the same time cost you everything. If something costs you everything, it is not free!

The lordship theologian is caught in the horrible bind that on the one hand, he has a class of passages that present salvation as free. On the other hand, he is working with a large group of passages that are related to discipleship where it is obvious that discipleship is not without enormous costs. I maintain that those who are in the lordship camp should have said to themselves, “Something is wrong with the way I’m handling these Scriptures. I cannot put them together in a meaningful or reasonable or rational way.” What is the problem then? The problem is very simple: Lordship theology misdefines *discipleship*.

The most obvious conclusion that we ought to draw if we compare passages like Luke 14 with John 4 is that they’re talking about different subjects. And clearly, since John 4 is talking about the subject of eternal life or eternal salvation, then Luke 14 is not. That ought to be square one in our thinking about these texts. The lordship view of discipleship, that it’s a functional equivalent to “be a Christian,” is fraught with internal contradiction. It is a mishandling of the Scriptures that are involved. What is the Biblical view?

Biblical View of Discipleship

Let me state it and then let me try to defend it. The Biblical view would be that

² “[S]alvation is a gift, yet it costs everything.” John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 31.

discipleship is equal to being a spiritual learner. Here, we need to keep in mind one very simple and basic fact. The Greek word that is translated *disciple* really means “a student, a pupil.” That is what *disciple* means in Greek.

When you read in your English Bibles about the master-disciple relationship, the simplest English translation of that, is to say we’re talking about the teacher-pupil relationship. Now in the ancient world, in the world of New Testament times, it was a widely recognized phenomenon that there were traveling teachers. There were many of , not only in Judaism, but also in the Gentile world. They were what we might call “peripatetic” teachers. They went from place to place, and they dispensed whatever wisdom or philosophy they claimed to be in possession of.

As a rule, if these teachers had anything going for them, they collected a group of younger men who became their pupils, who became their students. Now, if you were a student of a traveling teacher or philosopher, obviously, to be his student, you had to travel with him. You had to follow him around the countryside. Jesus was exactly that. He was a traveling rabbi. He was a traveling teacher. He was not stationary in one spot. He didn’t have a school that was located in a building where He went every morning at 9:00 a.m. to teach the truth. No, Jesus taught the truth all over the land of Palestine. To become a pupil of His, therefore meant that you followed Him around.

That could be very inconvenient, particularly if you had a family at home, right? You had a wife and children, an aging mother and father. You had to make a decision: *Am I going to leave my parents or my wife and children in order to get the benefit of the training that this Rabbi has to offer?* But what I’m suggesting here is that if we can put ourselves into the cultural situation of the first century, we will understand the concept of discipleship. It was perfectly clear to the average individual in the New Testament world. They knew what it meant to be a disciple. It meant to be a pupil of a teacher. They knew what it meant to follow your teacher around because so many teachers traveled.

If we will grasp this concept, then we are prepared to confront the New Testament idea of discipleship, which is basically that we take Jesus as our spiritual teacher. We sit under His instruction through the Scriptures and through the proclamation of the Scriptures, and we are willing to follow Him wherever His teaching leads us. We move from the literal movement around the countryside to the spiritual idea of following Him wherever He takes us, wherever He leads us. Whatever He wants us to do, we do. But we do this as pupils of a divine Teacher.

Confusing Salvation with Discipleship

That leads to this very simple observation: What has gone wrong in lordship salvation is a confusion between two concepts that ought to be kept separate — a confusion between birth and spiritual education. I can’t emphasize this simple distinction enough.

When lordship people collapse the distinction between conversion and discipleship, they are collapsing the Biblical distinction between birth and education. We all know in natural life that you can’t educate somebody who hasn’t been born. So, birth precedes education even, in physical life. We also know that some people who are born don’t wish to go to school, and so education doesn’t automatically follow from the fact that you were born — or full-fledged education

doesn't automatically follow from that! A person may, under pressure from his parents, go to the first grade, maybe finish grade school and a little bit of high school, and then drops out. No more education. We all understand that.

Well, that's the simplest of all possible analogies to explain what is going on in Christianity. First, we have to be born into the family of God. First, we have to be saved. Now, there were people in the Biblical accounts who became disciples without being born again. That is, they sat under the teaching of Jesus. Judas was a case in point. They were never born again, but they tried to get an education. Just as there are people who come into our churches and who come every Sunday and who listen to the Word of God and try to be educated spiritually, and they've never been saved. That happens, too.

But the Biblical order, the only meaningful and significant order, is first to be born into the family of God and secondly, to receive the education that God has to offer us through His Word and through His Holy Spirit. So to collapse this distinction is a major mistake, which is one of the mistakes of lordship theology.

Opting Out of Discipleship

Now this leads us to a final observation about discipleship. Inasmuch as Luke 14 and other passages on discipleship make it clear that education is not easy to come by — that somewhere along the line you're going to meet difficulties that will tempt you to throw in the sponge — it is obvious that discipleship is something you can opt out of. And there are Christians who do opt out of the educational process. They run into something in their life and in their Christian experience that is too tough to handle, they think. Instead of trusting God and learning the lessons that God has to teach them in it, they throw up their hands, throw in the sponge and get out of the church, and get out of the spiritual education process altogether. Unfortunately, it happens.

That doesn't mean it's going to be permanent, but it happens. No parent reading this, I presume, is going to assume automatically that just because you have a young child in your home, that your young child is necessarily going to finish his education in the schools. You hope that your child will. You're going to do everything in your power to encourage them to do so. But it's not automatic, is it? They have to stick with it. If they get discouraged, you're going to have to step in and try to encourage them, and all the rest of it.

The same thing is true in in the spiritual life. Once we become Christians, we can enter immediately into the educational process, and we do so by coming to hear the Word of God. Our fellow Christians presumably will encourage us. Our pastor will encourage us to stick at the process of spiritual education, no matter how tough the going gets. But it's not automatic.

If I get sufficiently discouraged or sufficiently away from God, I may throw in the towel. So, we have to be realistic. One of the things that I think is wrong with lordship salvation is that it is theology in the ivory tower. It doesn't recognize the way people are, the way they operate, and what can happen in the Christian life. Christianity is a wonderful experience. It begins with the reception of an absolutely free gift. But after that, it is necessary to persevere in order to get the full benefits of our spiritual experience and to get the full spiritual education that God designs for us. If we think that because we're Christians, we will never drop out, let us think

again. To be forewarned is to be forearmed. It is necessary for us to face the potential dangers of Christian experience in order to become victorious over those dangers.

Repentance and Discipleship³

So much for the nature of discipleship. But my third point which at first blush will not appear to be related to discipleship, is in my mind at least firmly related to it. It is a point that we cannot avoid discussing when we are discussing Lordship Salvation theology. That is the subject of repentance.

(1a) Repentance as a Turning from Sins and a Condition of Salvation

It is a watchword with lordship salvation theologians, that repentance is absolutely necessary to salvation. They pillory those who do not share that conviction. They say, “How can a man get to heaven if he doesn’t repent?”

Let’s talk about this for a moment. There are at least three basic views that exist in the Evangelical church on the subject of repentance. The first of these is that repentance means turning from sin, and it is a condition of salvation. If I do not repent, if I do not decide to turn from sin, I cannot be saved. This is the view of lordship salvation theology.

(1b) Repentance in the Gospel of John?

Now there are many ways of addressing this issue, but the simplest way to address it, I think, is this. There is one book in the New Testament that professes to have been written for the purpose of bringing men to the experience of salvation. What book is that? Not James. Not even Romans, even though Romans discusses salvation. That book is the Gospel of John. Notice the key word of that question. All of us professors try tricky questions. I said the only book that *professes* to be written for the purpose of bringing men to salvation. You can come to salvation through Romans. I even think you can do it through James. But neither of these two books claims to have been written for this purpose. But the Gospel of John does. We read in John 20:30-31:

And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.

The only book in the New Testament that claims directly to have been written for the purpose of bringing men to saving faith is the Gospel of John.

Now, for my second question — you knew you were going to have to have a quiz somewhere along the line with an ex-professor. Twenty-seven years at Dallas

³ For more on the subject of repentance, see *Harmony with God: A Fresh Look at Repentance* by Zane C. Hodges, published by Redención Viva, 2001.

Theological Seminary, 27 years of giving tests, and my greatest frustration as a non-professor is that I can't give tests anymore. So, here I am to give you a test. The answer to question one was: The Gospel of John is the only New Testament book that claims directly to have been written for the purpose of bringing men to salvation.

Question number two. How many times does the Gospel of John refer to repentance? How many times does the Gospel of John mention repentance?

For anyone who answered *zero*, you get an A+. The answer is *zero*. An absolute zero. The one book that claims to have been written for the purpose of bringing men to eternal salvation mentions repentance not at all. That ought to tell us something. In Dr. MacArthur's book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, he has a statement to this effect. He says, "No evangelism that omits the message of repentance can properly be called the gospel."⁴ And my reply to that is: In that case, the Gospel of John does not present the Biblical gospel, because it omits the message of repentance.

Of course, the Gospel of John presents the Biblical gospel. Therefore, I think we must draw the conclusion that repentance is not a condition for eternal life. If it had been a condition for eternal life, John would have said so. Not once, but many times.

John does link eternal life with faith many times. Can you read the Gospel of John without discovering you have to believe in Christ? You can't even get through a chapter without it. But you can read the whole Gospel of John and never get the idea that you have to repent. How did the Apostle John manage that? On purpose, folks. On purpose.

I always like to refer to the little incident in the first chapter of the Gospel of John. Most scholars think that John the son of Zebedee was originally a disciple of John the Baptist. There's reason for thinking so. It is a good guess that before John became a disciple of Jesus, he was a disciple of John the Baptist and is, in fact, one of the two unnamed disciples in John 1 who leave John the Baptist and join themselves to Jesus.

But in the opening chapter of the Gospel of John, recall that a Jewish delegation calls on the John the Baptist to find out for the officials at Jerusalem just exactly who he is. John the Baptist denies that he's the Christ. He denies that he's Elijah. He denies that he's the "Prophet who should come." Then the delegation from Jerusalem says, "Why do you baptize then, if you're not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet? What's this baptism all about?"

Now, John the Evangelist is writing about this interaction, and if he was a former disciple of John the Baptist, this is his golden opportunity to give the response that we would expect from the Synoptic Gospels, right? "I baptize with the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins" — golden opportunity for John the Evangelist to put the subject of repentance into his book in the mouth of John the Baptist.

What do we get? According to John the Evangelist, John the Baptist replies, "I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know. It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose" (John 1:26-27). There is not a word, not a syllable about repentance. Golden

⁴ John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 167.

opportunity.

How did John the Evangelist manage to miss the subject of repentance for 21 chapters? I say again — on purpose — because he is writing a book to tell us how to get eternal life, and with that, repentance has nothing to do. The lordship people have no answer to that. Their efforts to read repentance into the Gospel of John are counsels of desperation. I've cited a couple of their efforts in the endnotes of *Absolutely Free!*⁵ That's one view: that repentance is turning from sin, and it is a condition of salvation.

(2) Repentance as a Change of Mind and a Condition of Salvation

A second view is that *repentance* is changing the mind, and that in salvation, it is changing the mind about Christ. Now let me say here that some very fine people hold this view. Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer, the founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, held it. Dr. John Walvoord⁶ holds it. Dr. Charles Ryrie⁷ holds it. Many of the graduates of Dallas Theological Seminary hold it. Some of my best friends hold it. I respect it.

The reason I respect it is that it does not interfere with the freeness of the Gospel. Those who hold this view say, in essence, that when you trust Christ, it is impossible to do so without changing your mind. That is, you move from a condition of unbelief to a condition of belief. Before, you thought, maybe, that you were saved by your own works, or that you couldn't be saved, or that something else was true. And now, when you trust Christ, you have changed your mind about that because now you understand that salvation comes only through faith in Christ. Under this view, repentance is really only the flip side of the coin of faith — that is, repentance is something that inevitably occurs whenever faith occurs.

I agree that nearly everybody who trusts Christ has some change of mind in the process. My problem with this view, for a long time, has been that I do not think that the evidence that the word *repent* means simply a “change of mind” is adequate or compelling. There is agreement that originally the Greek word for *repent* — the verb is *metanoēō*, and the noun is *metanoia* — did mean “to change one's mind.”

But, as everyone who studies language knows, words tend to change their meaning according to the way that they are used. In my judgment, the usage of the word *repent* in the New Testament and during the New Testament period, does *not* support the idea that *repent* means simply “a change of mind.”

In the first century, at the time the New Testament books were written, the Greek word translated *repent* meant approximately what the English word *repent* means today. What I am then basically saying is that the English word *repent* which we read in our Bibles is an adequate translation of the Greek word for *repent*. The connotations we generally associate with the English word *repent* are more or less present in the Greek word.

⁵ See chapter 12, “Repentance,” of *Absolutely Free!*

⁶ President of Dallas Theological Seminary from 1952 to 1986.

⁷ Professor of Systematic Theology and Dean of Doctoral Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary from 1953-1958 and 1963-1982.

Now that's my view of things, and therefore I am uncomfortable with position two (repentance as a change of mind and a condition of salvation). But let me underline the fact that I am not uncomfortable with people who hold this position, because I believe that the many people who do hold it are fully and deeply committed to the total freeness of the grace of God.

(3) Repentance as Turning from Sin for Harmonious Relations with God, and Not a Condition of Salvation

What, then, is my view of *repentance* after rejecting views number one and two? May I suggest this? Let me offer you a definition. I want to suggest, and do suggest in *Absolutely Free!*, that *repentance* is “a decision to turn from sin to God for harmonious relations.” Let me repeat that. We can sustain from the New Testament the view that *repentance* means that the repenting person decides he is going to turn away from sin, whatever his sin may be, and he is going to turn back to God. And the purpose of this is to restore harmony between himself and God.

Let me elaborate on this a little bit, because this is a little new in some of our circles and needs a little bit of clarification. The first thing I would like to say is that we need to observe that in the New Testament, the word *repent* is frequently addressed to Christians. Revelation 2:16 is a case in point:

“Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth.”

The Apostle John is writing to the seven churches of Asia, and John is recording the message of the risen Savior to each of these churches. Look at Revelation 2:5. This is the church that had left its first love, the church of Ephesus. In verse 5, Jesus says to this church:

“Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place — unless you repent.”

“Get back to where you were. Get back to your previous relationship with God,” is what Jesus is saying to this audience.

The next verse that I want to discuss is Revelation 3:19:

“As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.”

Now, this is the letter addressed to the Laodicean church, the famous lukewarm church, which was neither cold nor hot. The word *chasten* here is the familiar word for child training, the Greek word *paideuō*, which means the discipline and education that you administer to the child. Jesus is saying to the Laodiceans, “You are among those that I love, and I treat you as children who need discipline.” “As

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many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore, be zealous and repent.”

Then notice the next verse, a famous verse, oftentimes misused as though it were a gospel text, but it is actually a text for Christians. Jesus says:

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.” (Revelation 3:20)

Notice that the call to repent is followed immediately by an invitation to fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ. What is lost when a Christian sins is not his salvation, but his fellowship — his harmony — with God. Therefore, when we repent, we turn away from the thing that has interfered with our relationship to God. We turn back to Him for harmonious relationships. We turn back to Him for fellowship. First John 1:9 says:

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

In the context, we’re talking, obviously, about fellowship. If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus Christ is cleansing us from all sin. But if we sin, then we are to confess it, and we are to experience forgiveness. What is happening here? Well, the word *repent* is not used there, but obviously, we are repenting. We’re turning away from the sin. We’re turning back to God. We’re renewing our fellowship with Him by confession. So, the first thing that we want to observe is that in the New Testament, repentance is very frequently a Christian experience.

This leads me to make this observation: If you will look carefully at the writings of John Calvin and Martin Luther, I think you will discover that, essentially, they held the view that repentance is something that Christians do. They were very much opposed to the Roman Catholic doctrine that penance or repentance was a condition for eternal salvation. Luther and Calvin both firmly held to *sola fide* — faith alone — and they regarded repentance or penance as a product of saving faith, not a precondition to it, not a part of it, but a result of saving faith.

There’s a great passage in Calvin, part of which I have quoted in *Absolutely Free!*⁸ in which he says:

In one word I apprehend repentance to be regeneration, the end of which is the restoration of the Divine image within us...

Wherefore, in this regeneration, we are restored by the grace of Christ to the righteousness of God, from which we fell in Adam...And this restoration is not accomplished in a single moment, or day, or year.⁹

⁸ Chapter 12, first page, *Absolutely Free!*

⁹ Quotations from John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* are taken from the translation by John Allen in the two-volume edition published at Philadelphia by the Presbyterian Board of Christian Education [n.d.]. *Institutes* III.III.9.

Calvin adds that the Lord renews His people's senses to purity so that "they may employ their whole life in the exercise of repentance, and know that this warfare will be terminated only by death."¹⁰ In summary, Calvin's view of repentance is that it is the process by which God remakes us and transforms us so that more and more we become like God, like Jesus Christ. He goes on to say that we are engaged for all of our life in this and that there is no end to this warfare before death. That was Calvin's view of repentance.

Martin Luther wrote: "Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, in saying 'Repent ye, etc.,' willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance."¹¹ In other words, Luther says that God has ordained that the entire life of the believer should be repentance. There is a sense in which Calvin and Luther have struck a real Biblical truth: that the entirety of Christian experience is in fact, repentance.

So whether or not I talk about being out of fellowship or in fellowship, increasingly I discover what God disapproves of in my life, and I turn from it for His transforming power. I sustain or restore my harmonious relationships with Him, and this process goes on and on and on.

You remember the passage where Jesus is talking to His disciples, and He says to them:

"If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him." (Luke 17:3-4)

Now, why did Jesus say that to His disciples? Why is that their standard? Because that's the way God deals with us. I sin. I don't know about you, but I'm sure I sin more than seven times a day. But the wonderful thing about the grace of God is that every time I turn back to God in repentance, He is there with forgiveness, so that fellowship can either be restored or continued, and so that His transforming and remaking process can go on and on in my life through the years. I think Calvin and Luther are on to something: that repentance, at its most fundamental level, is what the Christian life is about.

Therefore, in one sense of the word, it is what discipleship is about, because as I follow the Lord Jesus Christ, I learn more of what is pleasing to Him, I repent of the things in my life that I increasingly discover are not pleasing to Him, I allow Him to remake me and to deepen my fellowship with Him. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If you repent, we have fellowship. If you do not, you have not opened the door to Me."¹² That's the fundamental principle that is involved.

¹⁰ *Institutes* III.III.9.

¹¹ See *Luther's and Zwingli's Propositions for Debate: The Ninety-Five Theses of 31 October 1517 and the Sixty-Seven Articles of 19 January 1523*, in the original version and contemporary translations, with a new English translation, introduction, and bibliography by Carl S. Meyer (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1963), 2-3.

¹² Revelation 3:20

Repentance and Unserved People

Now, there's a second thing under this discussion of repentance. I have said, first of all, that Christians do it repeatedly. A second thing that we may say is that unsaved people sometimes do it before salvation.

I think that's easy to demonstrate from the New Testament. The story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-32, if you will read it carefully in context, is really a story about repentance. If I ask you the question, "When did the Prodigal Son repent?" I think your answer ought to be that it was when he was out there in the far country, and he said to himself:

"How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me as one of your hired servants.'" (Luke 15:17-19)

That was repentance. That was not salvation, because at this point in time, the Prodigal Son is thinking, *I will have to work for my dad in order for him to receive me back. I will probably have to strike a bargain with Dad. I will have to say to him, "Don't treat me anymore as your son. Just treat me as a servant and I will work for you and you can let me live on the farm."*

As you know, if you've read, this is a passage I center on in *Absolutely Free!*¹³ When the Prodigal Son makes his journey and gets back to his dad, his dad runs and meets him. Before the Prodigal Son can get anything out of his mouth, his dad has embraced him and kissed him. His dad has given him his total acceptance without so much as a single word from his son, and then and only then does the son say, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight" (Luke 15:20-21). It was only after his father had already received him.

But the Prodigal Son does not say, "Make me as one of your hired servants." He now realizes that that was perfectly inappropriate, that his father receives him back unconditionally and extends his forgiveness to him. It's not a matter of striking a bargain with his dad. And so all he says is, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son" (Luke 15:21).

What does the father do and say? "That's right, kid. You are not worthy to be called my son"? No, he does not do, nor say this.

Instead he says, to paraphrase, "Bring out the best robe. Put the ring on his finger and the sandals on his feet. Kill the fatted calf. We're going to sit down and we're going to have fellowship — he and I and everybody who wants to come in to the party," which the older brother did not want to do.

What we have here is something that is very realistic. The Prodigal Son repents. He needs to get back into harmony with his father. He does not yet understand the terms on which his father will receive him. But he has repented, and that starts him on his way back to God.

The book of Acts contains a story that is in many respects similar. This is the

¹³ Chapter 1, *Absolutely Free!*

story of Cornelius. Cornelius was a Gentile pagan, and while he is still unsaved, he turns from his paganism. He begins to pray to the God of Israel. He begins to give alms to the God of Israel. Then the message of salvation is given to Cornelius. The Apostle Peter says, “To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins” (Acts 10:43).

Cornelius had already repented, but he was not saved by his repentance. He is saved by the grace of God. Now this has many analogies in ordinary life and experience today. Many times, unsaved people do, in a very significant sense, repent. They say to themselves, *I am getting nowhere with this lifestyle. Everything is coming to pieces. The number of particulars here is almost endless: My marriage is breaking up. I’m losing my job. I’ve got this habit that I can’t break. I need God. I need to get back into right relations with God.*

So what does he do? He starts coming to church. He is not a Christian. He starts reading his Bible. He starts saying his prayers. He has repented. But he is not saved by any of those things. What does his repentance really do for him? It gets him moving in the right direction. It gets him back under the ministry of the Word. Hopefully, he finds a church like Jansen Bible Church where he can find out that he is not saved by repentance. He is saved by the grace of God through faith alone.

In other words, he has started the journey of the Prodigal Son. He has gotten down the road, and eventually he meets a loving heavenly Father who says, “I receive you unconditionally. I accept you on the basis of your faith in My Son of alone. Your pledges to me about service, surrender, commitment, etc. are no part of this transaction. I receive you on the basis of what Christ has done for you on the cross.” So that often happens. But my third point is: Not always.

While it is true that many unsaved people experience a real form of repentance before they are saved, it is equally true that many do not. Nor is it necessary. Here an example is obviously the woman at the well in John 4. Jesus does not talk to her about repenting of her lifestyle. He does not call upon her to disengage from the married man with whom she is now living. He starts right up front with her, and He says, to paraphrase, “I’ve got a gift for you and all you need to do is to know that the gift is here and who I am, and you’ll get this gift” (John 4:10).

Anyone who thinks they see any repentance in this story is looking at a mirage. It isn’t there. Here is a woman who is thirsty for something she does not have. She hardly knows what, but she meets it in the Person of Jesus Christ. She gets it in the form of eternal life, and there’s no repentance there.

Now, after she got eternal life, there was time enough to repent, and Jesus stayed a day or two. I don’t know what He said to her, and it’s not the purpose of the Gospel of John to tell us what He said to her. But it wouldn’t be surprising, would it, if she came to Him and said, “You know, I got the impression that You maybe didn’t approve of my lifestyle. What do You think I ought to do about it?”

Jesus probably said to her, “Leave that man.” But, that was no part of the transaction of salvation, no part of the gift of eternal life. It was a logical outflow but not a condition for that.

Another example is the blind man in John 9. You can read through this chapter in its entirety, and you will not find even a reference to sin except for our Lord’s statement to the disciples that the man is not blind because of his own sin or anybody else’s. The disciples asked, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2).

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Jesus responded, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him” (John 9:2). Jesus says not a word about the guilt of this man. But when we get to the end of the story, we have Jesus saying to this blind man, “Do you believe in the Son of God?” (John 9:35)

The blind man says, “Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?” (John 9:36) To paraphrase the answer, “You just tell me. You know, I’m ready.”

Jesus says, “You have both seen Him and it is He who is talking with you” (John 9:37).

The next words are that the man falls down before Jesus and says, “Lord I believe!” (John 9:38). There is no repentance there. Anybody who thinks they see repentance in this interaction is looking at a mirage. The point is that when a person is ready for faith, he is ready for faith. We do not need to introduce repentance at all. We do not need to introduce conditions at all.

But sometimes God uses repentance to get people ready for faith. Let’s not put God in a box. Let’s not say that because He dealt with Cornelius in the way that He did and brought repentance to Cornelius before He brought him salvation, that God has to always do that. He can also reach people as He reached them in John 4 and John 9.

My principle is this: If I am talking to a person who says to me, “Sir, what must I do to be saved?” My answer to him is not, “Repent and believe.” My answer to him is, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31).

Conclusion

So, by and large, we may say that repentance is the experience that goes along with discipleship. It may indeed occur prior to salvation and, in fact, often does occur, but it does not always occur, and because it is not always there, it is not a condition for eternal life. The only condition for eternal life remains faith.

But after we are Christians, we have lots to repent of. We have lots to repent of every day of our lives until the Lord Jesus Christ takes us home to be with Himself. So repentance — I agree with Luther and Calvin — repentance is largely a Christian operation and is part and parcel of the process of learning to know God, to live with God, and to be the disciple of Jesus Christ.

Chapter 5

What Is Guidance from God? What Is God's Will?¹

Eat whatever is sold in the meat market, asking no questions for conscience' sake; for "the earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness."

If any of those who do not believe invites you to dinner, and you desire to go, eat whatever is set before you, asking no question for conscience' sake. But if anyone says to you, "This was offered to idols," do not eat it for the sake of the one who told you, and for conscience' sake; for "the earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness." "Conscience," I say, not your own, but that of the other.

- 1 Corinthians 10:25-29

Invitation to Dinner from the Unsaved

Did you ever stop to consider how terribly unspiritual the Apostle Paul sometimes sounds? Take, for example, his statement in verse 27. He says, in effect, "If an unsaved person invites you to dinner and you feel like going, go ahead." Now, considering the tremendous spiritual ramifications of our social intercourse with unsaved people, it would seem that the very least the apostle could have said would have been, "If an unsaved person invites you to dinner, pray about it. And if God leads you to accept the invitation, go ahead." Isn't it a tragedy that the Apostle Paul did not have access to the superior spiritual wisdom of the 20th century?

Think how we might have improved on a verse like this: "If an unsaved person invites you to dinner, go ahead, provided that you are prepared to share with him the *Four Spiritual Laws*."²

Of course, in our Dallas Seminary context, we could do even better than that: "If an unsaved person invites you to dinner, go ahead, but be sure that you leave behind under your dinner plate a copy of the tract, *How to Have a Happy and Meaningful Life*."³

Or if you really want to make your evening out a flaming spiritual success, as you depart, present your pagan host with an autographed copy of *The Hungry Inherit*.⁴

¹ Based on a message given in chapel at Dallas Theological Seminary during the early 1970s.

² An evangelistic tract developed by Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ.

³ An evangelistic tract published by Dallas Theological Seminary.

⁴ Zane C. Hodges, *The Hungry Inherit: Refreshing Insights on Salvation, Discipleship and Rewards* (Moody Press, 1972); and *The Hungry Inherit: Winning the Wealth of the World to Come*, 3rd edition (Redención Viva, 1997).

What a pity, writing under inspiration, that all Paul could think to say was, "If an unsaved person invites you to dinner and you want to go, go ahead."

Mystical Guidance (Inner Peace) from God

But that brings us face-to-face with an issue that has concerned me for a number of years. A little over a year ago, I went out of town for some special lectures. I was told about a young man — a graduate of our seminary, a man that I myself had in class a number of years ago — who had gotten out of the ministry and was standing more or less on the fringes of Christian life and testimony.

Although I was not given any details about his personal case, I was made to understand that for a period of years, he was convinced that God had been leading him in a certain direction. He was persuaded that God had given him certain unmistakable signs confirming that leading. But when he came right down to the crunch, whatever it was he was looking for either didn't happen or didn't materialize. He was tremendously discouraged by this. He thought God had let him down. At that time, at least, he was living in spiritual defeat.

Somehow or other, the idea has arisen in our circles that whenever we make a significant spiritual decision, we need some specific and somewhat nebulous mystical guidance from God before we are able to make that decision. And yet, as I search the pages of the Scriptures, I find that the New Testament gives no substantial support to that concept whatsoever.

Now, I know that somebody's going to quote to me Colossians 3:15:

And let the peace of God rule in your hearts.

But if you examine the context of that passage, you will find that the Apostle Paul is talking about our interpersonal relationships with other Christians. A spirit of peace is to govern our hearts in regard to our dealings with other believers. Colossians 3:15 has nothing whatsoever to do with the question of divine guidance.

Direct, Plain, and Explicit Guidance from God

There is, however, divine guidance is very clearly mentioned in the Scriptures, but it is not the kind of divine guidance that we are usually talking about. When Philip the Evangelist was preaching in Samaria, he did not suddenly get the vague impression that his ministry at Samaria was through and that somehow or other God was calling him to a desert ministry.

Instead, we read that an angel of the Lord spoke to him, saying to Philip, "Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza" (Acts 8:26). When Philip got there and saw a chariot passing, he did not draw the conclusion, *Maybe this is why God sent me to the desert*. Once again, God said to him, by the Spirit, "Go near and overtake this chariot" (Acts 8:29).

When Cornelius was seeking the will of God, he didn't have the name *Joppa* suddenly pop into his mind. And because he was unable to get *Joppa* off his mind, he came to the conclusion that there was somebody down in Joppa who could

probably help solve his problem.

No. At a certain hour of the day, an angel came in and said, "Cornelius!" (Acts 10:3).

Cornelius says, "What is it, lord?" (Acts 10:4).

The angel says, "Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa, and send for Simon whose surname is Peter. He is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea" (Acts 10:4-6).

Pretty direct, pretty plain, pretty explicit.

When the Apostle Paul was wrestling with the question of where next to carry a great missionary thrust, he has a vision. A man of Macedonia is saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (Acts 16:9).

Now, someone is surely going to say to me, "But what about Gideon's fleece?" To which I reply, "What about it?"

I am willing to leave aside the question of whether the fleece was an expression of either his faith or his unbelief. I am even willing to ignore the fact that before he put out his fleece, an angel of the Lord came to him and said, "Go in this might of yours, and you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites. Have I not sent you?" (Judges 6:14), which is fairly definite.

But I would suggest that if you are going to lay out a fleece, lay out a real fleece. I do not mean a literal sheepskin, but if you are going to "lay out a fleece," ask God for something that cannot possibly happen unless He does it.

When you put a fleece on the ground and you expect the fleece to be full of water and the ground around it to be absolutely dry, you are not asking for something that is ordinarily taking place in the normal course of events. When you reverse the process the next night, you are not doing that, either. If you want to be guided by a metaphorical fleece, ask God for something that cannot possibly happen without His intervention. Ask Him for a miracle. That's what Gideon asked Him for.

Now, I'm saying all this because I do not want anyone going out of the auditorium this morning carefully adjusting their spiritual halo and saying, "Professor Hodges⁵ may not believe in divine guidance, but I do."

I do believe in divine guidance. But I refuse to raise a vague feeling of inner peace to the level of a divine voice. I refuse to take a combination of circumstances that may be ambiguous in themselves and translate it into a definite, explicit call to ministry.

I believe that the Scriptures themselves do not encourage us to do this. There is guidance in the Scriptures, but that guidance is direct. It is plain. It is explicit. It is verbal.

The Bible and Divine Guidance

You say that there is not a great deal of that kind of guidance being given today. So where does that leave us in the 20th century? I hope my answer will not shock you to the core. Where does that leave us in the 20th century? It leaves us with the Bible.

⁵ Zane was a Professor of the New Testament at Dallas Theological Seminary from 1959-1986.

I am never tired of quoting those crucial verses in 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

The challenge that I'm throwing out to you this morning, not just to you men sitting in front of me, but also to the men behind me.⁶ Do we really believe those words? Do we really believe that the Scriptures are all we really need to be ready for every good work?

Or do we believe that on top of this, we must have some sort of rather mystical guidance from God about which the Scriptures are strangely silent?

Can it be that if the Scriptures show no particular interest in telling us how to decide on whether to accept an invitation to dinner from an unsaved friend, then the Scriptures wish to leave this decision to us?

(1) Is Every Decision a Matter of Conscience?

Now, I can hear somebody saying, "Professor Hodges, I thought you were an exegete, but you are preaching exactly the kind of sermon this morning that Dr. Robinson⁷ has warned us against over and over again. You've picked up a text and, like the Prodigal Son, you have taken your journey into a far country, there to waste your breath in riotous preaching."⁸

Well, I confess to you that I am not directly interested in the issue of "doubtful things," to which this passage (1 Corinthians 10:25-29) is usually applied. But I am deeply interested in a principle that is very clearly embedded in this passage and that is directly related to the very casual way that Paul treats the question of a dinner invitation.

It seems to me that one of the things Paul is saying to his Corinthian readers in this passage is, "I wish that you people would not be over-scrupulous. I wish you would not be excessively conscientious.

"When you go into the meat market, don't ask all sorts of questions like, 'How was the meat slaughtered? Was the blood drained out of it? Does it come from an animal that was offered and sacrificed to idols?' When you go into the meat market," says Paul, "feel perfectly free to buy anything that you want to buy, asking no questions for conscience's sake.

"Do not think you have walked into a den of Satan, though it may be true that behind idol worship there are demons. Do not get the idea some people have that the

⁶ During the 1970s, Dallas Theological Seminary consisted of an all-male student body and faculty. The student body sat in front of the chapel speaker, while the faculty sat behind.

⁷ Dr. Haddon W. Robinson was a professor who taught preaching at Dallas Theological Seminary from 1960-1979.

⁸ Zane is humorously paraphrasing Luke 15:13: "And not many days after, the younger son...took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his possessions in riotous living."

meat therefore belongs to the demons. Remember that the world belongs to God and all the things in it. The earth is the Lord's, the fullness thereof. When you sit down at table with your pagan friend, don't be asking all sorts of questions about the food that he sets in front of you. Feel free to eat whatever he serves you, asking no questions for conscience's sake."

I submit to you that the rather casual way in which Paul addresses himself to the issue of a dinner invitation from a pagan friend is part of the ethos of this passage. You see, in a city like Corinth, it was inevitable that the question should ultimately arise: Is it possible for a Christian to have social intercourse with his pagan neighbors?

It was hard enough for a Jewish convert to Christianity to learn to sit down with Gentile Christians, much less to entertain the possibility of sitting down with a pagan Gentile. In fact, we have evidence that such a question had already arisen at Corinth. Remember that back in 1 Corinthians 5:9, the Apostle Paul says,

I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people.

But he says in 1 Corinthians 5:10,

Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.

The very fact that Paul finds it necessary to address himself to this misunderstanding of his words is proof that the question of social intercourse with pagans had already arisen in the Corinthian church. Therefore, when Paul says, very casually, "If any of those who do not believe invites you to dinner, and you desire to go..." (1 Corinthians 10:27a), this casualness is very studied, very definite, very pointed, for Paul's concern through the whole passage (1 Corinthians 10:25-29) is that the Corinthian Christians not be excessively troubled by questions of conscience that they need not raise. Whether it was in the meat market, whether it was confronting a dinner invitation from a pagan friend, or whether it was sitting at his table, "Ask no questions for conscience' sake."

If the pagan raises a question, then you have to respond in a certain way. But it is his conscience that concerns you, not yours.

Then, as I thought about this, it has seemed to me that one of the reasons, perhaps, that we feel we must have direct, mystical guidance from God in all of the major decisions of our life may very well be that we have reduced everything plus everything plus everything to a question of conscience.

So whenever I am confronted with a decision, my mentality is to see the thing in terms of black and white. There is one thing that is right and there is another thing that is wrong. There is one thing that is good. There is another thing that is bad. There is one thing that God wants me to do, and there is another thing that God does not want me to do. When I search for this mentality in the New Testament, I cannot find it.

I am wondering if we have recognized that the Word of God, within the

guidelines laid down for us, gives us tremendous areas of freedom within which the decision-making process is our own.

The seniors will have to forgive me for repeating something they have heard me say recently, but one of the areas in which it seems to me the Scriptures leave us free to decide is the area of marriage. You may remember that earlier in this very letter, the Apostle Paul says, in 1 Corinthians 7:39,

A wife is bound by law as long as her husband lives; but if her husband dies, she is at liberty to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.

And if words mean anything, that statement means that a widow is free to decide whether she wants to be married or not. She can be married to anybody whom she chooses, provided the person is a Christian. There are areas of decision-making that are left to us.

So, the question of whether I should get married or remain single is not, to me, a question of conscience. Since God approves of the married life and also of the single life, the decision, it seems to me, is mine. If I decide to remain single, that is my decision. But if I wake up tomorrow morning and decide that I want to get married, then I can go out and get married. Although I've discovered it's not as easy as all that!⁹

But at least the potential freedom is there.

(2) The Bible Is Enough for You

The point that I'm trying to make is a very simple one: Why should we raise questions of conscience that the Bible itself does not raise?

I'm a little scared that somebody's going to go out of this audience this morning and they're going to say, "Professor Hodges says we shouldn't use our conscience very much." Just to make sure that my big idea is as plain as possible, what I am saying is this: The Bible is enough for you and enough for your conscience.

If there is something that you need to learn, the Bible can teach you because it is profitable for doctrine. If there is something about which you need to be rebuked, the Bible can rebuke you because it is profitable for reproof. If there is something in which you need to be straightened out, the Bible can straighten you out because it is profitable for correction. If there is training that you need, the Bible can train you because it is profitable for instruction in righteousness that you might be the complete man of God that God wants you to be.¹⁰

Your conscience will have a full-time occupation if it is occupied only with the things with which the Bible confronts it.

⁹ Zane was a lifelong bachelor and was in his early 40s when this message was given.

¹⁰ "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Conclusion

J.N Darby¹¹ was undoubtedly one of the greatest teachers in the history of the Christian Church. I think it was Dr. A. C. Gaebelien¹² who said that, in his opinion at least, Mr. Darby was the greatest teacher in the Church since the Apostle Paul. That may be an exaggeration, but I think there is no question about the greatness of Mr. Darby's gifts.

It is said of Mr. Darby that after he left the Church of England, he went out — I believe it was to Ireland — to live a very simple, frugal existence among the rustic country people of that part of the British Isles, preaching to them the gospel of Christ and living very simply on their level.

The story is told that as he was out living and preaching in this way, he was accosted one time by a cultured and well-known infidel of the day who challenged him on the authority and value of the Bible. The conversation is supposed to have gone something like this:

The infidel said, "Darby, you claim that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and all of it is profitable. However, take a verse like the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, 'Bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas when you come — and the books, especially the parchments.'¹³ What possible earthly value can a verse like that have ever had?"

To which Mr. Darby replied, "Ah! Do you know that when I left my ecclesiastical position to come out and live in this very simple way among these folks, it was that very verse that kept me from selling my own theological library. Make no mistake about it," said Mr. Darby, "All Scripture is inspired of God, and all of it is profitable."

Men, as you devote yourself to the study of the Scriptures — not only while you're in seminary, but throughout your life — you will discover that more and more, they will inform your thoughts. More and more, they will guide your decisions. More and more, you will become convinced that they are all you really need to be the man of God wants you to be.

Shall we pray?

Father, we're here in a seminary that is dedicated to the study and teaching of the Word of God. Help us to believe in the sufficiency of Scripture.

¹¹ John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) was a Bible teacher and part of the original Plymouth Brethren movement. He is considered by some to be the founder of modern dispensationalism.

¹² Arno C. Gaebelien (1861-1945) was a prominent Bible teacher and conference speaker who helped popularize modern dispensationalism.

¹³ 2 Timothy 4:13.

Postscript¹⁴

Question:

There was a book written in 1980 called, *Decision Making and the Will of God*, by Garry Friesen.¹⁵ Are you familiar with that?

Zane Hodges:

I am. I think I had a blurb on the cover, at one stage.

Question:

There's been an ongoing debate among a few of us here in the church, about whether there is some kind of a specific will of God for things like *What car should I buy?* or *What school should I go to?* that we need to discover through a process where we have inner prompting and are seeking inner peace, or whether those are things about which we are, as Garry Friesen points out, free to make a decision, as long as it's within the parameters of the Word of God?

Zane Hodges:

I certainly did feel that Garry Friesen's book made a definite contribution to the Church's thinking. As the years have passed, I now wish — and this is not his fault any more than mine — but I now wish that the place of prayer had been emphasized more than it was in the book.

While that doesn't change the general conclusions of the book, it does affect the way in which we reach decisions. This is because when we're praying about things that we need to make decisions about, then what we're asking for, it seems to me, is any wisdom that is available to us through the Word to apply to the decision in hand.

If I just simply barge ahead without any kind of sense of dependence on God and I make big decisions without reference to the Word of God, it would not be surprising if I made enormous mistakes as a result of that. So I feel that the one thing that maybe was lacking in that book was a stress on prayer.

At the same time, I have never felt or bought the idea that God tells me what I should do outside of the Scriptures. I've heard people say, "The Lord told me to do this or that."

They usually say it in a context where I can't grab their arm right away. But I would like to say, "How did God tell you that? Was that a feeling you had? Did you hear a voice? Did you get a revelation? Just exactly how did God tell you that?"

I think we would probably get a variety of answers to that question, none of them particularly Biblical.

When we see God speaking to people in the Bible, we almost always see (I don't know of any exceptions) verbalization to the individual involved of what God

¹⁴ "Postscript" is taken from a question-and-answer session conducted on May 23, 2004, at Coast Bible Church, San Juan Capistrano, California.

¹⁵ Garry Friesen, *Decision Making and the Will of God: A Biblical Alternative to the Traditional View* (Multnomah Book, 1980). Friesen received his Th.M. from Dallas Theological Seminary in 1973.

wants. When Philip goes down to Gaza and sees the chariot of the Ethiopian eunuch, Acts says, "Then the Spirit said... 'Go and overtake that chariot.'"

We are certainly reading into the text if we draw the conclusion that Philip got an impression that he should go and overtake that chariot. He didn't get an impression. He got a direct command from God, just as he had also gotten a direct command from God to go to the desert area in the first place. And when God wanted to remove him, God did that supernaturally.

So there's no evidence there — or anywhere else that I can tell — that somehow or other we have this mystical sense that God is leading me and therefore I make decisions based on it.

That kind of gets us back to the contemplative spirituality movement. You can justify anything if you want to say, "I had a very strong feeling I should do this." Well, maybe you did, but how do you know that feeling came from God?

Now in our circles — I'm talking about Evangelical circles — there has been a strong strain of what we call *pietism*. In pietism, you have that semi-mystical attitude toward our relationship with God. And that's one of the reasons Evangelicals are sometimes vulnerable to the false mystical ideas that are circulating.

But if you already have a feeling that *God leads me by my feelings* or *He gives me some very strong impression that I should do this or do that*, then you are kind of set up for this type of process, but you don't have a Biblical basis for it.

Chapter 6

What Is the Living Water? Water Producing Water¹

One of the disadvantages of being human is that you make mistakes. One of the disadvantages of being a writer is that you put them on paper and send them out for everyone to read.

I want to talk about a mistake I made in writing my first book. Please do not draw the conclusion that I haven't made any in the books that have followed. I'm sure I have. But the one I have in mind involves an important truth that we need to keep in focus.

My first book was *The Hungry Inherit*, published originally by Moody Press,² then by Multnomah Press,³ and finally by Redención Viva.⁴ Only the Redención Viva edition corrected the mistake. *The Hungry Inherit* begins by narrating the Biblical story of the interview between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. It is an extremely familiar story, so I won't repeat its details this morning.

As I point out in the book, Jesus' statement in John 4:10 unlocks the presentation Jesus is about to make. You will recall that Jesus said:

“If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, ‘Give Me a drink,’ you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water.”

This statement is fundamental to the discussion that follows it.

There were two basic facts the woman needed to know. She needed to know (1) the gift of God, and she needed to know (2) who was speaking to her. The exchange in verses 11-15 focuses on the gift of God. Verses 16-26 focus on who He (Jesus) is. Jesus' final words to her in verse 26 are:

“I who speak to you am He” [meaning, of course, *the Christ*].

In interpreting the narrative of John 4, I originally assumed that the words of John 4:10 (“you would have asked Him”) predicted what the woman would do as soon as she knew the two things I have just mentioned. There was just one problem:

¹ Based on the written paper for the message given on March 6, 2007, at the Grace Evangelical Society National Conference.

² Zane C. Hodges, *The Hungry Inherit: Refreshing Insights on Salvation, Discipleship and Rewards* (Chicago, Illinois: The Moody Bible Institute, 1972).

³ Zane C. Hodges, *The Hungry Inherit: Whetting Your Appetite for God* (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1980).

⁴ Zane C. Hodges, *The Hungry Inherit: Winning the Wealth of the World to Come* (Dallas, Texas: Redención Viva, 1997).

When Jesus finishes speaking in verse 26, the woman *doesn't ask for anything*.

At the time I first wrote *The Hungry Inherit*, I compensated for this lack of a request as follows:

Without a word, without a prayer, her heart had asked and He had given, living water.⁵

Neat, don't you think? But, unfortunately, wrong.

I should have known better. How could a carefully constructed passage like this one have failed to present the climax it obviously called for? I correctly concluded (at last!) that I had missed something.

Another factor also played into this final decision. The words of Jesus in John 4:14 state:

“But the water that I shall give him will become in Him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life.”

When looked at carefully, this statement implies that *the water of life* is not exactly equivalent to *eternal life*. Jesus does *not* say, “The water that I shall give him **is** everlasting life.” Instead, what He really says is this:

“The water that I shall give him shall become a **source** of everlasting life” [emphasis added].

After all, that is exactly what a fountain is. More precisely, the Greek word here is *πηγη*, which refers basically to a spring. But a spring is the *source* of water. Furthermore, Jesus says that this spring will “leap up” **into** everlasting life. Clearly, Jesus does not precisely identify the water He gives as *everlasting life*. Instead, He identifies it as the **source** of everlasting life.

The distinction I have just mentioned has certainly not always escaped the commentators. Sometimes, yes, but not always. For example, Raymond Brown, whose two-volume commentary on John⁶ is one of the major technical works on this book, states it precisely: “The living water is not eternal life but leads to it (vs. 14).” Brown goes on to point out that many suggestions have been made about the meaning of *living water*, but then he adds this:

Within the scope of Johannine theology there are really two possibilities: living water means the revelation which Jesus gives to men, or it means the Spirit which Jesus gives to men.⁷

⁵ Zane C. Hodges, *The Hungry Inherit: Whetting Your Appetite for God* (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1980), chapter 1; Zane C. Hodges, *The Hungry Inherit: Winning the Wealth of the World to Come* (Corinth, Texas: Grace Evangelical Society, 2016), Kindle edition, 164.

⁶ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (i–xii) (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), and *The Gospel According to John* (xiii–xxi) (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970).

⁷ Brown, 1:178

Brown does not think it necessary to choose between these two options. I would say, however, that we have to reject the second categorically, and we have to revise the first.

The second of these options is wrong in the light of John 7:39. In that text, we learn that the Spirit was not given until Jesus was glorified. This means, of course, that He was not given until Pentecost. Therefore, Jesus could not be offering the woman the gift of the Spirit. Whatever He is offering, He is offering it right now. As 4:10 states, “you would have asked . . . and He would have given.” The woman understood that fact, even if not the real nature of the gift, when she says (verse 15):

“Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw.”

The first option, however, is very close to the solution I want to give you. It is not quite right, because Brown has not paid close enough attention to the design of the discourse. The question is: What could Jesus give the Samaritan woman that would, in fact, produce everlasting life?

The answer is surprisingly easy. He could give her the fundamental truth that He, Himself was the Christ. Does this truth **produce** everlasting life? You bet! Listen again to the famous words of John 20:31:

But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.

The basic truth presented by the Gospel of John — that Jesus is the Christ — was precisely what this woman needed to hear. To believe it was to “have life in His name.” Thus, this truth itself was the *source* of everlasting life.

The entire interview climaxes, therefore, with Jesus’ *giving her* this truth. In fact, in a very real sense, she asks for it. Notice the climactic verses of our passage. The woman hears Jesus describe her immoral life marked by marriage after marriage. This leads to a new perception, which she states in verse 19:

“Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet.”

He *was* a prophet, of course, but that was not enough. This identification made Him only one of many. But the woman is uncomfortable with His unexpected knowledge of her life, so she throws out that good old diversion — a religious debate: Jerusalem versus Mt. Gerazim (verse 20)! But Jesus’ response to her question about worship (verses 21-24) is so impressive that a new thought occurs to her. Diplomatically, she replies (verse 25):

“I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When He comes He will tell us all things.”

From a formal grammatical standpoint, this is *not* a question or a request.

From a functional standpoint, it certainly *is*. Later, she will say to the Samaritan men (verse 29):

“Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?”

In short, Jesus’ exposé of her life had Messianic implications for her. Messiah was going to “tell us all things,” and Jesus had told her “all things” about herself. Her statement to Jesus about the Messiah was therefore an indirect, cautious way of asking, “Are you by any chance the Christ? Please tell me!” In other words, it was a request for knowledge of His Person.

Jesus’ answer is simple, direct, and categorical (verse 26):

“I who speak to you am He.”

Did she believe it? Certainly — as the Samaritan men could tell, for later they say to her (verse 42):

“Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we ourselves have heard Him and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world.”

So when Jesus says, “I who speak to you am He,” He was giving her the *living water* that *produces* eternal life. When she received this truth in faith, that water became in her a source of water “springing up” into everlasting life. In short, it was water that produced water!

As a matter of fact, the words *springing up* translate the Greek verb *αλλομαι* (“to leap up”). The word suggests the tremendous resources of the spring from which it came. In the arid Middle East there was a qualitative difference between a spring from which water merely ran forth and one from which it *leaped* forth. This latter type of spring was one whose hidden supply of water was impressive and powerful. Once given an outlet, it surged out of the ground.

This understanding of the climax of the narrative pushes us back to John 4:10. After a closer look, we discover that our Lord’s statement contains an element of ambiguity. Looked at carefully, His words can mean one of two things:

- (1) If you knew. . . you would ask.
- (2) If you had known. . . you would have asked.

The exact time frame for the asking is left ambiguous. Forgive me if I bore you momentarily with a grammar lesson.

It has been claimed that in contrary-to-fact conditions (like the one here), the reference is to present time if both clauses contain an imperfect tense. According to Dana and Mantey, if both contain an aorist or a pluperfect tense, the reference is to

past time.⁸ This rule, however, is of doubtful validity and has been challenged by Zerwick.⁹

The hearer or reader of such statements would probably have had to deduce the time being referred to by the speaker or writer. It is plausible that the woman herself initially heard Jesus' words as referring to what she would do *here and now* if she knew these facts.

On later reflection, however, she could decide that what He really meant was this: She would *already* have asked, if she had possessed this information. In other words, if she *already* had this knowledge, the asking and the giving would *already* have occurred.

That, in fact, was what actually took place. She had asked indirectly if He was the Christ. He had given her the living water — “I am the Christ” — and now she knew the two things He specified. These were (1) the gift of God, which opened the inward fountain of life, and (2) who He was, namely, the Christ. To know the latter was to receive the former.

Let me repeat this:

The possession of the knowledge Jesus wants her to have would mean that the exchange was **already** completed. She would **already** have asked and He would **already** have given the living water.

Let me give you a comparable example in English. I might say to someone:

If you knew how hungry we are, you would have gone to the store, come back and cooked, and we would have eaten and been full.

I mean by this that if this person really knew our hunger, all these things would already have happened.

Jesus' words in John 4:10 are ambiguous, I would contend, about the time frame. I would also contend that Jesus' ambiguity here is deliberate and intentional. In the fourth Gospel, Jesus more than once employs ambiguity as a teaching tool. Some of these instances you will easily recall:

- (1) John 2:19: “**Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.**” Misunderstood as a reference to Herod's Temple.
- (2) John 3:3: “**Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.**” Misunderstood as a reference to physically reborn.

⁸ H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1927, 1955), 109-110.

⁹ Max Zerwick, S.J., *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, trans. Mary Grosvenor (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Istituto Biblico, 1988).

- (3) John 6:53: **“Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you.”**
Misunderstood as eating His physical flesh.
- (4) John 11:11: **“Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake Him up.”**
Misunderstood as ordinary sleep.
- (5) John 11:23: **“Your brother will rise again.”**
Misunderstood as a reference to future resurrection.
- (6) John 13:27: **“What you do, do quickly.”** Misunderstood as asking Judas to buy something or to give alms.

Now listen very closely. Jesus employs ambiguity in John 4:10 as a way of providing later, additional confirmation of His Messianic claim. Before the woman even considered asking Him — even indirectly — whether He was the Messiah, Jesus had predicted that she would! His words mean: “You are going to ask for something, and I am going to give it to you.” And it was only after she had believed in Him that she could realize that she *had* asked for the truth about who He was, and He *had* given her the living water of that truth.

Messiah had already told her about her past (her repeated marriages), but in His first words to her, He had said something about her immediate and eternal future: “You will ask very soon, and I will give you the water that never ceases to flow.”

If the Christ was the One who was going to “tell us all things,” He had surely manifested that ability in His words to this woman — both about her past and about what she was soon to do. Therefore, she had every reason to be sure that His promise of an inner spring leaping up into everlasting life was equally true.

In the process of dealing so skillfully with this sinful lady, Jesus has set before us the awesome power of a simple truth. As even the Samaritan men later confessed, He is the Christ, the Savior of the world. And the salvation He gave, when that truth was believed, was drawn from the measureless reservoir of God’s infinite and unending life.

Since the day Jesus opened a spring for this life in the soul of this woman, He has opened the same kind of spring in the hearts of literally millions upon millions of people. But every time He does this, everlasting life gushes forth and leaps up with all the dynamic energy of the infinite reservoir from which it comes. That reservoir is never drained. It is never depleted. It still remains infinitely and eternally full!

The woman at the well is your prototype and mine if we are believers. The truth that Jesus is the Christ, the Giver of life, has never lost even the smallest scintilla¹⁰ of its immeasurable power. It has worked in you, and it has worked in me.

In fact, the water that produces water continues to perform its amazing miracle in human hearts right up until this very day!

¹⁰ A *scintilla* is a tiny trace.

Can believers have the dead faith in James 2?

What makes faith saving faith?

**Does salvation require a commitment
to obey Jesus?**

**Do I need to be a disciple and repent
for salvation?**

How can I know God's will for my life?

What is the living water offered in John 4?

**If you have ever wondered about these questions,
then this book is for you as Zane Hodges provides
Biblical answers to these questions and more.**

I read the entire book in one night. What a remarkable resource. I was pastor of Jansen Bible Church in 1990 when we invited Zane Hodges to come and speak. He was just excellent! He covered the two main areas of the Christian life, salvation, that is, "What must I do to be saved?" and discipleship, that is, "What should I do now that I am saved?" I would encourage anybody who is interested in these topics to secure a copy of this book. I believe it will be transformational.

Blessings!

~ Paul S. Carpenter President, Sellers Bible Institute



Zane Clark Hodges (1932-2008) taught at Dallas Theological Seminary for 27 years as a Professor of New Testament Greek. He ministered for almost 50 years at Victor Street Bible Chapel, a small inner-city church in Dallas, Texas. Hodges was known for his faithfulness to the text of the Bible through study and prayer. He ministered to many from all walks of life and all ages. For more information on his life and work, visit the Zane Hodges Library at ZaneHodges.org.