

Must not be that clear!

by Barry O'Dell

Consider the following statement: "I always wondered how if the Bible 'clearly states' anything why we had so many denominations doing so many different things. Must not be that clear." Whoever made that statement is not alone in the world! There are many "controversial" subjects to which people have that same reaction - the Bible must not be that clear. There are two (perhaps unintended) implications in this sentiment: (1) an expression of doubt in the clarity of Scripture and (2) the inability of God to communicate clearly. When making statements or reaching conclusions about the word of God we must understand what we are affirming! Paul told Timothy that some, "desiring to be teachers of the law; understanding neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm" (1 Tim. 1:7). The word translated *affirm* means, "to confirm thoroughly or confidently." Does Scripture "clearly state" certain thoughts/doctrines? In the process of speaking to His creation in written, human languages, was God incapable of doing so clearly? Think with me...

First, when Luke began his account of the life of Christ he noted that many had attempted to do what he was doing. However, writing by inspiration of the Holy Spirit he could say, "It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, that thou mightiest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed" (Lk. 1:3-4). Luke had an *accurate* understanding of what he was getting ready to write down. As a result of reading it, Theophilus could have *certain* (firm, undoubted) knowledge of it. Paul mentioned the same concept when writing to the church at Ephesus (Eph. 3:1-5). We should never, as was done in the opening quote, express doubt in the clarity of Scripture! This does not mean that some things are not "hard to be understood" (2 Pet. 3:16). It does mean, as Peter wrote, that we should, "Grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18).

"Was God unable to communicate clearly or is man guilty at times of disbelieving Him?"

Second, by saying the Bible is "not that clear" one is affirming doubt in God's ability to communicate clearly. Two questions come to mind: Was God unable to communicate clearly or is man guilty at times of disbelieving Him? The one who posed the question specifically mentioned denominations and their "doing so many different things." Should we lay the blame of division at the feet of God? That is exactly what Adam did - "the woman *YOU* gave me" (Gen. 3:12). Why people do what they do is a valid question. Shifting the blame to God is not the answer! Is it unclear that Jesus promised to build His church (Matt. 16:18-19)? Is it unclear that His will is unity (Jn. 17:20-21)? Is the entire book of Ephesians unclear when it states that Christ is the Head of the church (1:22-23), the Savior of the body (5:23), and that there is only one body/church (4:4)? We could go on and on! Consider what Mark recorded about the teachings of Jesus: "And the common people heard Him gladly" (Mk. 12:37). The word translated *common* is from a Greek word that means, "many, much, large." Jesus was capable of communicating to large groups of people and they could understand what He was teaching. Has that changed? Of course not! To say that the Bible "must not be that clear" is to affirm that either the Bible cannot be understood or that God was incapable of accurate communication. Both of these sentiments are wrong!

Saved by Grace

Kevin Beard - Harrisburg church of Christ, Harrisburg, AR

The Bible plainly declares the fact that we need to be saved from the terrible consequences of sin. We are dead in sin (Eph. 2:1), enemies of God in danger of His wrath in sin (Rom. 5:8-10), and marked out for condemnation because of sin (Jude 4). Since we cannot change the fact that we have sinned, the only hope we have is for God, the One against whom we sinned, to forgive us; and God be thanked that He offered us exactly that!

Why did God make it possible for a world full of sinful people to be saved? Certainly, it was because of His love. Passages like John 3:16 and Romans 5:8 beautifully point out this great fact. However, there is another marvelous quality God possesses that made salvation a reality: grace. Paul declared: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). Let's examine this important passage and consider how we are saved by grace.

First, notice that Paul said, "by grace are ye saved." To understand the significance of this simple statement, we need to understand the meaning of the word "grace." It is associated with other concepts such as, good will, favor, and kindness, and from the recipient's point of view, it is thought of in terms of thanksgiving, joy, and pleasure. Perhaps the simplest and most familiar definition is "God's unmerited favor." God showed great favor to mankind because of the love He has for us. He chose not to leave us to the destruction we brought upon ourselves, but to offer us what only He could offer: a way out of bondage to sin and its condemnation. Did we deserve this? No. God valued us because of His own mercy and extended His grace to make our salvation possible. Paul elaborated on this aspect of what grace is by saying, that we were not saved by works, "lest any man should boast."

Second, Paul said, "by grace are ye saved through faith." God has extended His grace to everyone, as we can see from Titus 2:11: "For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men." Since God shows no partiality (Acts 10:34), and the grace that brings salvation has appeared to all, would it not stand to

reason that all would be saved? Yes, it would, **if** we were saved only by grace with nothing else considered. However, Jesus told us many different times that not everyone will be saved (Matt. 7:13-14, 21-23; 25:31-46). So, what is the other factor to consider in being saved by grace? It is faith.

God offers His grace to everyone, but not everyone will accept it. Paul said of being saved by grace that "it is the gift of God." Think about what is involved in giving a gift, other than the gift itself. First, there is the giving of the gift. The giver has something to give and he offers it to the recipient as a gift. Maybe he attached conditions to the gift, or maybe he didn't. Choosing the gift, when to give it, under what circumstances to give it, etc.; all of that was within the rights of the giver to decide. But even with all that planning, the gift still must be accepted by the recipient. He may choose not to take the gift; he may choose not to

meet any conditions that might have been attached to it. We might think of various ways the gift might be offered but not ever given. Salvation by grace works in a

similar way.

Receiving that gift requires faith. God calls upon us to believe what He has said about salvation, trust that He can and will give it, and meet the conditions of obedience He has required of us. All of this together describes faith. What is interesting is that our ability to develop and demonstrate faith is also connected to God's grace. Faith comes by hearing the word of God (Rom. 10:17); yet Paul refers to that message of salvation as "the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24), and "the word of His grace" (Acts 20:32). The brethren of Achaia are called, "those who had believed through grace" (Acts 18:27). God's grace provides all we need for salvation, but we must have faith to accept what God's grace provides.

Understanding that we are saved by grace through faith helps us to continue to live in a way that glorifies God. We take no credit for our own salvation. We are not discouraged by the shortcomings we have despite our best efforts, and we remain humble, thankful, and at peace in our lives no matter what challenges we face.

"He chose not to leave us to the destruction we brought upon ourselves"

Saved by Faith

Aaron Dodson - Washington Ave. church of Christ, Jonesboro, AR

There are many religiously minded people who think that it is a heresy to believe and teach that obedience precedes salvation. They argue that a theology which teaches that obedience is essential to salvation is one which rejects grace. This mindset is not from Scripture, but is perhaps a overreaction to teachings on the opposite end i.e., salvation *by* man-made works. There are some who teach something like: *“if you follow all the rules and do what you’re supposed to do, you are going to heaven; because obedience is most important.”* Their opponents point out correctly that no one is sinlessly perfect (Rom. 3:9, 23) and that all are in need of forgiveness and salvation. **Truly, any doctrine that teaches or implies that mankind is able to save himself by living sinlessly is obviously false.**

In an attempt to avoid this false doctrine many have established an equally false doctrine. This second group teaches that obedience is not essential to salvation. They say and write things like: *“There is nothing you must do to be saved.”* **First of all**, if there is nothing that one must do in order to be saved, why would not everyone be saved? Doesn’t God want all to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4)? Someone might respond, “well, because everyone does not believe.” Isn’t this a contradiction though? Wouldn’t it be a contradiction to say that there is nothing one must do to be saved and in the very next breath preach that one must believe in order to be saved? Isn’t telling someone to “believe” telling them to do something? In fact, Jesus said that believing is a “work” (John 6:29). Further, the contradictions continue, when many go on to say that to be saved one must “ask Jesus into their heart”, or “accept Him as their Lord and Savior,” or say the “sinner’s prayer.” Are not the words “ask,” “accept,” and “say,” verbs? Doesn’t a person have to *do* something in order to accomplish these tasks? These contradictions are mentioned not to hurt the character or sincerity of anyone, but to expose error. **The contradictory teaching that says “you must do nothing” but also says “you must do this or that” has to be abandoned because it isn’t from Scripture nor is it logical.** There is God’s truth which is neither “no obedience is necessary to be saved” nor is it “salvation

is by obedience only without the sacrifice of Jesus”

Stated plainly: **“Without faith it is impossible to please Him: for he that cometh to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him”** (Heb. 11:6). What will it look like if I diligently seek Him? Hebrews 11 says it is when I (a) hear God’s word (b) trust it and (c) obey it. Truly, we are saved upon the **condition of faith**: *“For by grace you have been saved through faith”* (Ephesians 2:8). Faith is the means through which the gift of eternal life is received. Paul explained to the churches of Galatia, *“For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus”* (Gal. 3:26). Is that it? “Faith alone?” No! He explains what their faith did, *“for as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ”* (Gal. 3:27). Why did they do that? Was it because they were trying to *“work their way to heaven?”* Was it because *“they meant well, but misunderstood the Gospel?”* **No,**

“Faith is the means through which the gift of eternal life is received.”

it’s because that’s exactly what Jesus Christ said all people who live on this side of His cross are to do if they want to be saved. *“Go ye into all the world and preach the*

gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned” (Mk. 16:15-16). **Paul preached the same exact message that Jesus preached.** Since all spiritual blessings are *“in Christ”* (Eph. 1:3) and God, Christ, and Paul say the way to get into Christ is by faith and baptism, why would a person today not do that? **Nowhere does the New Testament say that salvation is by “grace only”, or “faith only,” or “faith and confession only,” or “baptism only.”** We must take it all together. **How am I diligently seeking God? How is my faith pleasing Him if I do not do exactly what He said to do, nothing more and nothing less?**

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 - Baptism does save us (1 Pet. 3:21)

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Mail address corrections to:

Fulton County Gospel News

PO Box 251

Mammoth Spring, AR 72554

Editor - Barry O'Dell

Phone - (870) 625-3217

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