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Q&A: Theology

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Theology:

Question: Throughout all of the quagmire, bloodshed, and corruption that we find in church history, how do we know that Jesus Christ's central teachings have been preserved? I ask specifically about salvation. What did the early Church Fathers teach about what salvation requires? I don't want any Roman Catholic bishop's or minister's opinions. What do the earliest known Christian writings affirm on this matter? Do you know what Polycarp, Ignatius or Clement say about salvation?

Answer: I'd say that to begin, the easiest, as well as the most authoritative and direct route is to go straight to the New Testament and read for yourself the texts about the nature of the Gospel message. I'd say that you should read texts like Acts 1:38-39; 8:30-38; 10:39-43; Romans 1:1-4; 10:9; 1 Corinthians 15:1-8; Ephesians 2:8-9; 1 Peter 1:21; 1 John 5:13. Notice the range of authors here? That indicates the widespread amount of agreement on the central matter of salvation. Whenever the Gospel data are defined in the New Testament as the foundation of what someone must believe to be saved, these three doctrines always appear: the Deity, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Thus, Jesus Christ is the Son of God, he died for our sins, and he was raised bodily from the dead. As the verses above say over and over again, when someone decides to commit or surrender themselves to this particular Person of Jesus Christ (which is the New Testament Greek meaning of the main word for "believe" or "faith"), that constitutes salvation. In other words, saying "I do" to the truth of the biblical Jesus Christ results in salvation. For passages in the earliest Church Fathers (according to Lightfoot's chapter numbering), see Clement 7, 12, 24, 42; Ignatius, in Magnesians 11; Trallians 2, 9; Smyrnaeans 1-4; or Polycarp 1, 8. The closer we get to the center of theology, the more the vast majority of Christians agree on this. Usually, the most disagreement is reserved for the periphery items.

Question: Does the witness of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life actually provide evidence that Christ is who he said he was, or is this wishful thinking? The historical evidence seems more concrete than the idea of the Holy Spirit living in me.

Answer: We have said (see "General Apologetics") that while the witness of the Holy Spirit does build on the data, it is not evidence in and of itself. Thus, the witness is especially not something that can be generally cited with unbelievers. So the evidence shows that Christianity is true and the Holy Spirit's witness indicates who belongs to the faith. We can perhaps think of it this way: the facts show that there is a basis for a personal friendship with God. That Christians testify that they experience this witness is an additional indication that builds on the facts. Based on the promises and statements in Scripture, not only should experiencing the Holy Spirit's witness not be surprising, but it should be *expected*. Again, the evidence shows that the facts are true and that a relationship with the God of the universe is therefore possible, whereas the experience indicates that it is *actual*.

Question: Regarding the Old Testament, did salvation belong to the Jew only, or was it possible for Gentiles to be saved as well?

Answer: On the issue of salvation for non-Jews in the Old Testament, we can state some general principles. Of all the people on the earth, God chose Abraham to reveal himself in a special way and to bless him as the father of many nations. Although some became believers without being a part of God's chosen people (for examples: Abel, Seth, Enoch, Noah, Melchizedek, Jethro, and Rahab), salvation chiefly came in the context of the revelation of the true God for Israel, as God had decreed.

Although God chose to reveal himself to Abraham and his descendants, salvation resulted from faith in God, as demonstrated by Jethro, Rahab, and others who were Gentiles. Further, we learn that there are many Old Testament references to "strangers" being allowed among the Jews. You can check a Concordance on this. If I'm not mistaken from memory, strangers were entitled to virtually all the benefits of Jews, including having their sins forgiven. And as I recall, there are several warnings against mistreating them. This changes significantly the picture of Gentiles in the OT, not to mention promises in Isaiah, etc, of God's Messiah extending salvation to the world. So it seems that salvation was obtainable to all who put their faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

It has been argued that the Jew could and did look forward to the coming of the Messiah. However, it may be difficult to prove that OT Jews placed their trust in the work of the Messiah for salvation. The evidence for this seems a bit scanty. However, we do know from both the OT as well as the NT, such as the writings of Paul, that faith in God was indeed the means for obtaining salvation.

Some have argued that this seems isolated and unfair. But when we remember such factors as the believers outside of the people of Israel, God's willing inclusion of strangers, God's chief revelation in Jesus Christ for our means of salvation, and the privilege that believers have to proclaim this message to others who do not possess this knowledge, we have a wonderful string of references to the grace of God! As Paul states, salvation went first to the Jew and then to the Gentile (Rom. 1:16). Jesus Christ said that he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. But after his resurrection Jesus commissioned his own apostles to take his message to the world, so that the Gospel could be given to all nations (Matt. 28:19-20; Lk. 24:45-49; Acts 1:8). Therefore, from the beginning, salvation was an option, clearly open to any number of both Jews as well as non-Jews, although God declared that salvation came through the Jews, his chosen people.

Question: What scriptural references would you recommend concerning sanctification?

Answer: Sanctification can come at salvation (1 Cor. 6:11; 2 Thes. 2:13; Heb. 10:10) but sanctification is also progressive (2 Cor. 7:1; 2 Pet. 3:18). It includes theological growth (Heb. 6:1-2) and moral growth (Gal. 5:16; 22-25). Two purposes are power for witness (Acts 2:4ff; 4:8, 31; 9:17-20) and for holy living (1 Jn. 2:27; Rom. 8:14, 16, 26).

Yes, I think it is clear that sanctification often comes in steps and we should progress in our Christian lives. A really good text on our process and growth is 2 Peter 1:5-11. Notice the key words there. Js 3:17 shows some progress, too.

Question: The concept of the Trinity is indeed confusing. How can God be three Persons but one Being? Also, does this imply that Christ is not equal to God the Father?

Answer: The doctrine of the Trinity can be difficult and it is easy to walk a path other than the one decreed in Scripture. This is a crucial area of theology. Scripture reveals the truth that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each called God. We are also told that they are one. To refute early church heresies, the early church fathers and apologists explained the Trinity as three Beings who are one in essence, having the same nature. Yet they remain separate Persons. Thus, three Beings all have the same nature. Further, there is no problem with three Beings who share the exact same nature but who are different in position. For example, my son and I have the same nature or essence, but he is obedient and obeys me (position). The latter has nothing to do with the former. Jesus said on several occasions that he was the obedient Son who did what his Father gave him to do (see Jn. 5:19, 30, 36).

Question: Is morality due to social convention? What do you think about this? I cannot believe it. This might mean that we only have certain morals because of society and if there was no society then we also wouldn't have these morals. How does this fit together with our God-given conscience?

Answer: No one doubts that morality, especially certain aspects, is in large part socially derived. We learn much of our behavior. But the question is where the moral law came from in the first place. You might want to read CS Lewis' *Mere Christianity*, where the first five chapters argue against the social convention and similar options and develops a strong moral argument for God's existence.

Question: If God is all powerful, why did he send himself to die for our sins in such a gruesome manner? Why couldn't he just snap his fingers or something?

Answer: There is more than one angle to this. Another of God's attributes is justice, so he is not able to whisk sin under the carpet as if it never happened. Sin is a very serious matter and so it requires God's justice. But additionally, Jesus was God and volunteered to pay the supreme price for our sins precisely by dying in that manner. That he did it willingly adds an entirely new dimension to the question.

Question: Would it be accurate to say that non-Christians may understand cognitively what Christians are saying, even when presented with evidences, but that, apart from responding to the Holy Spirit's work in convicting and illumining the mind, they still may not become believers?

Answer: On the "natural man" and the Holy Spirit's work, of course the unsaved person can hear and evaluate the believer's arguments, understanding them in such a manner. Of course, they may not want to hear these things. But appealing to the Holy Spirit's witness wouldn't normally "register" with them, both because they have not had the experiences and because this may seem to be less than evidential. So I agree totally that, apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, no argument will ever bring a person to Christ. Still, I think that laying evidential or even experiential groundwork may still be very helpful, in that the Holy Spirit may use it later to convict the person.

Question: Could you recommend some good, general books to read on Christian theology?

Answer: Here are some books that I have really enjoyed, on both a theological as well as a practical level: J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Intervarsity); John Piper, *Desiring God* (Multnomah); Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (Macmillan); Peter Kreeft, *Heaven: The Heart's Deepest Longing* (Harper and Row, revised edition by Ignatius Press); J.P. Moreland, *Loving God with all of Your Mind* (NavPress); Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (Harper Collins).

Question: I was taught that the Great White Throne Judgment comes at the end of the 1000 year reign of Christ. However, it says in Hebrews 9:27 that after death comes judgment, and in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, the man is immediately in hell, tormented by flames. Now, since no one gets dumped into the lake of fire until the end, how can someone be judged immediately at death? Wouldn't they have to wait until the Great White Throne judgment? So was the rich man in the lake of fire, or Hades, that holding place that the unrighteous dead go to await their being thrown into the lake of fire?

Answer: At death, I think Scripture teaches that there is an initial separation judgment, even though that isn't the final indictment. Maybe it helps to think of an imperfect analogy: if a crime is committed, a person may be charged and held for a while until their court case, and then longer still until their sentencing. At death, the charges come and at Judgment, the final sentencing is given. That should help on Luke 16, too, which would then be at the stage of being charged, before final sentencing. Yet, we do know that, because God doesn't make mistakes like a human prosecutor may, there is no question

about the person's final judgment and what is going to happen. But also remember that Luke 16 is very difficult because it is very possibly a parable, so it is difficult to be overly precise there.

Question: What is biblical salvation? I know it's not just some little "sinner's prayer." But, so many different churches have different opinions on what it means to become a Christian. What, then, is biblical salvation? What is essential for salvation?

Answer: In the New Testament, there are two sides to salvation—what God has provided, and our faith response to God. Whenever the New Testament writers actually define the Gospel, which is that initial basis for salvation, it always includes at least these three doctrines:

- 1) the Deity of Jesus Christ,
- 2) his atoning death for our sins, and
- 3) the resurrection of Jesus. To be saved, we are told that a person
- 4) not only believes these doctrines, but the word "faith" means to commit or surrender to something or someone.

So to come to Jesus, we need to commit ourselves to him, about whom these facts are true, trusting him to forgive our sins and take us to heaven. That's why I often describe this as saying "I do" to Jesus in faith, because we surrender/commit our lives to him. The result of salvation is a total commitment to God, through Jesus Christ. Our commitment to others is also affected. So, in my analogy, those who say "I do" to Jesus in commitment are saved and experience eternal life. The change begins immediately. (In case you want to check out some of these biblical references, see Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 15:3-4; Acts 13:26-39; John 3:15-16; etc. On the commitment that follows from salvation, see Luke 10:25-37; Galatians 6:7-10; 1 John 3:17.) The vast majority of evangelical Christians believe and agree that this is the plan of salvation, apart from anything else. Also, it is interesting that as we get to this center, the evidence for Christianity is absolutely at its strongest!