

The Gospel of Jesus Christ: By Grace Through Faith

David S. Dockery
President

Union University
1050 Union University Drive
Jackson, TN 38305

If anything has disappeared from modern thought, it is the belief in an eternal heaven and an everlasting hell. Even those who retain some vague idea of heavenly bliss beyond this life are slow to acknowledge the reality of final judgment and condemnation. Modern men and women live with the mind-set that there is no heaven, no hell, and therefore no guilt.

Today it seems obvious that we face major challenges to believing and understanding the gospel of Jesus Christ. On the one hand, much confusion exists concerning the gospel on the part of unbelieving modern men and women. On the other hand, the believing church has confused the truthfulness of the gospel with effectiveness regarding evangelistic methodologies.

One of the common mistakes in our time is to think of evangelism more in terms of a method than a message. Such is the case with some revivalists or evangelists who have suggested that evangelism can only take place when the “right words” are uttered or the “right prayer” is prayed by the professing respondent. Recently, this thinking has been taken so far as to suggest that evangelism can only take place when the “right music” is played or the right kind of “invitation” given. What has been lost, or at least misplaced, is the recognition that at the heart of genuine evangelism must be a firm theological foundation. Evangelism is the proclamation of the good news in words, as well as the manifestation of this good news in deeds, with the purpose of reconciling men and women to God.

Not only are unbelievers confused about the truthfulness of the gospel, and not only has the church confused truthfulness with methodological effectiveness, but believers have also become sidetracked by secondary and tertiary matters found in the theological systems of Calvinism and Arminianism. In order to help us refocus on primary and essential matters, we will seek to explore the basic themes that help us understand the biblical and theological aspects of the gospel message. Prayerfully, this effort can help unify and strengthen the church, help us proclaim faithfully the good news of the gospel, and advance the cause of Christ. Please join me in thinking about: 1) God as creator and the place of men and women in God's creation; 2) the fall of humanity into sin; 3) God's provision in Jesus Christ; 4) God's salvation of men and women from their estranged, guilty, and dreadful plight; and 5) God's ultimate work of redemption.

Men and Women in God's Creation

Men and women are the highest forms of God's earthly creation. All other aspects of creation are for the purpose of serving men and women; men and women are created to serve God and are thus created with what has been referred to as a "vacuum that only God himself can fill." I sometimes hear people say I've been a Christian all my life, which generally means they really do not understand what it means to have a true relationship with God through Jesus Christ. They may have believed in the existence of God for as long as they can remember. They may have attended church for as long as they can recall. But we need to look more closely at what the Bible says about the human race and their relationship, or lack thereof, with the creator God.

The Position and Nature of Men and Women

Men and women are complex creatures of God composed of not only a physical body but also an immaterial self, called a *soul* or *spirit*. In the present life men and women function as

whole persons, though it is a type of conditional unity because the material and immaterial aspects interact upon each other in such intricate ways that they are not easily distinguished. Yet as has been expounded by many others in the history of the church, the characteristics of the immaterial (soul/spirit) cannot be attributed only to the physical. The material and immaterial aspects remain distinct but not separated until death, closely related and interacting with each other. Humans were a unity at creation and will again be a complete unity at glorification, but during the present time we can affirm a type of conditional unity brought about by the entrance and effects of sin. The primary reason for focusing on the importance of men and women in creation, over against the rest of God's creation, is related to their creation in God's image (Gen. 1:26-27).

The Image of God

God has created us in His image and likeness. At first this might appear to refer to our physical makeup—that we *look* like God. That is not what the Bible means by the terms “image and likeness of God.” Men and women, because they are created in the image of God, have rationality, morality, spirituality, and personality. They can relate to God and other humans while rightly exercising dominion over the earth and the animals (Gen. 1:26-28; Ps. 8).

Nothing in us or about us is separable, distinct, or discoverable as the divine image. Each person individually and the entire race corporately are the image of God. But no single aspect of human nature or behavior or thought pattern can be isolated as the image of God.

Male and Female

In creation there is a complete equality between men and women; neither gender is given prominence over the other. Again this is related to the fact that male and female are both created in God's image. Also “in Christ” in our redeemed state there is neither male nor female (Gal.

3:28). We cannot, however, bypass the teaching that a distinction between the roles or functions carried out by men and women is addressed in Genesis 2:18-25.

Sin and the Fall

Even though men and women are created in God's image, the entrance of sin into the world has had great and negative influences upon God's creation, especially humans, created in God's image. As a result of sin, the image of God was not lost (Gen. 9:6; James 3:9) but was severely tarnished and marred. The role of exercising dominion (Gen. 1:28) has been drastically disturbed by the effects of sin on humans and the curse on nature. The ability to live in right relationship with God, with others, with nature, and with our very own selves has been corrupted. All attempts at righteousness are as filthy rags in God's sight (Isa. 64:6), and humans are ultimately spiritually dead and alienated from God (Eph. 2:1-3). Therefore we are unable to reflect properly the divine image and likeness (Rom. 1:18-32).

Spiritual Death

It is necessary to see that the sin of Adam and Eve (Gen. 3) was not just a moral lapse but a deliberate turning away from God and rejection of Him. The day that they disobeyed God, they died spiritually, which ultimately brought physical death (Gen. 2:17). Spiritual death points to the state of alienation and separation from God as a result of sin.

Physical Death

Physical death is separation of the material aspect of the human from the immaterial, as well as separation from the human community. Both spiritual and physical death are the result of sin. All die because all have sinned (see Rom. 3:23; 6:23). This is clearly the message of both the Old and New Testaments:

Now behold, today I am going the way of all the earth (Josh. 23:14).

For the living know they will die (Eccl. 9:5).

The soul who sins will die (Ezek. 18:4).

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned (Rom. 5:12).

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 6:23).

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins...even when we were dead in our transgressions (Eph. 2:1,5).

And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment (Heb. 9:27).

Men and women were created with the possibility of obeying God and never dying. However, after sin's entrance, death became a universal, physical, and spiritual necessity. God takes no pleasure in death; yet even physical death may be the result of spiritual causes and divine displeasure (see Ps. 55:23). Death is so pervasive that the New Testament points to death as a realm where the devil reigns (see Heb. 2:14; Rev. 1:18; 20:13), as a ruler (see Rom. 5:14, 17) and as an enemy or a destructive warrior (see 1 Cor. 15:26; Rev. 20:14).

Alienation and Separation

Spiritual death is alienation from the life of God's Spirit, as well as from the love and holiness which that Spirit offers. The relationship of sin to death is seen in the law of Moses. Here we find the phrase "shall be cut off" (Lev. 18:29), which means that although the nation went on living, the offender was separated from it by death. The Old Testament warned that to disobey God's commandments would break fellowship with God and bring death (see Jer. 21:8; Ezek. 18:21-32). Genesis 2:16-17 is the Bible's first reference to death. This passage clearly teaches the connection between sin and death:

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die."

Death was threatened by God as the penalty for eating from the forbidden tree. The Hebrew expression underscores the intensity of the words, for it literally means "you shall certainly die." What is meant by the phrase, "In the day that you eat from it"? Did these words mean that Adam would die within 24 hours of the time he ate the forbidden fruit? We know that Adam and Eve did not experience physical death on the day they ate the forbidden fruit.

Whatever else Genesis 2:17 means, it certainly teaches us that physical death in the human world is the result of human sin. Though we do not know for sure what Adam's body was like before he fell into sin, we are prevented by this passage from assuming that he would have died physically whether he had sinned or not (see also similar expressions in 1 Kgs. 2:37; Ex. 10:28).

According to Scripture the deepest meaning of life is fellowship with God. The deepest meaning of death, therefore, is separation from God. Death as threatened in Genesis 2:17 points to the disruption of human fellowship with God. Because of Adam's sin, every human being is now by nature in a state of spiritual death (see Eph. 2:1-2). Thus when Adam and Eve sinned, they passed into a new state—one dominated by, and at the same time symbolized by, death. Spiritual death and physical death involve each other; while they can be differentiated they cannot be separated. Therefore we can say that after Adam and Eve sinned, they died immediately in the spiritual sense and became subject to separation from God's loving presence. At that time the door opened for all humans to enter a state in which bodily death was inevitable (see Rom. 5:12-19).

When Adam and Eve sinned, death entered the world. Each person who has ever lived, apart from Jesus Christ, has been impacted by sin and followed in Adam's footsteps (see Rom. 3:23; 5:12), bringing death for all as the necessary result. So death is not merely something that happens to people at the conclusion of life; it is the definition and description of life apart from fellowship with God.

Without Hope

Spiritual death is expressed in several ways, including active antagonism toward God and rejecting His manifestation through His creation (see Rom. 1:18-32). Thus instead of loving God, people fear Him. Instead of seeking forgiveness, humans seek to minimize or rationalize their guilt. Instead of seeking to please God, men and women seek to please themselves. Consequently, those who reject God's offer of grace in Jesus Christ are cast "outside" into the darkness for all eternity (see Matt. 22:13). There is no hope for a person apart from God's gift of life. Otherwise they are under divine condemnation and excluded from relationship with God for all eternity (see Matt. 22:13). There is no hope for a person apart from God's gift of life. Otherwise they are under divine condemnation and excluded from relationship with God for all eternity (see Rom. 5:16-21).

In Titus 3, Paul portrays humans apart from Christ as foolish and disobedient; that is they are mentally and morally depraved. Beyond that he claims that humans are disobedient and enslaved to all kinds of passions and pleasures. We need salvation because we are in a desperate condition without Christ (Titus 3:3-4).

Sinful Nature

The consequences of sin are many as we have seen. One ongoing consequence is that sin's entrance has brought about a sinful nature in all humanity. Therefore men and women are

not simply sinners because they sin, but they sin because they are sinners. People thus act in accord with their natures.

The idea is most significant when reflecting upon our relationship to God. Because of the entrance of sin into the world and our inheritance of Adam's sinful nature (Rom. 5:12-19), we are by nature hostile to God and estranged from him (Rom. 8:7; Eph. 2:1-3). We have wills that do not obey God, eyes that do not see, and ears that do not hear because spiritually we are dead to God.

While we function as free moral agents with a free will, our decisions and actions are always affected by sin. In day-to-day decisions, we have the ability to make free and rational choices, but these choices are always negatively influenced by our sin nature. In regard to our relationship with God, we do not genuinely repent or turn to God without divine enablement because we are by nature hostile to God.

Depravity

Any proclamation of the Good News must understand the problem of sin. An awareness of the problem of sin helps to clarify frequently misunderstood concepts about the nature of sinful humanity. Our nature is depraved, but this does not mean we are as wicked as we can be. Rather, the idea of depravity refers to the fact that all aspects of our being are negatively impacted by sin. People still can and still do right and good things as viewed by society, but these thoughts and actions, no matter how benevolent, are sinful if not done for the glory of God. We can affirm that people choose to do good, but not the ultimate good which is the goal of pleasing God and seeking His eternal glory. Thus depravity involves our total willful rejection of the will and glory of God.

Gertrude Himmelfarb, a professor at New York University, has written a fascinating book called *One Nation, Two Cultures*. It is a picture of the dominant approaches to life in this country. One culture is largely traditional, conservative, found primarily in the South and Midwest, or if divided along age group lines, this group tends to be older. They read the *Wall Street Journal*, watch Fox News, and enjoy “Seventh Heaven.”

The others are progressive or liberal, found mostly on the east or west coast. They tend to be younger, get their news from the *New York Times* or CNN and see life through programs like “Will and Grace.” The difference between the two is at times stark, but they share a certain similarity. Both are largely deluded by a type of self-salvation.

The first group believes in civic and personal good. They often want to work their way toward some kind of salvation by avoiding certain sins or by doing what is good. For example, they generally are pro-family. They believe sex outside of a covenant heterosexual marriage is wrong. They believe in hard work and oppose stealing, and on and on the list could go. They want to be good or at least think that being good is important. But the reality is that none of us can be good on our own—or at least good enough to earn God’s righteousness. We all miss the mark; we fall short of God’s glory. The possibility of self goodness is a major delusion, and many miss the gospel message because they think they can attain salvation on their own. But the apostle Paul says not on the basis of deeds done in righteousness; that is not the origin of our salvation (Titus 3:5).

The other group, the other culture in Himmelfarb’s description, is less concerned with being good; instead they want to be real or authentic. For them it matters little whether a sexual relationship is carried out in a covenant heterosexual marriage. It matters only that the persons involved, whether a man and a woman, a man and a man, or a woman and a woman, are

authentic. The question is not what is good or right, but what is real, and so this mindset applies to any and all relationships or actions in life.

But this search for authenticity is nothing other than an attempt at self-salvation. Such an approach to “authenticity” comes not from without (God coming to rescue us), but from within—a type of self exploration or self discovery.

The Bible is concerned with both goodness and authenticity. Yet, the message of the New Testament maintains that both are impossible to attain apart from God’s gift to us. The marvelous gift of salvation has its origin not within ourselves, nor in our deeds, nor any kind of self effort, because all of our own efforts are tainted by our sinfulness, our depravity.

We are therefore totally depraved, but we cannot say that we are totally corrupt. Other factors such as environment, emotional makeup, heritage, and of course the continuing effect of our having been created in God’s image, influence the degree of corruption. Yet, all types of immoral actions, whether lying, murder, adultery, seeking after power, homosexuality, pride, or our failure to love one another, are related to our sinfulness, depravity, and alienation from God. The human hearts of all humanity are wicked, corrupt, and deceitful (Jer. 17:9). The degree of wickedness, corruption, and deceitfulness differs from individual to individual and culture to culture, but certainly some are more noble than others (Acts 17:11). Still, all in this world are estranged from God, but the biblical answer is that Jesus Christ has regained what was lost in Adam (Rom. 5:12-21). The grace of God has provided our restoration and brought about a right relationship with God, with one another, with nature, and with ourselves.

God’s Provision in Jesus Christ

The gracious redemption that God provided came in the person of Jesus Christ. When we point to Jesus, we see the whole man Jesus and say that he is God. This man Jesus Christ does

not only live through God and with God, he is himself God. The confession of the Christian Church has maintained Christ as one person having two natures, the one divine and the other human. This is the great mystery of godliness, God manifested in the flesh.

The Humanity of Jesus

Jesus' humanity is taken for granted in the synoptic Gospels, but in other parts of the New Testament it seems as if it might have been called into question or its significance neglected (1 John 1:1-2; 4:2-3). In Mark's gospel there is concentration on the humanity of Jesus as much as in any New Testament book. Matthew and Luke focus on Jesus' birth stories as aspects of his humanity including the temptation accounts. John pictures Jesus as the eternal Word who took on full humanity (John 1:1, 14; 4:6, 7; 11:33-35), a humanity similar to our own which could be seen. While he is a true man, his humanity must be viewed according to his uniqueness. He is a real man, yet sinless and different from other men (Rom. 8:3). His significance is not found through comparison alongside others but by contrasting his perfection with our imperfection (Heb. 2:9, 14-18; 5: 7-8; 10:10). This uniqueness is especially seen in his miraculous birth and sinless life.

The Deity of Jesus

We must approach Jesus as a true man within the context of history, a man who actually said and did certain things. But we will not understand him even in that context until it is recognized that he is also God and that his deity provides meaning for his speech and actions. That was the experience of his disciples and others who encountered him while he was on the earth. As one Swiss theologian commented, "Only when they understood him as this absolute Lord, to whom the full divine sovereignty belongs, did Easter as victory and Good Friday as

saving fact become intelligible. Only when they knew Jesus as the present heavenly Lord did they know themselves to be sharers in the messianic kingdom as men of the new messianic era.”

Paul, in Philippians 2:5-11, affirms that Jesus existed in the form of God from all eternity. This means that he possessed inwardly and demonstrated outwardly the very nature of God himself (Col. 1:15-16; 2:9). Also the opening verse of John’s Gospel is a categorized affirmation of Jesus’ full deity (John 1:1-2; 14:9; 17:5). Likewise, there are pictures of Jesus’ deity in the unique “I AM” statements of John’s gospel (John 6:35; 8:12; 10: 7-9, 11-14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1-5). Particularly do we see this in Jesus’ statement about his eternal existence which comes during the confrontation with the Jews (John 8:58). Finally, we see Jesus receiving the worship of Thomas (John 20:28) in his confession, “My Lord and my God.” These passages, along with others in the New Testament (e.g. Rom. 9:5; Titus 2:13; Heb. 1:1-8) cut across all lesser confessions of Christ’s person, showing that any evangelistic proclamation that would make him merely a great teacher or a great prophet is most inadequate.

It was necessary that Christ should be both God and man. Only as man could Jesus be a redeemer for humanity; and only as a sinless man could he fittingly die for others. Yet it was only as God that his life, ministry, and redeeming death could have infinite value and satisfy the wrath of God, so as to deliver others from it.

Christ has a human nature, but he is not merely a human person. The person of Christ is the God-man, the second person of the Trinity. In the incarnation, Jesus did not change into a human person, nor adopt a human personage. He assumed a human nature in addition to his eternal divine nature. With the assumption of the human nature, he is a divine-human person possessing all the essential qualities of both the human and divine nature. This is a mystery beyond full comprehension. We must also confess that Jesus has both a divine and human

consciousness, as well as a human and divine will, yet clearly a unity of person. It is always the same person, Jesus Christ the Lord.

The Death of Jesus

Jesus Christ's life and death exemplified divine love and exerted an influence for good and sacrifice. But more importantly, Christ's death provided for sinners a sinless substitutionary sacrifice which satisfied divine justice. This incomprehensibly valuable redemption delivered sinners from enslavement, and reconciled and restored sinners from estrangement to full fellowship and inheritance in the household of God. Although there are several models of the cross-work of Christ presented in the Bible, the three most important are the models of atonement, redemption, and reconciliation.

Atonement

The idea of atonement is one of the primary models of the biblical idea of the saving work of Christ (Isa. 53:10; Rom. 3:25; 1 John 2:2; 4:10; Heb. 2:17). This understanding of Christ's work on the cross has reference to the effecting of satisfaction on God (propitiation), while effecting the same satisfaction on the guilt of human sin (expiation). Atonement can only be rightly understood in light of the holiness and justice of God—the severity of the reaction of God's holiness to sin. This concept affirms that God's holiness must be satisfied and the sins of humanity must be removed. Atonement is realized when God takes upon himself, in the person of Jesus, the sinfulness and guilt of humankind, so that his justice might be executed and the sins of men and women forgiven. It is mandatory to underscore this idea by affirming that God is moved to this self-sacrifice by his infinite and eternal love. The basis of our salvation then is totally in God himself and in Christ's work on the cross.

Redemption

The idea of redemption is vitally related to the themes of liberation, deliverance, and ransom. Within this model, there is seen a struggle between the Kingdom of God and the hostile powers enslaving humankind. Redemption is the idea of bringing sinners out of such hostile bondage into authentic freedom (Col. 2:15). As redeemer, Jesus breaks the power of sin and creates a new and obedient heart by delivering us from the power of sin, guilt, death, and Satan, bringing about a people who have been bought with a price (1 Pet. 1:18).

Reconciliation

The idea of reconciliation involves bringing fallen humanity out of alienation into a state of peace and harmony with God. Jesus, as reconciler, heals the separation and brokenness created by sin and restores communion between God and humankind. Reconciliation is not a process by which men and women become ever more acceptable to God, but an act by which we are delivered from estrangement to fellowship with God. Because of Christ's accomplishment on the cross, God has chosen to treat sinful men and women as children rather than transgressors (2 Cor. 5:18-20; Eph. 2:12-16; Col. 1:20-22).

Throughout church history Christian theologians have emphasized some or all of these ideas, including some and rejecting others. It is important to see all of these ideas, as well as the theme of the example he provided for us (1 Pet. 2:21; 1 John 2:6), as necessary. Other religions have a martyr, but Jesus' death was that of a savior. As Christ took our place and died our death, he provided our salvation. By his obedient life, he fulfilled the law for us and by his death on the cross, he satisfied the demands of the law for us. The cross of Christ is the actual execution of justice on God's unrelaxed penalty revealed in the law (Gal. 3:10-13). This means that Christ suffered for our sins (2 Cor 5:21). In Jesus, God's holy love is revealed, his holiness is

completely satisfied, and his love is clearly demonstrated (1 John 4:10). As Martin Luther said, “This is the mystery of the riches of divine grace for sinners, for by a wonderful exchange our sins are not ours but Christ’s and Christ’s righteousness is not Christ’s but ours.” Thus, as P.T. Forsyth has so richly stated, “The work of Christ stands not simply for God’s sorrow over sin but for God’s wrath on sin.” Therefore, we cannot rightfully understand the cross unless we perceive both God’s anguish over sin and his inviolable holiness that refuses to tolerate sin. The Bible teaches that the death of Christ was sufficient for the entire world (1 John 2:2), but only applicable for those who have trusted in Christ alone for forgiveness of sins (1 Tim. 4:10).

The Resurrection and Exaltation of Jesus

The resurrection is the core of the Christian message (1 Cor. 15:3-4) showing that the hope of the gospel is eschatological in nature (Luke 24:45-48; Acts 2:27, 35). The resurrection tells us that the God who raised Jesus from the dead exists. Also, it establishes Jesus’ lordship and deity, as well as guaranteeing the justification of sinners which was accomplished at the cross (Rom. 1:3-4; 4:24-25; 5:9-10). On the other hand, it is a pledge of God’s final judgment for those who reject Christ as Lord and Savior (Acts 17:31).

Following his resurrection, Christ ascended into heaven (Acts 1:9-11) where he is exalted at God’s right hand (Heb. 1:3), a position of great honor. Having sat down, Christ demonstrated that his earthly work was completed. His position at God’s right hand signifies his sharing in God’s rule and dominion and the power and authority to which he is entitled. At God’s right hand, Jesus exercises his priesthood interceding for his own (John 17; Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25). Here he serves as the defense advocate for his church (1 John 2:1) over which he is head (Eph. 1:20-21). From here, he will return to consummate God’s redemptive plan.

Grace Through Faith: The Means of Salvation

The Bible maintains that faith is the means by which we receive and appropriate the salvation purchased for us by the Lord Jesus Christ. Salvation is a free gift of God. It cannot be merited by good behavior (see Rom. 3:22-24).

Grace comes to us while we are still in our sins and brings spiritual transformation based on the accomplished work of Jesus Christ. For the recipients of grace the promise holds that Jesus Christ “delivers us from the wrath to come” (1 Thess. 1:10). “For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5:9). Believers need not fear future condemnation because we have been justified by grace through faith (see Rom. 8:1).

God’s Initiating Grace

Grace declares that salvation is not the culmination of humanity’s quest for God, but that it resides in the initiative of God toward men and women (Eph. 1:4-7). Even our faith by which we receive salvation is a gift of God (Eph. 2:8-9). As a matter of fact, all of life is such (James 1:17). If grace brings us to God, it also enables us to continue and complete our spiritual pilgrimage. This does not deny human involvement in salvation, but it does affirm the primacy of grace. When men and women receive the grace of God, it is a testimony to the impact of grace itself, but when grace is rejected, it is attributable to the hardness and sinfulness of the human heart.

Grace comes to us while we are still in our sins and brings spiritual transformation based on the accomplished work of Jesus Christ. Even the sanctifying work of the Spirit is enacted in those who do not merit or deserve it. In reality, as B. B. Warfield has so aptly summarized, “Grace is God’s free and loving favor to the ill-deserving.”

The degree of divine grace and human involvement has been debated throughout the centuries. There have been classic differences expressed between Augustine and Pelagius, Luther and Erasmus, and the followers of John Calvin and Jacob Arminius. This subject continues to be emotionally debated even in our time. We do not or cannot deny that people on occasion seek and ask for God's grace, but even the asking or seeking is the gift of grace. God does not graciously accept us because he sees our change for the better, as if conversion were the basis for receiving God's grace. Instead, the Bible pictures God coming into our lives, taking us just as we are because he is abundantly merciful (Eph. 2:1-10).

We maintain, with Donald Bloesch, that God is the sole source and mainspring of all gracious and redemptive action, but he is not the sole actor. God is the sole efficient cause of salvation, but not the only casual factor in salvation. There are also secondary and tertiary causes that have to be taken into account. Salvation is of God and is not based on the human response, yet men and women must respond to God's grace. Only persons who receive and are transformed by divine grace can make a favorable response to God's salvific invitation, but only those who do respond are indeed transformed by grace. Thus we affirm the priority of initiating grace while emphasizing our responsibility to believe.

The work of salvation is a work of the great Trinitarian God. Its origin is in God. Its basis is the grace of God in Christ and it comes to us through the work of God's Spirit.

Responding to God's Grace

Far from violating our wills or personalities, God's grace appeals to our deepest yearnings and therefore, when we are exposed to grace, intrinsically we are drawn toward God. As A. W. Tozer has said, "Salvation is from our side a choice, from the divine side it is a seizing upon, an apprehending, a conquest by the Most High God. Our accepting and willing are

reactions rather than actions.” Initiation always remains with God. We affirm that in salvific grace, men and women are not merely passive. Yet, we do not wish to imply that God does some and we do the rest; but rather with Jonathan Edwards we conclude that God does all and we do all. God does not override the will, but releases the will for believing response. Still, the Bible indicates that the convicting grace of God’s Spirit can be rejected (Matt. 23:37; Luke 7:30; Heb. 12:15). Yet, when we receive the gracious gift of regeneration our wills are turned in a completely new direction. When God extends his grace to us, he is the active agent, but he always extends grace through various means. The means of grace include the preached gospel, the written Word of God, the invitation to respond to grace, the prayers of other believers, and the faith of the respondent. Thus we see the imperative of evangelism, the necessity of proclamation and witness, and the need for responding faith.

This discussion leads to the importance of further understanding the meaning of faith. As we noted above, the Bible maintains that faith is the means by which we receive and appropriate salvation. Faith includes a full commitment of the whole person to the Lord Jesus, a commitment that involves knowledge, trust, and obedience. Faith is not merely an intellectual assent or an emotional response, but a complete inward spiritual change confirmed to us by the Holy Spirit. Faith is altogether brought about by God, and it is altogether the human response bringing about complete submission to God and full liberation from the snare of sin.

The object of faith is not so much the teaching about Christ, but Christ himself. Though faith is more than doctrinal assent, it must include adherence to doctrine. In our belief in and commitment to Jesus Christ, we acknowledge him as Savior from sin and Lord of our lives, even Lord of creation (Rom. 10:9). True conversion definitely involves a belief in Christ’s person as

the God-man and in his work as Savior. We must be ever mindful, however, that it is possible to have an orthodox understanding of Christ without a living faith in him (James 2:19).

Conversion and Repentance

God's grace brings about conversion, which signifies our turning to Christ initiated by God. It is a great work of God's power changing the heart and infusing life into our dead spirits. It is very important to recognize that the response to the evangelistic message manifests itself differently in each person who experiences conversion. Not all have a "Damascus road experience" like the Apostle Paul. Some are converted quietly like Lydia (Acts 16:14) and others dramatically like the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:30-34)). But for all it involves a turning away from sin to righteousness and issues both in service to the world and separation, without withdrawal, from it.

The turning away from sin, renouncing sin, and changing our minds about sin and Christ is what we mean by repentance. It is not merely feeling sorry for ourselves, but the forsaking of sin. Repentance is deeper than feeling; it is action. It is a turning right about, and God commands all people everywhere to turn. True conversion does not just stimulate our natural abilities to do better, to "turn over a new leaf;" rather it is the imparting of a new nature. Conversion must be differentiated from reformation of character; it is a radical yet progressive alteration of our very being.

Understanding our Salvation in Christ

Briefly we must mention some of the important biblical themes and metaphors or models that picture our salvation. None of these concepts completely present the full understanding of salvation.

Regeneration

This is the most frequently discussed term within popular Christianity. It is a *spiritual change by which the Holy Spirit imparts divine life*. The idea is familiar in the writings of John, Peter, and Paul and is not without Old Testament precedent. The classic presentation is found in John 3:3-8 (see also 1 Pet. 1:23; Titus 3:5-7). From John 3 comes the popular term “born again” which is better translated as “born from above” whereby God imparts righteousness to us. It is the experiential picture of our entrance into God’s family, whereby adoption refers to our position in this family. Salvation is more than just inward renewal. It includes being justified by God’s grace.

Justification

Justification is predominantly a Pauline concept, though it is found in other biblical writers, especially Luke. Justification is accomplished at the cross of Christ (Rom. 5:10), guaranteed by his resurrection (Rom. 4:24-25), and applied to us when we believe (Rom. 5:1). While regeneration pictures an experiential imparting of righteousness, justification is a declaration of our righteousness. Experientially we still sin, but God views us as totally righteous, clothed in the robes of our Lord Jesus (Rom. 4:1-8). Because of Christ’s sacrifice, God no longer counts our sins against us (2 Cor. 5:19-21). Justification is more than pardon, it is a granting of positive favor in God’s sight (Rom. 3:21-26).

We are not justified to become regenerated, and we are not regenerated to become justified. We must not confuse these two marvelous truths, separate them or comingle them. God never justifies us without regenerating us, and He never regenerates us without justifying us.

Adoption

Adoption, also, is primarily a Pauline picture. It carries the idea of receiving the position of full-grown children of God, adopted into God's family with all the corresponding rights, privileges, and duties (Rom. 8:15; Gal 4:1-5; Eph. 1:5, 14-15). Adoption is not entirely a past event, for the consummation of our adoption awaits the redemption of our bodies (Rom. 8:23), something hoped for as well as something already possessed.

Sanctification

Sanctification involves different aspects of our salvation and is in some sense an umbrella term. The Bible speaks of positional sanctification (1 Cor. 6:11), progressive sanctification (Rom. 6:1-4; 7: 2-5), and ultimate sanctification (1 John 3:1-3). It is a work of the Father (John 17:17), the Son (Gal. 2:20), and primarily of the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:17-18). Yet it is also a work of the believer (Rom. 12:1-2). The Bible does not teach a "letting go and letting God" approach to sanctification; rather, we are to strive after holiness, working out our salvation with fear and trembling. This is accomplished through the Bible's transforming impact on our lives (1 Pet. 2:2), prayer (Col. 4:2), fellowship and worship (Heb. 10:19-25), and our responses to the circumstances of life (Rom. 8:28). By the work of God's Spirit, believers are thus conformed to the image of Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:29) in order to do good works (Eph. 2:10).

Forgiveness

The putting away of sin and its penalty is forgiveness. It includes a gracious forgetting (Eph. 4:32), a sending away of our sins (Matt. 26:28), and a putting aside or disregarding of all sin (Rom. 3:25). The Bible is the only religious book that emphasizes total and complete forgiveness (Heb. 10:17), as pictured in the account of the wayward son (Luke 15:11-32).

Scripture presents the bases of forgiveness as the shedding of blood (Heb. 9:22-26), and the means of our forgiveness as our faith and repentance (Luke 17:3-10).

Union with Christ

The result of the concepts of adoption, forgiveness, and justification is pictured as the believer's new sphere of union with Christ (John 15; Rom. 6:1-11; Eph. 1:3-14). Positionally, our union with Christ presents us in a new position before God. Experientially, the union of believers with God is one of the most tender concepts expressed in Scripture; it is invisible and imperceptible to the senses; it is unfathomable, escaping all inward vision. Yet this marvelous union, which the Bible refers to as a mystery (Col. 1:27-28) cannot be dissected or denied.

Security and Perseverance

God is the author and finisher of our faith (Heb. 12:2). Salvation is from sin, for the world has primarily a need of a sin bearer (John 1:29). This involves disarming believers from the rulers and authorities of this world (Col. 2:14-15). Salvation, which is found only in Christ (John 14:6; Acts 4:12), is imperishable (1 Pet. 1:4), and is the source of all spiritual blessing (Eph. 1:3).

Our salvation is secured in Christ, and nothing can separate us from the love of Christ (Rom. 8:31-39); yet our response to this truth brings our assurance. Eternal security is an objective truth, but our assurance is experiential and subjective. It is based on the work of Christ (Heb. 7:25), the witness of the Spirit (Rom. 8:14-17), and our obedience (1 John 5:11-13). God has promised to keep us from stumbling (Jude 24), having sealed us until the day of redemption (Eph. 4:30). Yet we must not neglect or ignore the many warnings that encourage us to persevere (John 15; Heb. 3, 6, 10) so as not to presume on God's gracious salvation. Thus we

are responsible to persevere and hold on to God, but ultimately our security in Christ comes because he has a hold on us (John 10:27-30).

Ultimate Redemption

The plan of salvation includes not only the redemption of individuals, but also the redemption of all of creation. Creation, which was spoken into existence by God and was defiled by the entrance of sin into the world, will also be included in God's ultimate work of redemption. At that time not only will the Antichrist and Satan be defeated, but also sin, death, and sorrow will be eliminated. Following the final judgment (see Rev. 20:11-15), the fallen creation and all associated with it will be driven from God's presence by His majestic and victorious glory. The old order will pass away; the new order, described as the new heaven and new earth, will come.

All Things New

In many ways the new heaven and the new earth will consummate God's plan to make all things new. Jesus brought new wine (see Matt. 9:17) and enacted the new covenant (see Luke 22:20); 1 Cor. 11:25; Heb. 8:8). The people of God who participate in this new covenant have become a new creation (see 2 Cor. 5:17; Rom. 6:4). The redeemed people of God will sing "a new song" (Rev. 5:9; 14:3) as they look for a "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev. 21:1; see 2 Pet. 3:13) and a "new Jerusalem" (Rev. 21:2).

A crucial distinction between biblical Christianity and all "new age" movements is that Christianity is not preoccupied with protecting Mother Nature. Reverence for nature is not Christian teaching, even though respect for God's creation certainly is. The natural world was made for human beings, not human beings for the natural world. Ecology, or the protection of the human environment, should be important for Christians. But we must remember that this earth awaits ultimate renewal and restoration with the new heaven and new earth.

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). Genesis 1-2 sets out ideals for creation. Yet, sin has not impacted just individuals, it has impacted creation as well. Since the time when humanity was banished from the garden, disarray and disorder have characterized the earth. The New Testament message is that all things have been reconciled to God by the cross of Christ (see Rom. 8:18-25; Col. 1:15-20). Paul claimed in Romans 8 that creation has been subjected to futility through humanity’s sin and will be liberated. The redemption of the earth will be accomplished when God brings about the new heaven and the new earth (see Rev. 21). The crescendo for redemptive history is stated in Revelation 21:5: “Behold, I am making all things new.”

Isaiah 65-66 prophesied that the devastation Israel had observed in its history is not to be considered as God’s ultimate plan for His people. Thus, the old and new creation becomes the key terminal points for God’s work in redemptive history. Peter called his readers to godly living on the basis of God’s redemptive plan for all creation (see 2 Pet. 3:11, 13-14). This ethical call is intrinsic to the New Testament message of the return of Christ and the future (1 John 3:2-3).

The Climax of Human History

It is interesting that the image of the eternal state has redeemed men and women on a restored earth. Human history climaxes where it began—on the earth. This truth is another distinctive of Christian theology, for Christianity is historical at its heart, for in its essential teaching, God has acted decisively in history, revealing Himself in specific events attested in both the Old and New Testaments. Moreover God will act to bring history to its providential destiny and planned conclusion. As Carl F. H. Henry has said so powerfully:

The Bible throughout insists that God the Creator holds mankind eternally accountable for every thought, word and deed, and that each successive generation

moves toward a final future in which the God not only of creation but also of redemption and judgment will consummate human history in the light of his divine offer of salvation.

God who has acted in history in past events is also to act in history to consummate this age. So when we ask, "How will it all end?" We do not suddenly pass out of the realm of history into a never-never land. We pass to that which has not yet occurred but which is nevertheless certain of occurring simply because God is behind it and is Himself the One who tells us it will come to pass.

The picture of the new heaven and new earth in Revelation 21 tell us the sea will be no more. The sea is a symbol of sin and evil. In the new heaven and new earth it is gone. The apostle John set forth the future hope for a redeemed world that transcends this sinful world.

The manner in which the new heaven and new earth come into existence is difficult to discern. The biblical picture is more impressed with the fact and nature of the new order than by how it will come about. Somehow this world order will begin to be redeemed at Christ's return to rule and reign on earth. The earth will be renewed and purged (see 2 Pet. 3:12-13) and then formed into the new heaven and new earth. There is thus a continuity and fulfillment of the purposes God began in the original creation. All that God intended will be brought to completion. There is some analogy between the old earth and its renewal and that of our current bodies and the resurrection of the body at Christ's return. All evil and sin will be purged and the earth will be made new.

The Eternal State

While the Bible teaches eternal damnation for unbelievers (Rev. 20:11-15), the final chapters of Holy Scripture focus on the eternal future for believers. The eternal

climax of redemptive history is seen in the description of the new Jerusalem (see Rev. 21-22). The general image of a future Jerusalem symbolizes the fulfillment of many of God's promises to His people (see Isa. 2:1-5; 49:14-18; 52; 54; 60-62; 65:17-25; Jer. 31:38-40; Mic. 4:1-4; Zech. 14). As is true of Christ's return and other features of His rule and reign, the trustworthiness of Scripture underscores our confidence that these prophecies are indeed true.

Some suggest that the new Jerusalem is an allegorical description of the final state of the church with no real new earth locality in view. Others see it as a literal city that hovers over the earth and houses the glorified church and will be transferred into the eternal state after the renovation of the earth. It is best to see it as a literal city distinctly designed for all the redeemed in the eternal state. The new city emphasizes that the people of God will be a universal community of redeemed individuals living together in love.

While the final two chapters of the Bible present pictures of the beauty of the new heaven and new earth with streets of pure gold and walls of precious stones, the focus is the dwelling of God with His people (see Rev. 21:1-4). God Himself, in all His glory, will take up eternal residence with His people. He will live with them and be their God. This is the essence of heaven; this is our future hope—not streets of gold or elaborate mansions, as wonderful as all that might be.

We see that the ultimate state of the people of God and their reward is presented under diverse metaphors such as the bride (see 21:2,9) and the holy city (21:2). The new Jerusalem, the holy city, is perfectly symmetrical and is constructed of materials of fabulous wealth (see 21:18-21; Isa. 54:11). The city shines with the glory of God (see

21:11). The foundations are named after the apostles, and the gates are named after the twelve tribes of Israel (see 21:12, 14). The water of life flows from the throne of God down the middle of the city. The throne of God and of the Lamb is in the city (see 22:1, 3). All darkness and all tears have been banished (see 21:4; 22:5). The face of the Lord will provide all the light that is needed (see 22:4-5).

The holy city is the focal point of the existence of all the redeemed in the new heaven and the new earth. The most moving element in the new Jerusalem is the missing item. There is no temple, because “God the Almighty, and the Lamb, are its temple” (see 21:22). This final culmination of God’s plan far surpasses any Old Testament expectation. Ultimately, unbroken fellowship with God through the Lamb of God is the central feature of the eternal state.

Thus the salvation we enjoy now is merely a foretaste of what is to come. Those who have received this gift of salvation will worship, serve, and enjoy God forever. This is not just a wish for which we hold out. Ours is a confident hope built on the promise of God the Father, the justifying work of God the Son, and the regenerating work of God the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5-8).

We have seen that we do not receive salvation by good deeds, but the fruit and evidence of genuine salvation in the here and now are good deeds. Though good works are not the basis of salvation, Spirit-enabled good works are the evidence of genuine conversion. This is not a self-righteous moralism, which unfortunately is what those without Christ often think about when they hear believers talking about the gospel message. The reality is that we and they have a limited understanding of our salvation.

We think we have heard it over and over, but the Bible gives us an incredibly comprehensive picture of the trinitarian God working in concert to secure our salvation.

The past aspect of our salvation is seen in our justification and regeneration. The present aspect of our salvation is seen in the Spirit's renewing work enabling us to live an authentic life, characterized by good works. The future aspect of our salvation is the inheritance of eternal life that will one day be given to all who are trusting in Jesus Christ alone for salvation.

Once we have seen and grasped and embraced this full comprehensive character of the Gospel we will never again be guilty of trivializing it, sneering at it, or misrepresenting this glorious good news in word or deed. We will not be satisfied with a truncated, minimalist, reductionist account of the message of salvation. When we understand our desperate need of salvation, its basis, where it originates, how we receive it, what is its goal, and the evidences for it today we will seek to share this message in an understandable and winsome way, so that others too may become heirs of the hope of eternal life.

Conclusion

We hope that it has become apparent that a firm theological foundation is important for faithful evangelistic proclamation. Pastors, theologians, evangelists, and lay people must work harder at closing the gap between theology and the work of evangelism so that our theology is done for the church and our proclamation is grounded in biblical theology. Our evangelistic message need not include every aspect of our discussion, but a faithful messenger of the gospel must ground the message firmly in a biblical and theological foundation.

In summary, we affirm that our evangelistic proclamation is shared by the truth that God has created men and women in his image. Humans have sinned and are separated and alienated from God without any hope apart from salvific grace. In grace, God takes the initiative in bringing sinners to Christ through the proclamation of the gospel message and the human response of faith. As a result of God's grace, believers experience salvation from sin which involves conversion to God. All of salvation is of God, yet recipients of this salvation *must* respond in faith and commitment. The Bible expresses these truths in various ways, but underscores throughout that God is the author and finisher of our salvation.

By faith we confess and affirm that Jesus Christ, as the God-man, has fully revealed God to men and women. Having lived a sinless life, Christ died in our place for our sins. He now sits exalted at God's right hand, a position of honor and exaltation, exercising his rule and dominion. We gladly acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord, our prophet, priest, and king who has completely revealed God, reconciled men and women to God, and who now sits enthroned as ruler of God's kingdom and head of his Church. In him we place our trust and hope, offering our thanksgiving, praise, and worship for the gift of salvation he has provided for us by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9).

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