

*The New Testament
Concept of Salvation:
An Evangelical Christian Perspective*

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Evang^ol^oical is the most common term used today by theologically conservative Protestants to describe themselves within the larger world of Christendom.¹ It is often used as the opposite of *liberal*, suggesting strong lines of continuity with historic Christian orthodoxy in contrast to the numerous modern, revisionist definitions of the faith. *Evangelical* does not mean the same thing as *evangelistic*, which means “eager to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ,” though most Evangelicals are evangelistic. *Evangelical* does usually refer to a cluster of shared theological doctrines among conservatives across the diversity of Christian and especially Protestant denominations, centering on the need for all people to receive forgiveness of their sins and thus salvation from ultimate spiritual death by trusting in Jesus as their Lord and Savior and following Him in a lifelong journey of discipleship.² Evangelicals also use a variety of terms to describe their respect for the nature of scripture and its central

function in their lives—authoritative, inspired, infallible, inerrant, or all of the above.³

A presentation of an Evangelical understanding of salvation could proceed in at least two ways. The most common approach, found in everything from erudite tomes of systematic theology to simple tracts used by laypersons in sharing their faith, is to synthesize the salient scriptural data in some logical or topical sequence.⁴ One could also then discuss the areas in which Evangelicals across the various denominations largely agree along with those areas that still divide them.⁵

The less common approach, especially outside scholarly circles, is what may be called the approach of biblical rather than systematic theology. Biblical theology seeks to present anew what each distinct portion or author of scripture says about a given topic before merging it all into one grand synthesis.⁶ Because my academic training is in biblical studies rather than systematic theology, I have chosen to adopt the second approach in this essay. Because Evangelicals ascribe so central a role to scripture in their thought and practice, this approach will also fulfill my mandate to discuss broadly agreed upon Evangelical Christian views of salvation.

The Old Testament

A full-orbed biblical theology of the doctrine of salvation would devote substantial attention to the Old Testament before proceeding to the New.⁷ It would also at least triple the length of this paper! Let me just summarize, therefore, a few key highlights and then dwell primarily on New Testament data, since after all it is the New Testament that explains how Christianity came to be a new religious option for humanity and not merely one more Jewish sect, as it had begun. The plot of the Old Testament in a nutshell is how God, after creating the cosmos and after fashioning humanity uniquely in His image, began to implement a process of providing salvation for human beings from the sin into which they fell. With the selection of Abram in Genesis 12:1–3, God purposed to elect (or select) one specific ethnic group—the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, later known as the Israelites and later still as the Jews—as the people through whom He wished to disseminate His revelation to the entire world. He rescued this people from

slavery in Egypt and soon afterward gave them unique laws at Mount Sinai. In addition to telling them how to live, the law (in Hebrew, *Torah*) contained provisions for the temporary forgiveness of sins—animal sacrifices offered according to specified rituals. It also promised this people that they could inhabit a particular land, the land of Canaan, and enjoy its blessings in peace and prosperity, to the extent that any given generation obeyed the *Torah*. Unfortunately, the subsequent history of Israel demonstrated that more often than not the nation as a whole proved disobedient and therefore experienced warfare with the surrounding nations, internal division, and eventually two major periods of exile instigated by foreign empires.

The Old Testament never teaches the idea of spiritual salvation through law-keeping. The giving of the law came *after* God's gracious physical rescue of His people in the Exodus, and this same sequence typified the growing Jewish understanding of a more spiritual form of salvation, all the way up to the first century.⁸ Though dissenting views emerged, and though practitioners did not always live up to the theory they endorsed, the dominant theology of Judaism by the time of Jesus was that birth as a Jew made a person a member of God's elect, covenant community. One could opt out through conversion, apostasy, or prolonged, willful disobedience, and others could join by conversion and commitment to follow Israel's *Torah*. But the role of obeying God's laws was supposed to be one of living out one's commitment to Yahweh, God of Israel, not of establishing it in the first place.⁹

At the same time the collection of Hebrew scriptures that Christians call the Old Testament creates a very open-ended book. The writing prophets anticipate a new covenant that God will make with His people, not like the covenant with Moses. They describe how it will involve a greater internalization of God's law with less of a focus on external rites and ceremonies and a greater empowerment by God's Spirit to generate fundamental moral transformation of individuals. And it will produce the possibility of full and final forgiveness of sins. The fulfillment of these hopes is never narrated in even the latest Old Testament books, nor in the non-canonical Jewish literature of the so-called intertestamental period. The New Testament (and *testament* simply means covenant) is written almost entirely by Jews

who became followers of the Jewish teacher Jesus (the one exception is Luke, a Gentile). It therefore describes the life and ministry of this Jesus and the experiences of the first generations of the communities of His followers as God's fulfillment of these prophecies, bringing closure to the intentionally open-ended nature of previous inspired Jewish literature.¹⁰

*The Message and Ministry of Jesus,
Especially in the Gospel of Mark*

The four New Testament Gospels, with varying emphases and from different angles, all present an account of the life and significance of Jesus of Nazareth. All four agree that a self-styled prophet who was one of Jesus's contemporaries, John the Baptist, preached a radical message throughout Israel early in the first century. Not content to assume that Jews were automatically God's chosen people unless they consciously opted out of His covenant with them, John called on everyone in the nation, including its most pious and influential religious leaders, to repent—to change their beliefs and behavior and be immersed in water as a public sign of this repentance.¹¹

Jesus, too, began His itinerant ministry with a similar theme. The earliest and shortest Gospel, the Gospel of Mark, summed up Jesus's message to His contemporaries with the words, "The time has come, the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news" (Mark 1:14–15). The "kingdom of God" became the primary, integrating topic in Jesus's ministry. God was present, reigning in a dynamic, new way through Jesus's words and works, and was on the verge of establishing a new community of chosen people—no longer those who formed a part of or identified with ethnic Israel but a multi-cultural community of Jews and Gentiles alike who followed Jesus in discipleship. Parables were Jesus's most common way of illustrating the nature of this new community, the subjects of God's kingdom, eventually called "the church."¹² Jesus's many miracles demonstrated the veracity of His claim that the kingdom, or God's kingly reign, was arriving (see Matthew 12:28).¹³ Jesus proclaimed a message of holistic salvation, showing concern for people's bodies as well as their spirits. On at least four occasions, including when He healed blind Bartimaeus

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(see Mark 10:52), Jesus said to an individual, “Your faith has made you whole.” In each context it is clear that physical healing and spiritual salvation are both in view.¹⁴

The Gospel of Mark not only presents all of these highlights of Jesus’s public ministry; it also devotes nearly half of its account to the events that precipitated the Crucifixion (see Mark 8:31–16:8). This is in keeping with the uniform conviction of early Christianity that the most important thing about Jesus’s life was His death. Despite the conventional Jewish wisdom in His world, Jesus did not see Himself as a Messiah who would bring sociopolitical liberation and rid the land of the Romans but as one who came to die an atoning death for the sins of the world. The clearest teaching attributed to Him on the subject appears in Mark 10:45: Using His favorite title for Himself, Jesus declared, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Again, celebrating the Jewish Passover with His closest disciples the last night of His life, He invested the bread and cup symbolic of the Israelites’ Exodus of old with additional meaning: “this is my body” and “this is the blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many” (Mark 14:22, 24). From this day on, as His followers celebrated the commemorative meal, they would look back to His death by crucifixion as no mere martyrdom but as a sacrificial offering to atone for humanity’s sins.¹⁵

Distinctive Additions in Matthew and Luke

Mark, Matthew, and Luke form the synoptic Gospels because their presentations of Jesus are more similar than different. Matthew and Luke reproduce a substantial majority of the material found in Mark, though often in their own words and with their own emphases. Both also include significant additional material about Jesus, especially involving His teachings. Matthew arranges a majority of these teachings into five large blocks of material in chapters 5–7, 10, 13, 18 and 23–25. The first of these blocks is the famous Sermon on the Mount, which well encapsulates Jesus’s ethical instruction. Christians have at times confused this material with “entrance requirements” for the kingdom; a closer look at the context shows that Jesus is first of all instructing those who have already committed themselves to Him in discipleship

at some level (see Matthew 5:1–2). So just as Moses went up on the mountain to receive God’s law and then came down to promulgate it to God’s people, so Jesus goes into the hill country of Galilee, descends to a plateau where large numbers could gather and hear Him, and explains how this new stage of God’s revelation relates to the previous one. In sum, there is continuity as well as discontinuity. Christ says in Matthew 5:17, “Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets” (i.e., the Hebrew scriptures). But He does not continue with the expected opposite, something like “I have come to preserve them.” Instead He declares, “but to fulfill them.” The illustrations He gives of this fulfillment throughout the rest of the sermon, and more generally in His teaching demonstrate that His understanding of the Jewish scriptures often means that His followers will no longer obey various civil or ceremonial laws literally but must look for the underlying, abiding moral principles that the laws originally illustrated.

On the other hand, Jesus is no antinomian. He requires greater righteousness of His followers than do the Jewish leaders (see Matthew 5:20), and He insists that true disciples will produce the good fruit that demonstrates the genuineness of their faith (see Matthew 7:15–20). He notes that counterfeit disciples, even church leaders, will emerge, involved in activities that one might at first associate with true followers (see Matthew 7:21–22), but Jesus will say to these counterfeit disciples on Judgment Day, “I never knew you” (Matthew 7:23). But it is not merely good deeds that Jesus has in mind, nor merely a profession of faith in Him; these false disciples have produced good works and called Jesus “Lord” also. The key is having a personal relationship with Jesus, so that Christ can look back on one’s life and say, “I did know you; indeed, I do know you.” If Jesus’s ethics were an entrance requirement for the kingdom, no one would ever enter, for Jesus’s standard was the perfection that God Himself models (see Matthew 5:48). But as a manifesto of how His followers are to live, as a goal for which they are to strive—knowing they will always fall short in this life—Jesus’s ethics become intelligible. And despite their demanding nature, Jesus also promises a greater empowerment through the Holy Spirit than previous eras have known when He paradoxically promises, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:30).¹⁶

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Luke, too, contains many of Jesus's teachings found in Mark and Matthew. His, however, is especially the gospel of "salvation." Of the synoptic Gospel writers, Luke alone, eight times, uses the actual word for "salvation" (Greek *sōtēria*) or the title "Savior" (Greek *sōtēr*) for Jesus.¹⁷ He stresses Jesus's concern and compassion for the outcasts of His society more than any of the other three Gospel writers do, focusing on Jesus's ministry among the poor, the sick, women, Samaritans, and even Gentiles. Many scholars suggest that Luke 19:10 functions as a summary verse of the message of this entire Gospel: "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."¹⁸ Only Luke narrates such famous teachings of Jesus as His preaching in Nazareth about good news to the poor (see Luke 4:16–21) or His parables of the good Samaritan (see Luke 10:25–37), the prodigal son (see Luke 15:11–32), or the Pharisee and tax collector (see Luke 18:9–14).

Two details in the last of these accounts create the closest parallels in any of the Gospels with the later teaching on salvation by the Apostle Paul.¹⁹ In the prayer of the tax collector, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13), Luke translates the man's Aramaic words with the Greek verb "be propitiated." In other words, his plea for mercy more literally is that God might "be for me an atoning sacrifice," the very verb that Paul will later use as a key metaphor to explain the significance of Christ's death (Greek *hilaskomai*—see Romans 3:25). At the end of the parable (see Luke 18:14), Luke uses another key Pauline term in translating Jesus's concluding pronouncement that it was the publican and not the Pharisee who went home "justified" (from the Greek *dikaioō*)—declared righteous by God through no merit of his own but entirely by God's grace.

Luke also helps solve a problem that has troubled many readers of the Gospels. In His encounter with the famous rich young ruler, Christ commands this Jewish leader to "sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (Luke 18:22). But the vast majority of all Christians throughout history have done nothing of the kind, even though this passage is found in all three synoptic Gospels. But shortly afterward Luke alone narrates two additional accounts, as if anticipating the very question of whether all or even many Christians must meet the same

requirements. In Luke 19:1–10 the chief tax collector Zacchaeus comes to faith and voluntarily gives up “only” a little over half of his wealth. And if that does not adequately relieve contemporary Christians, Jesus proceeds to tell a parable in which faithful servants invest their master’s money in order to make more (see Luke 19:11–27), almost a primitive form of capitalism! Jesus will make plain to each individual follower what, if anything, stands between him or her and full-fledged discipleship; no package of specific actions can ever be proposed as a “one-size-fits-all” model.²⁰

Matthew and Luke both close their Gospels with a much more detailed account of Jesus’s Resurrection than does Mark, climaxing with Jesus commissioning His followers to take His message to all the nations, to the ends of the earth (see Matthew 28:16–20; Luke 24:45–49). Both make it clear that it is lifelong disciples Jesus is after: Matthew’s account refers to baptism and to teaching new converts to obey everything Christ had commanded—a task that no one completes in this life. Luke sums up Jesus’s message in terms of repentance and forgiveness of sins and anticipates where his second volume, the book of Acts, will resume the story—with the disciples awaiting new spiritual empowerment for their missionary mandate.

The Gospel of John

But before we can turn to Acts, we must comment briefly on the fourth Gospel. Among the New Testament writers, only the Apostle John speaks of Jesus as the “Lamb of God” (see, for example, John 1:29). In so doing, he alludes to the atoning significance of Christ’s death, just as the writers of the synoptic Gospels do in describing Jesus’s words as they ate the sacrificial Passover lamb. Only John narrates the famous conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, in which the renowned Pharisaic teacher failed to grasp Jesus’s metaphor, “You must be born again” (John 3:7). Like John the Baptist, Jesus insists that a spiritual birth must complement physical birth for entrance into God’s kingdom. In rephrasing this requirement as “born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5), Jesus alludes to Ezekiel’s prophecy that in the messianic age of Israel’s restoration God would sprinkle clean water on His people, cleanse them from all impurities, give them a

new heart and new spirit, and move them to obey His laws better (see Ezekiel 36:25–27).²¹ Whether on the lips of Jesus or from John as narrator, it is in this context that perhaps the best-known verse in all of scripture appears: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Far less well known is that the larger context of this verse speaks more of judgment than of salvation, including the observation that “those who do not believe stand condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son” (John 3:18).

While Nicodemus, perhaps the most prominent religious teacher of his day, did not yet believe, John 4 surprisingly proceeds to narrate another extended dialogue between Jesus and a person far less likely to come to faith, who nevertheless does believe.²² When Christ offers His “living water” to an immoral Samaritan woman, she accepts him as the long-awaited Messiah, despite the three strikes she had against her in that culture—her gender, ethnicity, and sexual history. In his own way, John depicts the “great reversal,” otherwise more prominent in Luke, of judgment on the powerful and salvation for the outcast. John also sets the stage for what Paul will articulate even more clearly—that salvation is by faith alone and not by good works. In John 6:28–29 the crowds ask Jesus, “What must we do to do the works God requires?” Jesus changes the plural noun to the singular and replies, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.”²³

John’s Gospel is also known for its strong promises of the security of the believer in God’s hands. In John 6:39 Jesus promises that He “shall lose none of all that [God] has given” Him and “will raise them up at the last day.” In John 10:28 He declares of His sheep, His spiritual flock, that “they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.” John 8:32 contains the famous promise to true disciples, often misappropriated as an inscription over the entrances to modern libraries, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” As in the synoptic Gospels, the Johannine Jesus recognizes spiritual slavery to sin and ignorance as far more damaging than social or political oppression. Still, the rest of chapter 8 demonstrates that not all who initially profess allegiance to Christ persevere as His followers.

God's promises apply only to those who hold to, or abide, Christ's teaching. John 15:2 puts it even more pointedly: God cuts off "every branch in [Christ] that bears no fruit." Since the Reformation, historic Christianity has applied the labels "Arminian" and "Calvinist" to the respective sides of the debate over whether such texts imply that true Christians can forfeit salvation. In his later first epistle, John seems to support the Calvinist view that such people were never true believers in the first place when he describes the false teachers in Ephesus: "They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us, but their going showed that none of them belonged to us" (1 John 2:19).²⁴

Other important texts found only in John also prove relevant to his understanding of salvation. In 11:25, in the context of His raising Lazarus, Jesus claims to be the resurrection and the life. In 12:32 He predicts His death, referring to it as exaltation and as providing the opportunity of salvation for all people: "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." In 14:6 Jesus makes His exclusive claim, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Finally, in an abbreviated commissioning of the disciples after the Resurrection, He breathes on them to symbolize the coming of the Holy Spirit (see John 20:21–24), whom they will receive in fullness at Pentecost. As will become clearer in his epistles, John recognizes just as much as Mark, Matthew, and Luke that, while faith saves, good works do inevitably issue from saving faith. John's preferred vocabulary for this is to speak of the true believer both showing love and obeying Christ's commandments (see John 15:15–24). But the most fundamental purposes of the entire Gospel are that unbelievers would come to faith and that Christians would continue to believe (see John 20:31).²⁵

The Acts of the Apostles

Luke's second volume begins where his first one left off, narrating Jesus's post-resurrection ministry among His disciples and culminating in His ascension to heaven and His bestowal of the Holy Spirit on all His followers at Pentecost (see Acts 1–2). Immediately after this empowerment, Peter preaches the first recorded evangelistic sermon of

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this fledgling community that would come to be known as Christianity (see Acts 2:14–36). Its power convinced many in Jerusalem to ask what they should do, to which Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). A few Christians over the centuries have derived from this text the idea that baptism is a prerequisite for salvation, but Peter’s words probably form a chiasm: “Repent (A) and be baptized (B) in the name of Jesus (B1) for forgiveness (A1). . . .” After all, nowhere in the New Testament does the language ever appear of “repenting in the name of Jesus,” only of “baptism in the name of Jesus.” Similarly, repentance alone elsewhere produces forgiveness and the filling of the Spirit. Thus, at the end of Peter’s second sermon in Acts 3:19 no mention is made of baptism at all, only the call to “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out.”²⁶

The plot of the rest of Acts is one of many men and women, Jews and Gentiles alike, coming to faith in Jesus and receiving salvation, as the Apostles fulfill their great commission of spreading the gospel to the ends of the known world. A particularly important barrier between Jew and Gentile is shattered in Peter’s famous vision of unclean animals descending from heaven with the accompanying divine voice commanding him to get up, kill them, and eat their meat (see Acts 10:13). From this Peter deduces that if God is declaring all foods clean, He must be declaring all people clean, since it was the non-kosher food Gentiles ate that erected so large a barrier between them and orthodox Jews. Thus Peter proclaims to Cornelius, the Gentile centurion, “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts those from every nation who fear him and do what is right” (Acts 10:34–35). It is scarcely a coincidence, then, that at the very moment Peter declares “that everyone who believes in [Jesus] receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43), Cornelius and his companions receive the Holy Spirit. Presumably that was the very moment they believed and committed their lives to Christ.²⁷

As Acts proceeds, it records, no doubt in drastically abbreviated form, the sermons of numerous early Christians, but most notably the Apostle Paul. As a special envoy to the Gentiles, Paul demonstrates

superb skill in what missiologists today would call “contextualizing” his message. To a Jewish audience in a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, he quotes scripture in detail (see Acts 13:16–41); to superstitious pagans in Lystra he refers to what can be known of God from creation—what theologians call general or natural revelation (see Acts 14:15–17); and to the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers in Athens on Mars Hill, he quotes their own poets and honorific inscriptions to his advantage (see Acts 17:22–31). To an audience of Christian elders from the Ephesian Church, the Paul of Acts sounds more like the Paul of the epistles than he does anywhere else in the book, with his reference to the redemption purchased by God in Christ through His blood (see Acts 20:28), not surprisingly since the epistles too are written to Christian audiences.²⁸ But, in every case, the one constant is the message of the resurrected Jesus in whom one must believe to be saved. Acts 16:31 is the “John 3:16” of the book of Acts, as Paul explains to the Philippian jailer, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” From this and a couple of other references to household baptisms in Acts, Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and certain Protestant traditions have often concluded that even infants can be baptized. But the only clue we get to the age of these individuals anywhere in Acts comes in this passage as well: the jailer “had come to believe in God—he and his whole family” (Acts 16:34). Whatever the ages of his family members, they were old enough to believe and hence to be baptized.²⁹

Finally, of great significance in Acts is the Jerusalem council described in chapter 15, in which all major parties in the early church ultimately agreed on a solution to an enormous problem that threatened to split the first generation of Christianity completely in two: did Gentiles becoming Christians have to become Jews first?—that is to say, did they have to commit to keeping the Mosaic law, complete with its requirement of circumcision for males (and that in a world without any anesthesia stronger than a stiff drink)? Mercifully, the answer was no, with Peter agreeing with what he had previously not been prepared to act on in Antioch: “We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we [i.e. we Jews] are saved, just as they [i.e., the Gentiles] are” (Acts 15:11).³⁰

The Epistles of Paul

Indeed in what is probably Paul's first extant letter, the epistle to the Galatians, the earlier confrontation between Peter and Paul on this topic is narrated. In this context, brought on by itinerant Jewish-Christian missionaries (Judaizers, as Paul calls them) who were insisting on law keeping as a prerequisite to salvation, Paul first formulated his metaphor of justification by faith. The Greek verb for *justify* (*dikaioō*) meant to "declare righteous"; its background was legal. It reflected the judicial verdict that a convicted criminal had paid his or her fine or served his or her sentence and thus was now free to leave the courtroom in which the justification had been pronounced. Likewise, because of Christ's death on behalf of us sinners, those who put their faith in Him have had their fines paid and their sentences served and are free to enjoy eternal life.³¹

And Paul is passionate about all this. Whereas in other contexts he can bend over backward to identify with various cultures in morally neutral practices for the sake of bringing as many as possible to salvation (see 1 Corinthians 9:19–23), when he believes the principle of justification by faith is being threatened, particularly by those who would replace it with the works of the law, Paul can use language deliberately reminiscent of the Jewish ban put on flagrant sinners during Old Testament times.³² Thus in Galatians 1:8 we read, "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let that person be eternally condemned" (see again in v. 9). And it was the outward rituals and practices of what scholars often call the badges of Jewish "national righteousness"—the Sabbath, the temple sacrifices, the dietary laws, circumcision, and so on—that proved most problematic for Paul.

Once again, though, Paul is no more an antinomian than Jesus was. In Galatians 5:6 he recognizes that true faith expresses itself through love, and in 5:14 he says that love sums up the entire law. But any attempt to characterize either the means by which one begins the Christian pilgrimage or the manner in which one lives it out, *primarily in terms of obedience to laws or ordinances*, so perverts the true gospel that instead of liberating people, it condemns them. True, godly, Christian living is summed up in intangible virtues that cannot be encapsulated

in a list of do's or don'ts, most notably Paul's well-known fruits of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22–23). To this Paul immediately adds, "Against such things there is no law"; in other words, these kinds of things cannot be legislated (Galatians 5:23).³³

Chronologically, the next two letters of Paul that contain significant material on the doctrine of salvation address the Corinthians. The most overtly theological sections of 1 Corinthians (chapters 1–4, 15) focus on the Crucifixion and the Resurrection as the heart of Christ's work for humanity. The theological center of 2 Corinthians (5:11–21) develops the metaphor of reconciliation—the replacement of interpersonal hostility and alienation with warm friendship—as the central act of God in Christ for humanity. It also speaks of a fundamental role for believers as being "ambassadors for Christ" with others (2 Corinthians 5:20).³⁴ In chapters 10–13, Paul once again has to confront Judaizers; not surprisingly the rhetoric is again harsh by modern standards (though no harsher than previous Jewish writers used in their own intra-Jewish quarrels³⁵). If Satan can disguise himself as an angel of light, then it is not surprising "if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness" (2 Corinthians 11:15).

Paul's most systematic treatise on the plight of humanity and its remedy is clearly his next letter, the epistle to the Romans. Not surprisingly, those who sum up the historic Christian doctrine of salvation via systematic theology regularly produce a sequence of topics not much different from that of Romans itself.³⁶ All humanity has rebelled against God and chosen to sin; none is able to escape from the eternal condemnation such rebellion elicits (see Romans 1:18–3:20). God therefore took upon Himself human flesh to provide the "propitiation" (the atoning sacrifice) and the "redemption" (the purchase of a slave's freedom) that only one who was both fully divine and fully human could accomplish (see Romans 3:21–31). The man, Jesus of Nazareth, was that very incarnation of God. It is faith in Him, not works, that brings us back into right relationship with God and confers on us eternal life with Him and with all fellow believers.

Good works do not save, but they do play an essential part in the subsequent process of sanctification (becoming holy), a process

that comes nowhere close to being completed in this life but that can effect substantial transformation of individuals compared to their lives apart from Christ (chapters 6–8). Romans 8:30 indicates that the eventual culmination of sanctification is glorification—resurrection to a sinless life in the world to come. And Romans 8:38–39 completes Paul’s breathtaking survey of the history of the world and of humankind with its marvelous promise that “neither death, nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”³⁷

Later letters of Paul add only a little to what is already clearly enunciated in Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Romans. Ephesians 2:8–10 aptly captures the twin emphases of the New Testament in general on our topic. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” The Greek construction behind the expression, “you have been saved,” is a periphrastic perfect participle, literally implying that by grace humans “have been and continue to be” saved. One does not enter into the Christian life by grace, through faith, only to live it out by meritorious works. Even faith and good deeds are themselves God’s gracious gifts, which apart from His empowerment we could never produce on our own. But, again, that does not mean, with Paul’s imaginary objector in Romans 6:1, that we may deliberately sin “so that grace may increase.” We are created to do good works, but they are never anything we can muster in our own strength.³⁸ Philippians 2:12–13 well expresses the same paradox: “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good pleasure.” We are tempted to cry out, “Please, Paul, pick one or the other.” But he, like every other biblical author, refuses.³⁹ What is more, any attempt to emphasize one at the expense of the other leads to further damning rhetoric, as in Philippians 3:2–11, when once again Paul has to confront Judaizing intruders into the Christian community.

Hebrews through Revelation

The anonymous epistle to the Hebrews is unique among the New Testament documents in explicitly portraying Christ as our great high priest. Thus this letter develops the theme of Christ's once-and-for-all sacrifice in greater detail than any other portion of the Bible. But how could Jesus be a priest when Jewish priests had to come from the tribe of Levi, whereas Jesus, as the prophesied Messiah, was born of the tribe of Judah? Hebrews solves this dilemma by appealing to the intriguing case of the priest of Salem (before it became "Jerusalem") to whom Abram paid tithes. Though Salem was a Canaanite stronghold, Genesis calls Melchizedek "a priest of God most high" (Genesis 14:18), presuming that this man somehow retained a vestige of the revelation of the true God of the universe that most of his people had obliterated. Thus, Hebrews concludes that there can be a priest "after the order of Melchizedek" (Hebrews 7:15) who in fact is superior to all the Levitical priests because Abraham, father of the Jewish nation, paid tribute to Melchizedek as a subordinate submits to a superior authority. Jesus is thus a Melchizedekian priest, an office He holds forever and passes on to none of His followers; through Him and Him alone do we receive forgiveness of sins and access to the one living God of all creation (see Hebrews 7).⁴⁰

Hebrews is also well known for its solemn warning passages against apostasy (see Hebrews 6:4–8). Calvinists and Arminians again continue to debate whether those who absolutely and without ever repenting renounce their Christian commitment were ever true Christians. But interpreters of this epistle dare not lose sight of that about which both Calvin and Arminius agreed.⁴¹ Such people are lost, separated from God for all eternity, and therefore apostasy must be guarded against at all costs. There is no second chance, even after death, for "people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). More positively, Hebrews 11 supplies an inspiring catalogue of Old Testament "saints" who lived by faith despite not seeing the complete fulfillment of God's promises to them in their lifetime. Thus Hebrews can summarize faith as "being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (Hebrews 11:1).

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The epistle of James can be summarized by the slogan, “faith without deeds is dead” (James 2:26). Indeed, Martin Luther, like various others throughout church history, wondered whether this did not contradict Paul’s teaching—especially in Romans 4 and Galatians 3. But to use the felicitous phrasing of the German Lutheran commentator Joachim Jeremias, Paul “is speaking of Christian faith and Jewish deeds,” while “James is speaking of Jewish faith and Christian deeds.”⁴² In other words, Paul requires people to trust in Christ, not to obey specific ordinances or perform certain rituals. James, in an entirely different context, warns against a lifeless orthodoxy. Faith as mere monotheism, as belief in one God (see James 2:19), is inadequate; it must produce a Christian lifestyle that demonstrates the presence of saving faith. When each writer is allowed to use terms according to his unique context, and when neither’s usage is read into the other, the so-called contradiction evaporates.

The epistles of Peter and Jude add little to our topic that a survey as brief as this needs to treat. But it is worth commenting, in passing, that a substantial consensus of contemporary scholars, rightly in my opinion, understands the enigmatic text in 1 Peter 3:18–22 to refer to Christ proclaiming His victory over death to the fallen angels rather than any second-chance offer of the gospel that would contradict Hebrews 9:27.⁴³ Jude picks up on a theme, introduced in Paul’s “Pastoral Epistles” to Timothy and Titus, that faith is not merely a subjective relationship with Jesus but also a fixed body of fundamental doctrine that must be preserved against error and passed on from generation to generation through Christian catechesis.

A famous turn-of-the-century English commentator properly dubbed the theme of the three letters of John *The Tests of Life*.⁴⁴ Even more clearly than in his Gospel, John here uses love, obedience to Christ’s commandments, and belief in Christ as fully God and fully human as three overlapping criteria for identifying the true Christian in an Ephesian community torn from within by false teachers. Sometimes one of the criteria will prove more decisive, sometimes another. Viewed from the course of one’s entire life, the true Christian will eventually demonstrate a substantial amount of all three. At the end of 1 John, John gives another precious promise of the assurance of salvation: “I

write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13). But this is immediately balanced by a solemn warning that there is an unforgivable sin (see 1 John 5:16), presumably alluding to Jesus’s own teaching on that topic when He cautioned His most hardened opponents about blaspheming against the Holy Spirit (see Matthew 12:32). Tellingly, this is a warning issued to those who would ultimately crucify Him, not to any who ever professed to follow Him. The only unforgivable sin, therefore, is the sin of unbelief from which one never repents.⁴⁵ People who turn to Christ, even as belatedly as did the thief on the cross, can still have Jesus’s words applied to them: “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).

The book of Revelation closes the New Testament with the picture of Jesus no longer meek and mild but returning to earth in victory and judgment (see Revelation 19), ushering in a millennial reign in this world (see Revelation 20) that will culminate in the complete recreation of the cosmos—new heavens and a new earth (see Revelation 21–22). Despite all of the diversity in humanity throughout the earth’s history, despite all of the competing religions and ideologies in the world, one day it will all boil down to only two categories: first, those whom Jesus acknowledges as His followers and ushers into His presence in the company of the Father, the angelic host, and all the multicultural myriads of the redeemed of all ages for an unbelievably happy eternity; and, second, those whom Jesus rejects, condemns for their disobedience and lack of faith, and consigns to an eternity separated from God and all things good. Both of these destinies are described (in the Revelation and throughout the Bible) with numerous metaphors, but this much at least seems to reflect the literal realities that those metaphors depict.⁴⁶

Conclusion

In our modern, pluralistic age, the exclusive claims of the various New Testament writers, indeed of Jesus Himself, seem at best off-kilter and at worst morally reprehensible. In this light the famous British Christian apologist C. S. Lewis once penned some very memorable words:

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I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool; you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.⁴⁷

What Lewis wrote of Jesus's claims to divinity may equally be stated about the New Testament claims for salvation more generally. We must not forget that the first-century Roman empire was even more pluralistic than contemporary America. It was then even less fashionable than it is now to declare Jesus as the only way to God.⁴⁸ Indeed, for the first three centuries of the church's history, such fidelity to the gospel often led to martyrdom, just as outside the Western world the twentieth century saw more Christians martyred than in all previous centuries of church history put together. Yet, as Tertullian phrased it in about AD 200, the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church.

I am grateful that we are able to discuss matters of ultimate importance at a conference like this in what I think remains a safe environment of relatively courteous interfaith dialogue. But it is interesting to speculate on what first-century Christians or even Jesus Himself might have thought of our setting and format. I suspect they would have found it inadequate unless it afforded an opportunity at some point for a speaker to abandon the rhetorical genre of an academic paper such as this one and issue a clarion call, to any participants who needed it, to repent, believe in Jesus, and accept His gracious gift of the forgiveness of sins, which nothing anyone of us can do could ever merit. After all, if the New Testament message is right, then trusting wholly in Christ and not at all in personal performance is the most

important, liberating decision anyone can ever make in this life. That affirmation remains at the heart of the contemporary Evangelical Christian doctrine of salvation. And because of its congruence with apostolic, New Testament Christianity, it makes us wonder if the extra adjective *evangelical* is not superfluous. Surely this is simply the Christian doctrine of salvation, and those who fundamentally differ from these beliefs should call themselves something other than Christian.

Notes

All biblical citations are from the New International Version.

1. For a survey of those wings of the church that use this label or would otherwise merit it, see Donald W. Dayton and Robert K. Johnston, eds., *The Variety of American Evangelicalism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991).

2. For further detail, see Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 27–32.

3. For a detailed survey, see Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 200–285.

4. Excellent recent examples of the “erudite tomes” include Erickson, *Christian Theology*; Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996); and Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman: 1994).

5. I have tried to do something like this already in my half of the chapter on salvation in the book I co-authored with Stephen Robinson, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation*. Several later presenters in this conference are also Evangelical, but they have been invited to focus more narrowly on one particular branch of Protestant thought.

6. See T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, eds., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000).

7. See T. V. Farris, *Mighty to Save: A Study in Old Testament Soteriology* (Nashville: Broadman, 1993).

8. See Thomas E. McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985).

9. See E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (London: SCM, 1977).

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10. For the most relevant scriptural references, see Craig L. Blomberg, "The Unity and Diversity of Scripture," in *New Dictionary*, ed. Alexander and Rosner, 67–69.

11. For detailed amplification, see Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997).

12. See Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990).

13. See Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical and Theological Study* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999).

14. See Blomberg, "Your Faith Has Made You Whole': The Evangelical Liberation Theology of Jesus," in Joel B. Green and Max Turner, eds., *Jesus of Nazareth, Lord and Christ* (Carlisle: Paternoster; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 75–93.

15. See George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, ed. Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 133–57, 181–92; Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 19–26.

16. For all of these points about Matthew, see Blomberg, *Matthew* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1992).

17. I. Howard Marshall finds this to be the central theme of the Gospel, helpfully expounded in his *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Exeter: Paternoster; 1988).

18. See Darrell L. Bock, *Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 2:1523; Craig A. Evans, *Luke* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 281.

19. See F. F. Bruce, "Justification by Faith in the Non-Pauline Writings of the New Testament," *Evangelical Quarterly* 24 (1952): 66–69.

20. See Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 138–41, 124–25.

21. See D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Leicester: InterVarsity; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 194–95.

22. On the contrast, see Craig L. Blomberg, "The Globalization of Biblical Interpretation: A Test Case—John 3–4," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 5 (1995): 1–15.

23. See Peter W. Ensor, *Jesus and His "Works": The Johannine Sayings in Historical Perspective* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1996).

24. See D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott; Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 125–98.

25. See Craig R. Koester, "Hearing, Seeing and Believing in the Gospel of John," *Biblica* 70 (1989): 327–48; George Allen Turner, "Soteriology in the Gospel of John," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 19 (1976): 271–77.

26. See John B. Polhill, *Acts* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 117; F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 70–71.

27. On this passage, see I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Leicester: InterVarsity; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 180–98.

28. See Philip H. Towner, "Mission Practice and Theology under Construction (Acts 18-20)," in I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson, eds., *Witness in the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 417–36.

29. Polhill, *Acts*, 356.

30. On the role of the Law in Acts, see Craig L. Blomberg, "The Christian and the Law of Moses," in Marshall and Peterson, eds., *Witness to the Gospel*, 397–416. On salvation in Acts more generally, see the seven contributions to part one of *Witness to the Gospel*, 17–166.

31. See James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 334–89.

32. See F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Exeter: Paternoster; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 83–84.

33. Richard N. Longenecker, *Word Biblical Commentary: Galatians* (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 263–64.

34. See Ralph P. Martin, *Reconciliation: A Study of Paul's Theology* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott; Atlanta: John Knox, 1981).

35. See Luke T. Johnson, "The New Testament's Anti-Jewish Slander and the Conventions of Ancient Polemic," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108 (1989): 419–41.

36. Indeed, even an outline of merely *Pauline* theology emerges most naturally from this letter; see Dunn, *Paul*.

37. For outstanding recent evangelical commentary on Romans, see Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996); and Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997).

38. See Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Leicester: InterVarsity; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 174–81.

39. See Peter T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (Carlisle: Paternoster; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 273–89).

40. See Bruce A. Demarest, *A History of Interpretation of Hebrews 7, 1–10 from the Reformation to the Present* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1976).

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41. Or their modern counterparts, well-represented in the commentary literature by Philip E. Hughes (*A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977]) and William L. Lane (*Word Biblical Commentary: Hebrews* [Dallas: Word Books, 1991] vols. 47A–B), respectively.

42. Joachim Jeremias, “Paul and James,” *Expository Times* 66 (1955): 568–71.

43. For a full history of interpretation, which also defends this perspective, see William J. Dalton, *Christ’s Proclamation to the Spirits: A Study of 1 Peter 3:18–4:6* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1989).

44. Robert Law, *The Tests of Life: A Study of the First Epistle of St. John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1968).

45. See Tim Ward, “Sin ‘Not Unto Death’ and Sin ‘Unto Death’ in 1 John 5:16,” *Churchman* 109 (1995): 226–37.

46. The best detailed study on these and related issues remains Richard Bauckham’s *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

47. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 52.

48. See Nicholas T. Wright, *New Tasks for a Renewed Church* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1992).