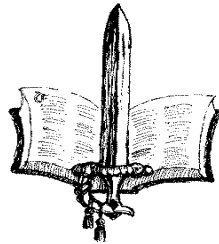


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What is the Relationship Between Right Doctrine and Salvation?

When I was given this question last spring (2002), I couldn't help but wonder if the questioner was seeking some sort of affirmation of his theological and/or doctrinal beliefs. In other words, was he really asking something like, "What does a good Southern Baptist believe?" But having had many discussions with him, I know better than that. His question is not so much about the rightness of this or that theological tradition, rather it concerns the essential beliefs one needs to affirm in order to be saved.

Of course, when we think of the issue from this perspective, we may immediately get sidetracked into debating whether or not we are justified by faith and faith alone, or whether there must be some theological affirmations *before*

justification by faith is possible. I recall an affirmation given us at Asbury College when we were studying theology: "God often saves us *in spite of* our theological beliefs, *not because of them*" (Dennis Kinlaw). While this thought may cause us to reflect for a moment, most of us can humbly affirm that we are saved while at the same time confessing that our theology is not likely 100% accurate. Indeed, I don't know of anyone who claims his or her theological beliefs are 100% accurate, with the exception of a few cultic groups. Further, most evangelicals are not so dogmatic as to insist that others must believe *exactly* as they believe or else they are not saved.

As much as Calvin thought he had an inside track on the Bible's truths, he confessed that he thought only 80% of his theology was correct. Unfortunately, he never mentioned which 20% he had doubts about, nor have his followers. As for those who claim that they have a corner on God's truth and to be saved one must believe exactly what that group believes, here again, this is a basic characteristic of cultic groups, a few fundamentalist sects, but very few evangelicals.

I do not mean to suggest that one can be a Christian and believe anything he wants. No, to qualify as a *Christian* in terms of doctrinal beliefs, there are certain perimeters one must be within, including such things as the deity of Jesus, His physical resurrection and atoning death. There is no Christianity without the cross. However, it is true one can be within the traditional perimeters of orthodox/evangelical

Christianity and yet not be a Christian. I mean by this that mere mental assent or affirmation of certain beliefs does not make one a Christian. Christianity is not just doctrinal beliefs, for the demons Jesus exorcized knew who He was and why He came. Christianity is about a Person and having a relationship with that Person, Jesus Christ.

But if we are saved in spite of our beliefs and not because of them, does this mean that what we believe has no bearing at all on our salvation? Not necessarily. There were many "believers" in the early church who were strongly condemned as heretics and their beliefs, at least the unorthodox ones, were labeled as "heresy." Why was there so much concern about beliefs that were not true? Could a person seeking Christ have his eternal destiny sidetracked by false teaching? Is the believer who falls into deceptive (false) teaching and sinful thinking robbed only of his joy or is something more eternal at stake?

We covered some of this ground in the early 1980s in this newsletter, but perhaps it is time we went back over it again. Christianity, like Judaism before it, has always been intolerant of false gods and false teaching. In his 1984 book Heresies, Harold O. J. Brown explains:

Contrasted with the many religions of personal salvation that vied with one another in the Roman Empire, Christianity made an absolutistic claim: it

worshiped the only true God, it had access to the only true faith. What was most obnoxious to ancient paganism was not the differentness of particular Christian doctrines and views, but the fact that Christianity asserted that it alone was true and that all other religions were false and worse than useless. Christianity finds it very difficult to tolerate religious pluralism, and consequently, a religiously pluralistic society finds it difficult to tolerate Christianity, even though the principle of pluralism is that all diverse opinions ought to be tolerated (Brown, Heresies, Doubleday, 1984, 18).

According to Scripture, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). When the question of the relationship between right belief and salvation is raised, one must also at least mention the question of the destiny of the unevangelized. By this I mean that if it is true that Jesus is the *only* savior for all of mankind and it is not possible to attain salvation apart from explicit knowledge of Him, this means that Jesus is both *ontologically* and *epistemologically* necessary for salvation. In other words, he who would be saved must know *Him* and *know* that he knows Him. This view of the fate of the unevangelized is known as exclusivism or the restrictivist view.

A second view held by some evangelicals is inclusivism. This approach to the fate of the unevangelized basically agrees that Jesus is the only savior for mankind, *but* that it is *possible* to attain salvation apart from explicit knowledge (apart from hearing the gospel or special revelation) of Jesus. According to this view, it is possible for a person to be saved by expressing faith in God based on the general knowledge of God that is available to everyone (general revelation). In this case, Jesus is ontologically, but not epistemologically, necessary for salvation. In other words, people must know Him, but their relationship is such that they do not know that they know Him.

For most of the world's religions, the crucial test is right conduct or right observance. However, for Christians, it is right faith based on right doctrines. But which doctrines are we talking about? Is it only a few, such as the Trinity, the deity of Jesus Christ, His atoning death on the cross, and His physical resurrection? Or, are we talking about doctrinal precision down to doctrines like baptism, and past that to a specific mode of baptism? Is belief in the full inerrancy of Scripture important to salvation? What about the ordination of women as pastors, belief in a universal flood, and holding to the idea of a secret rapture? Again, Harold O. J. Brown observes:

Christianity is full of specific doctrines. While some

seem evidently to be far more important than others, Christians have long been reluctant to admit that any of them are trivial. This is due in part to the conviction that all doctrine derives from God's infallible revelation. If it is not divinely revealed, it ought not to be doctrine at all; if it is divinely revealed, it can hardly be called trivial (Brown, 19).

Some readers know that I have been working on a study entitled *Doctrine in the Early Church*. This particular study focuses upon several basic Christian doctrines (Trinity, the person and work of Christ, sin, grace and salvation) and how the early church came to articulate and develop these teachings through to the time of Augustine in the 5th century A.D. Of course, not only was there considerable growth in the church's understanding of such things as the person and work of Christ up until A.D. 600, there has also been considerable development since that time. One of the noteworthy concepts about the development of doctrine in the early church is that it often came in response to heresy. It was not, mind you, that orthodoxy came about in response to heresy. Rather, orthodox belief was present from the beginning, but in light of early heresies or misunderstandings of orthodox doctrine, the church fathers found they had to state more precisely what the Bible taught and the church believed. This response resulted in a number of ecumenical

councils and creeds.

While it is true that many believers today don't understand the prominent role these creeds played in the daily worship and life of the early Christians, the fact remains that *the early church believed that it was absolutely vital to know and accept some very specific statements about the nature and attributes of God and His Son Jesus Christ.* Indeed, it was so important that all Christians were required to repeat the creeds frequently and to commit them to memory. The fact that today we can raise a question about the relationship between right doctrine and right belief is indicative of the fact that there is a modern dichotomy between viewing faith as trust and viewing faith as acceptance of specific doctrines, with our bias leaning strongly in favor of faith as "trust" (in a Person) without the need for "right" doctrines. However, this modern stance would have been totally incomprehensible to believers in the early centuries of the church. Indeed, they were able to *trust* Christ in the midst of terrible persecution precisely because they were persuaded that certain, very specific, things *about* Christ are true. Today, however, some of these beliefs - such as the Nicene doctrine of the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father (adopted in A.D. 325) - may, to us, appear rather complex and mysterious. Even so, this fact should not prevent us from seeing how important such a belief was to saving faith as the early church understood it.

Part of our problem today is that even modern evangelicalism is rather pluralistic in the sense that, as we have noted in a past issue, there is no agreement on which doctrinal beliefs are primary and which are secondary. For example, although most evangelicals would agree the early church placed an emphasis on baptism, there is little agreement past this point in terms of who should be baptized, how it should be done, and the significance of baptism. I have a friend who won't talk about baptism in mixed (denominational) groups because he knows that no one is going to settle the baptism debate this side of heaven.

Thus, on the one hand, evangelicals in mainline, pluralistic denominations seem to have no problem in affirming either a plurality of beliefs or the unimportance of certain beliefs (i.e., the virgin birth of Jesus; the authority of Scripture); while, on the other hand, evangelicals in more conservative denominations can't agree on what beliefs are essential or primary and which are secondary.

In the midst of the disunity of the modern church, especially among evangelicals, there is yet the widespread understanding that those with whom we disagree on such points as security, baptism, etc. are yet genuine Christians, though there has been in recent years a growing tendency among Reformed theologians to look upon anyone who dares to disagree with Calvin on any point as a heretic. Even so, the fact remains that in the Christian faith, since its inception,

faith and doctrinal beliefs go together. One cannot exist without the other. Brown writes,

Faith makes a Christian, but doctrine creates the church. . . . Although he may not think of it as "dogma" or refer to it as "doctrine," no one can be a Christian at all unless he accepts the truth of certain fundamental statements we usually call dogmas. Unless a religious community holds certain specific and well-defined teachings, it will gradually dissolve, and in any event cannot be considered a Christian community (Brown, 21-22).

Brown goes on to affirm, as we have noted here, that even within the larger Christian fellowship there is considerable disagreement concerning which doctrines are essential (and *must* be believed) and which are secondary. But he then states:

A certain level of disagreement is compatible with Christianity, and indeed has always existed, *but beyond a certain point of disagreement, one can no longer speak of a community of faith.* When the dogma in dispute is so important that it breaks up a community, it is a heresy. Those on our side, who reject it, thus "keep the faith," and are orthodox;

the others are heretics (Brown, 22, my emphasis).

To expand on what Brown is saying, there are doctrines which are essential and true, doctrines which are non-essential and true, and doctrinal beliefs which are false, regardless of whether they are viewed as essential or non-essential. Brown concludes his chapter entitled "Why Heresies?," with these important words:

...it is important to recognize that the very life of Christianity in general as well as *the salvation of the individual Christian* depends on at least a substantial measure of right doctrine, and where right doctrine exists, contrary views must be heresies (Brown, 22, my emphasis).

Therefore, in answer to the question posed, there is a very important relationship between right doctrine and salvation, so much so that one's belief, intentionally or unintentionally, in false teaching or doctrine, can serve as an obstacle to salvation or cause the believer to fall away from the faith. That false teaching can serve as an obstacle to salvation is readily testified to by several church leaders who were instrumental in taking the Worldwide Church of God from a cult to an evangelical denomination (see J. Michael Feazell's *The Liberation of the Worldwide Church of God*, Zondervan,

2001; J. Thomas Lapacka's Out of the Shadows, Concordia, 2001; Larry Nichols' and George Mather's Discovering the Plain Truth, InterVarsity, 1998; and Joseph Tkach's Transformed by Truth, Multnomah, 1997). The truth concerning Christ has now set them free. We can affirm that false teaching can prevent people from knowing Christ and cause believers to fall away from the faith by simply looking at the teaching and experience of the early church which repeatedly had to deal with heretics and heretical beliefs. At various ecumenical councils they declared those who endorsed such heretical beliefs as non-Christians, that is, not part of the true church.

This raises the question as to whether a person can belong to a non-Christian cult or a group whose beliefs are on the fringes of orthodox Christianity and yet be a true believer? Historically, the answer is no, not if they affirm false teaching. This perspective may seem harsh to modern ears, perhaps because we live in an age when both clergy and laity are often heard to say, "Of course, I'm no theologian." Such a statement often implies that serious thinking about Christian theology and doctrine and the attempt to rightly express them in an ordered form are altogether distinct from real Christianity (and real faith), which is about practical concerns such as our personal walk with the Lord, sharing the gospel with unbelievers, and so on. I have often noted in Bible studies and in preaching that "theology" in many of our churches is a negative word. In fact, whenever I am called

upon to teach an introductory course on theology and/or doctrine I must deal with the popular idea that the serious study of theology and doctrine is something which need not bother ordinary Christians, and indeed, may even hinder their Christian walk if they go into it too deeply. After a theological study in a large Baptist church a middle-aged lady commented to me, "I would hate to know what you know," her meaning being that "simple faith" is the best kind of faith, that Christians don't need to think too much about their faith.

But this has not been the historic position of the church. For example, Bruce Milne comments in the introduction of his popular book, Know the Truth:

This prevalent anti-doctrine spirit is a major departure from the Christian instincts of earlier ages and its roots go deep into contemporary western culture. In the face of the tremendous challenges and opportunities facing the church today this dismissal of doctrine is, in my judgment, nothing short of a recipe for disaster (Milne, Know the Truth: A Handbook of Christian Belief, rev. ed., InterVarsity, 1998, 17).

But doesn't this mean that right doctrine can save us? No. As we have noted, right doctrine in itself is not enough to save us. In the New Testament even the demons Jesus

cast out knew who He was and, apparently, had no question about His divinity and mission. But they did not believe. So why is right doctrine important? Again, because *it is impossible to separate Christ from the truths which Scripture reveals concerning Him.* The person who believes false teaching about God, Christ, and/or the Holy Spirit does not believe in the God, Christ, and Holy Spirit of the Bible, for there is no other God, no other Christ, and no other Holy Spirit than those who are known through the truths and doctrines of the whole Bible. God comes to us clothed in His word. The believer's loyalty and commitment to Christ inevitably involves commitment to the truths about Him, *and conversely, carelessness or indifference concerning those biblical doctrines can not only betray a form of disloyalty to Him and unconcern for His honor, they can prevent us from knowing Him and, despite our evangelistic and missionary zeal, prevent us from introducing others to the real Christ, the Christ of the Bible.*

Evangelicalism and the Stone-Campbell Movement

In 2002 several long-awaited books on or related to the Stone-Campbell or Restoration Movement were published. One of the most important was William Baker's (editor) Evangelicalism and the Stone-Campbell Movement (InterVarsity). The

foreword was written by Christian historian Mark Noll (Wheaton College) and contributors to the volume include Everett Ferguson (Abilene Christian University), Jack Cottrell (Cincinnati Bible Seminary), Craig Blomberg (Denver Seminary), John Mark Hicks (Lipscomb University), Robert Kurka (Lincoln Christian College and Seminary) and Stanley Grenz (Carey Theological College and Regent College).

The purpose of the book is, in large part, to make available the discussions and dialogue of the Stone-Campbell Study Group at the annual meetings of the Evangelical Theological Society from 1996 to 2000, giving the reader access to the latest thinking within and about the Stone-Campbell Movement.

As Baker observes in his introduction to the book, most evangelicals are aware that the largest church in America is Willow Creek Community Church where Bill Hybels is the senior pastor. However, most evangelicals are not aware that the country's second largest church is the 20,000 member Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, Kentucky where Bob Russell serves as senior minister. In the eyes of its own church members, as well as those familiar with the church in the Louisville area, Southeast Christian, as Baker says, "is simply a very appealing evangelical church. They are likely unaware of and unconcerned about Southeast's unswerving commitment to the principles of the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement. Much the same could be said for Oak Hills

Church of Christ in San Antonio, Texas, where Max Lucado is the senior minister.

Those familiar with Southeast Christian and other Stone-Campbell related churches have no question in their minds that these churches and their members are solidly evangelical - and they are - simply because of their commitment to and emphasis upon the Bible and evangelism. As do the vast majority of conservative evangelicals, most Stone-Campbell-rooted church members are avid listeners of James Dobson's "Focus on the Family," drawn to the preaching of Billy Graham and attendance at Graham's "The Cove" near Asheville, North Carolina, as well as voracious readers of evangelical books and magazines. The latter is evidenced by the fact that quite a (surprising?) variety of evangelical books are reviewed in the pages of the *Stone-Campbell Journal*.

However, many of those within the Stone-Campbell or Restoration Movement, as well as most people outside of the movement, are largely unaware of the movement's history and distinctive teaching concerning key evangelical issues. If widely read, this book will correct that problem.

A graduate of Lincoln Christian College, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and the University of Aberdeen, William Baker clearly points out in his introduction that one of the major "sticking points" between evangelicals outside the movement and those within the Restoration Movement is baptism in relationship to conversion. This is not surprising, since

baptism in general is a topic of debate within evangelicalism. For example, in Acts 22:16 we read, "And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name" (RSV). While there is no doubt that baptism and the washing away of sins are related in this verse, is there a cause and effect relationship between the two? In his response to John Weatherly, H. Wayne House argues that two distinct ideas are presented in the text, each with an imperative verb and modifying participle. In other words, there is no cause and effect relationship according to House. "The washing away of sins (a figure of spiritual cleansing) comes from the confession rather than the baptism, but the confession takes place at the baptism" (House, 189).

The vast majority of evangelicals will not appreciate such theological dialogue, nor are they likely in any position to evaluate it since much of modern evangelicalism has little use for theology, much less theological dialogue. But there is little question that in evaluating and thinking through one's theological beliefs, this kind of dialogue is very helpful, if not essential. As editor, Baker has included study questions for each chapter at the end of the book for those who use it as a student text. The book's major shortcoming is that it is not indexed. Even so, this is the kind of material church members need to be reading on a routine basis.