

Critical Issues Commentary

A Biblically based commentary on current issues that impact you
Issue #44 January/February 1998

Sanctification and Discipleship: Christian Options? by Bob DeWaay

“But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus, in order that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast.” (Ephesians 2:4-9)

“[God] who has saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity.” (2Timothy 1:9)

“He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit.” (Titus 3:5)

One of our readers submitted an interesting question which can be summarized this way: “Is there not a difference between salvation and discipleship; and is not any equating of the two a subtle inclusion of human works into the salvation equation?” The reader also pointed out that salvation is a free gift, but Jesus instructed us to “count the cost” (Luke 14:28). It seems acceptable to suppose therefore that discipleship is a secondary, perhaps optional, matter which is to be pressed upon Christians later.

The question is a good one, and the

answers will help us to understand better some essential matters of the Christian faith. We will examine the following issues as they relate to salvation: the necessary conditions for receiving salvation; the cost of salvation; calls to service, obedience, discipleship, sanctification; and the Lordship of Christ. Some readers of this commentary may already be aware of the “lordship salvation” controversy, but the issues are important enough to warrant further Biblical research.

What are the Necessary and Sufficient Conditions for Salvation?

When we speak of “conditions,” right away many will think that this is to teach salvation by works. Are there any necessary conditions that apply to receiving a free gift? If not, then we are teaching universalism (that everyone is or will be saved). Logically, if there are no conditions other than being a human being, then everyone is saved. No evangelical wants to make this claim, therefore all who believe the gospel acknowledge some necessary conditions for salvation. When the question was asked, “What must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30, Acts 2:37) the apostles never answered “nothing.” At the least, one must “believe upon the Lord Jesus,” which clearly is a condition. The New Testament does not consider believing the gospel to be a meritorious work that earns one’s salvation.

There are other aspects of receiving the gospel that are mentioned in various passages. One is the need to repent. For example, when Peter was preaching the gospel to his fellow Jews, he declared, “Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord” (Acts 3:19). Is the call to repentance part and parcel of the gospel message or is it optional, reserved only for some Christians who choose to have a higher order Christian

experience? Peter commanded repentance in Acts 2:38 in response to a direct question about what those who were convicted by his message ought to do.

In another passage, Paul claims that one must confess Jesus as Lord to be saved, “[T]hat if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved; for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation” (Romans 10:9,10). Is requiring this confession “salvation by works?” I do not think so. When I first heard that some were teaching that one could be saved without Jesus being Lord, I immediately wondered what they would do with this passage. Surely we are not saved by confessing something that is not true and by agreeing to a relationship (Jesus as Lord) that, in actuality, we want no part of. Perhaps some people confessed Christ as Lord with their fingers crossed behind their backs. Is this faith?

Jesus is Lord by His eternal nature and by right of having demonstrated this truth by His own resurrection from the dead. Believing this is more than agreeing that certain facts are true, but involves putting one’s hope and trust in the finished work of Christ. It is much more than mental assent that the basic historical facts about Jesus are true. For the born again Christian, confessing the Lordship of Christ is an act of adoration and worship, as well as submission. We have been rescued from our futile lives of living for self and trusting self and now live for Christ, placing our hope and trust in Him. Confessing Christ’s Lordship only happens as a response of faith to hearing the gospel (Romans 10:11-14) and no Christian ought to think or claim that this God-given faith response is a meritorious work that earns salvation. But neither should we think that a merely idle confession, of lip service only, is evidence that we are saved. “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21).

The key is that we have a vital relationship with our Lord, through faith.

This is only true for the regenerate. This relationship is a gift of God's grace that is powerfully at work in one's life to make him or her "God's workmanship" (see **Ephesians 2:8-10**). All who are in this saving relationship have repented in the sense of having turned away from putting hope and trust in self and the world and placed their hope in Christ alone.

The Cause of Salvation and the Resulting Conditions

No evangelical Christian would want to assert that Christians cause their own salvation. That would be tantamount to denying that salvation is a gift of God and a work of God. However, we need to understand the distinction between the cause of salvation and the resulting effects brought to pass in the individual. When God saves us, He also transforms us. The **only** payment for sins that will ever suffice is the blood of Christ, which includes His laid down life on the cross as a substitutionary atonement for our sins. The wages of sin is death, a price that if paid by a sinner, would result in eternal damnation. But the sinless Son of God died for us: "*For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit*" (**1Peter 3:18**). We cannot cause our own salvation, we can only receive it as a gift of God's grace. **Ephesians 2:4** quoted at the beginning of this article shows that we were dead, and that God made us alive. Corpses cannot resuscitate themselves.

Grace that saves and faith that saves are gifts from God. When **Ephesians 2:8** says that "*by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God*" it is not asserting that grace was a gift and faith was a meritorious work that we did. The whole of it, grace and faith is not of ourselves and is a gift of God. In his book *Faith Works*, John MacArthur explains this:

Human effort cannot bring salvation. We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. When we relinquish all hope except faith in Christ and His finished work on our behalf, we are acting by the faith that God in His grace sup-

plies. Believing is therefore the first act of an awakened spiritual corpse; it is the new man drawing his first breath.¹

God alone is the cause of salvation. He uses the agency of the gospel message which is to be preached to all nations. The preached gospel is to include the facts about Christ's atoning work, including His resurrection, and a call to repent and believe.

God uses this call to draw His elect to Himself. Some will mock and ridicule this message, but those who are being saved will respond as the Holy Spirit convicts them and draws them to the Lord. Paul wrote: "*For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God*" (**1Corinthians 1:18**). If we start to think pridefully that we merited this salvation or received it because of some activity of our own that made us acceptable to God, think again: "*But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, that, just as it is written, 'Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord'*" (**1Corinthians 1:30,31**). Notice that the apostle includes many aspects or conditions that are true of those who are saved, "wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption" as part of what Christ has become to us. Clearly all that is provided us in Christ is God's gracious provision for all Christians. Matters such as sanctification are not left as dealer installed options for those who decide to pay a higher price than the merely "saved."

It is important always to maintain this distinction: God's activity in Christ through the gospel is the cause of salvation, the resulting condition of being is many faceted. Those who are saved have been regenerated. One cannot be a true Christian without being born again by the Holy Spirit (see **Titus 3:5** quoted at the beginning of this article as well as **John 3:3,7**). Also notice that **1Peter 1:3** says that God is the cause of this: "*Blessed be the God and Father of*

our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."

The saved are those who have died to this world and come alive to Christ, through the cross. The question about counting the cost of discipleship came in connection with Christ's call for taking up one's cross: "*Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.*" (**Luke 14:27**). The cross is an instrument of death. Those who are in Christ have died to the world and come alive through His resurrection power to newness of life. Some have claimed that the teaching of Christ about discipleship is not for the church, but for people under the law. They think that if we press these matters upon people in the church, we are either teaching salvation by works or putting needless bondages upon the Lord's flock.

I am not teaching that if one somehow in his own effort decided to take up a cross, he could earn his salvation. The point is that if we are saved by God, we are dead to the world and alive to God. This should be pressed upon Christians as a living reality that they ought to take more seriously and should even be preached as part of the gospel message. Paul certainly considered the cross to be central to the gospel, not a superfluous extra-curricular activity. Count-

"Matters such as sanctification are not left as dealer installed options for those who decide to pay a higher price than the merely 'saved.'"

ing the cost means taking seriously the claims of the cross upon us. Are we willing to embrace the "scandal" of the cross or do we so love the world that we flee from the shame and seek the world's glory? If so, we can hardly claim

to have a vital relationship with our Lord Jesus.

When Paul said, "*Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God*" (**Colossians 3:2,3**), he was not writing to some elite saints who had decided to pay more for the super-charged version of Christianity, but to the whole church. For every Christian has died and now has new life in Christ. We may need to be reminded

of it and urged to earnestly seek to live up to all of the implications of this, but it is nevertheless true or we are not Christians.

Did Jesus think discipleship was optional, and not for any but Jews under the Law? Consider the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (**Matthew 28:19,20**). He commanded His apostles to make disciples of all the *ethn* (Greek for “tribes, peoples, ethnic groups”) and teach them what He had commanded them. The very things He taught them (including those recorded in the Gospels) are to be pressed upon people throughout the world. Clearly He did not consider either discipleship or His other teachings to have been for Jews under the Law only and not for the church. Becoming disciples is part of the gospel itself, according to this passage. Jesus taught that those who are being made disciples should be baptized. Surely He was not suggesting that there was to be another class of Christians, those saved from hell but for whom Jesus was not Lord and discipleship was not required who should also not trouble themselves with baptism?

To reiterate what I have said, one does not make oneself a disciple to be saved, get baptized to be saved, or obey all the teachings of Christ to be saved. However, all who respond to the gospel and are saved are called to be disciples, to be baptized, and to observe the teachings of Christ, by God’s grace. This is the resultant condition of those who are regenerated, not the cause of salvation. Yet the truly saved will rejoice to hear these things and count it a blessed privilege that unworthy as we are, we are called by Christ to be His disciples. These truths can and should be included in the preaching of the gospel. For example, see how Peter did so in his message on the day of Pentecost (**Acts 2:38**). We need not be afraid to explain the whole of Christ’s message under fear of teaching salvation by works. I highly recommend a chapter in *Faith Works* by John MacArthur entitled “What Must I do to Be Saved?”² I think we take too lightly the “whole counsel of God” and

fail to make clear that the fulness of the glorious message of Christ and His calling upon the church. There is nothing about the whole of the New Testament message that will make people think they can save themselves through good works.

None of God’s Purposes For Christians are Optional

It is a sad misunderstanding of the New Testament that leads people to take a minimalist approach to the Christian life. One need merely believe that Jesus lived, died and was raised from the dead in the sense of giving mental assent to these facts, they say, to be saved. Everything else is optional. Let us examine this idea in the light of God’s eternal purposes in Christ. Why did God save us in the first place? Did He save us for the purpose of letting us avoid hell, even though we have no love for Christ, desire to be like Him, hunger for the presence of God, or hope to have our lives changed so that we might better be conformed to the image of Christ? The New Testament does not see it that way.

The concept of God’s calling will help us here. Why did God call us to Himself? Surely He has a greater purpose than leaving us as we are, only we escape hell. “And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you” (**1Peter 5:10**). There is no indication here that the promises that attend God’s calling for His people in Christ are only for certain elite Christians who opt for a fuller version of Christianity. This passage was written for all Christians. Can any one of us legitimately say that we are Christian but God has not called us to His glory in Christ, and does not intend to perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish us? I think not. Consider what Paul wrote about this matter: “For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren; and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified” (**Romans 8:29,30**). Since we are predestined to be conformed to the image of Christ, we can-

not assume that we can reject sanctification, live devilish lives in conformity to this world, and then somehow say that we actually do want to be like Jesus. People of faith must at least agree with God’s purposes and trust God to work them out in their lives.

Consider what John said about this matter of our calling in Christ: “See how great a love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure” (**1John 3:1-3**). The apostles did not understand God’s calling on every Christian to include a category of people who have no inclination to be conformed to the image of Christ, no hope of God changing their lives, and no desire to trust God for sanctification. John said that “everyone” who is a child of God hopes to see Jesus and be like Him, and therefore takes seriously the need to be purified and changed. John called lawless people who love the world and do not so love God or to desire to do His will liars (**1John 2:4**), and of the devil (**1John 3:8**). They were not considered “carnal Christians” who are bound for heaven on “plan B” — consisting of no change, sanctification, or love for the truth, just mental assent to certain Christian facts.

This is not to say that everyone who is called by God has made the same progress toward the high calling of God in Christ. There is a continuum of Christians from those just saved from the clutches of sin and death to those who like Paul in **2Timothy 4:7** who have “finished the course” and “fought the good fight.” One thing all Christians have in common is that they are in a relationship with God by faith and are trusting Him to work out His purposes in their lives. They have hearts that have been changed by the power of the Holy Spirit so that their desire is to be like Christ. If we have no desire to be like Christ, then for what reason would we be interested in heaven? Justification happens when the righteousness of Christ is put in our account, sanctification is the process

whereby those who are called “sanctified ones” (saints) because of their legal position in Christ are practically changed to be more like Him. It is a life-long process that is not complete until the resurrection. Yet, it is true of every Christian that the process is happening.

Sanctification is by Faith, not Works

It is wrong to assume that the Christian life proceeds on a different basis than the one by which it began. Some have erroneously thought since salvation is by faith, and it is a free gift from God, sanctification must be by human effort. The reason for this assumption is the idea that by making sanctification a legal works issue, a category is thereby created in which to put many verses in the New Testament that teach obedience. The notion is that we get to heaven based on Christ’s finished work, but we grow in the Christian life by obedience to God’s moral law. The problem with this view is that it creates a false dilemma. It is supposed that faith and obedience are somehow at odds with one another.

The truth is that obedience is the result of faith, and that any legitimate obedience that is pleasing to God is obedience that comes out of a relationship of hope and trust in the Lord. We know God and love Him, therefore we obey Him. This is not legalism, it is a relationship with God by faith. For example, consider how Paul described the purpose of his ministry: “[T]hrough whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles, for His name’s sake” (**Romans 1:5**). The inner work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer brings forth obedience. This is not “works righteousness” but a practical expression of the righteousness of Christ which was first imputed and then progressively and practically imparted. Those who have come to Christ by faith can be confused or misled by those who claim that following certain regulations, ceremonial laws, etc., are necessary for the Christian life. This false approach is corrected by the Book of Galatians. But it is not the case that the freedom we have in Christ is best expressed through licentiousness (see **Galatians 5:13**). The walk of faith in the power of the Spirit is

a walk of love for God and one’s neighbor. Such love cannot be expressed through breaking the moral law of God.

It is very important to know that sanctification is by faith. “*This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?*” (**Galatians 3:2,3**) This does not mean that the walk of the Spirit is devoid of moral guidance, the epistles of the New Testament always offer such guidance. It means that complete hope and trust in God, a relationship of love, and the power of the Holy Spirit are means by which God is at work in the life of the believer to bring about objective, progressive, moral change. Faith is not antithetical to obedience, but produces it. This is the message of the Book of James.

Likewise grace is not a substitute for a changed life, but is the agent of such change. For example, consider Paul’s description of the activity of God’s grace: “*For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus*” (**Titus 2:11-13**). Like the passage considered earlier in **1John 3**, this passage shows that the hope that we have of eternal life with Christ is a hope that motivates present change. Grace “teaches” something practical about what kind of people we ought be. Those who truly have faith in God and are empowered by the Holy Spirit must and will respond to this teaching and God will change their lives.

Conclusion

The Lordship of Christ is not an add on piece of optional equipment for certain elite Christians, it is who He is! Confession of Christ as Lord involves putting one’s faith and trust in Him who died for us and who ever lives to make intercession for us. This is not legalistic bondage, but the most basic and necessary truth of who He is. When the person of faith confesses Christ as Lord, he or she is not claiming to have done meritorious works to have

achieved this status, but rather is stating the nature of Christ and their relationship to Him. We love and trust our Lord and by His grace we depend on Him and keep His commandments, out of love.

The Christian life can be described in its multi-faceted richness. We are Christ’s servants, believers, ambassadors, soldiers, members of His kingdom, priests, disciples, saints, and called out ones. More can be said, the New Testament is rich with various analogies and descriptions of the Christian life. Nothing about this Christian life is optional, but every aspect of it is a gift of God’s grace. Faith and grace do not preclude obedience, but cause it. People of faith are motivated people who love their Lord so much that they want to be like Him. Paul’s testimony of God’s work in his life shows us the balance that we ought to emulate: “*But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me*” (**1Corinthians 15:10**). May God so work in our lives that we can give the same praise report.

Scripture taken from the New American Standard Bible, © Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1988, 1995 The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Written by Bob DeWaay
Twin City Fellowship
P.O. Box 8068
Minneapolis, MN 55408; © 1998
bob@twincityfellowship.com
612-874-7484

End Notes

1. John F. MacArthur, Jr. *Faith Works — The Gospel According to the Apostles* (Dallas: Word, 1993) 69.

2. *ibid.* chapter 12, 193-212.

www.twincityfellowship.com/cic