

# Straight Bible Talk

Manchester Church of Christ, Share Christ's Love and Share His Message

## Faith and Works

January, 2006

Volume 1 Issue 1

Martin Luther, the great 15th century reformer, had doubts about the book of James in the New Testament because of what was written there about faith and works. He thought that the letter by James should have been omitted from the New Testament. In the end he accepted James and included it in the German translation he prepared for publication.

Others have imagined that James was writing in rebuke of Paul because of the position that Paul took in his letter to the Romans. Current evidence suggests that James wrote his letter before Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, so James was not writing against that letter.

Every religion, every religious group has struggled with the relationship of faith and works. Groups have split and divided in heated arguments about that relationship. Some have come down on the side of "faith only" while others have come down on the side of "works only."

It is not just Christian groups who have struggled with the issue of faith and works. For those who follow the Quran, it is a simple matter. "But those who believe and work righteousness will be admitted to Gardens beneath which rivers flow, - to dwell therein for aye with the leave of their Lord: Their greeting therein will be: "Peace!" (Surah 14:23) What they are commanded to believe is that Allah is God and Mohammed is His prophet and "it is not befitting to (the majesty of) Allah that He should beget a son." (Surah 19:35)

Some years ago while working in Philadelphia a local Catholic church passed out a tract from door to door. The claim was made that anyone who died wearing a particular scapular would go straight to

heaven. I have no idea whether that represented any kind of official Catholic teaching, but it represented the teaching of that particular church.

Systems that begin as faith and works both being necessary for salvation easily slide off into a works only kind of thinking. It was partly in reaction to that teaching that both Martin Luther and John Calvin came out with a teaching that claimed "faith only" as the way to salvation.

In Calvin's system, he went a step further and proclaimed that salvation was entirely a matter of God and that faith was a gift which God implanted in a person. Faith itself became something completely separate and apart from anything that a person might do.

There seems to me to be two problems in this whole matter. One is a misunderstanding of God and the other is a misunderstanding of faith.

When considering the nature of God there is a simple question. Did God create man with free will or did He not? An accompanying question is simply, "Is salvation conditional or unconditional?"

If salvation is unconditional or without any choice being made by people, then there is no point in any further discussion. Everything has already been decided and nothing that I believe or do will make any difference. If salvation is conditional then it is simply a matter of determining from the Bible what the con-

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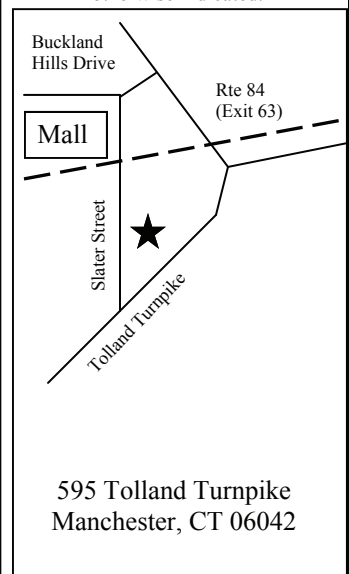
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Sun Bible Classes—9 AM  
Sun Worship—10 AM  
Sun Eve Worship—6:00 PM  
Wed Bible Class—7:00 PM

"God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world ."

Hebrews 1:1-2

All scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise indicated.



ditions are.

For example, if faith is the only condition that one finds then the matter is settled. The matter is not settled simply because one finds that faith is a condition. One verse does not settle the issue once one has reached the conclusion that salvation is conditional. Any verse in the Bible that relates to salvation can contain additional conditions.

### **Conditional or Unconditional Salvation**

Joshua challenged the people of Israel, "If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

Moses challenged those same people some 40 years earlier, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants."

Peter spoke of God's desires in his second letter, "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance."

Paul admonished the Christians in Galatia, "Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God."

If Christians who engage in such practices "will not inherit the kingdom of God," then it stands to reason that they can control such urges. Their salvation is conditional upon deciding not to do such things.

Perhaps it is simply a matter of the entire Bible addressing the issue of what God expects of us. The Bible is given to persuade us to follow a particular course of conduct. Our relationship with God is based on what we believe and what we do. All of the verses above require that we believe salvation is conditional. Otherwise words like choose and choice have no real meaning.

In a Roman jail in Philippi, Paul and Titus were asked the question, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" The response was: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."

Notice that Paul did not say, "There is nothing for you to do. God will make you a believer." For Paul, believing is something that a person must do in order to be saved. That is a condition. It leaves open the question of whether there are other conditions. In the account of this man's response we find that he washed the wounds of Paul and Titus. Afterward the man and his family were immediately baptized, "that very hour of the night."

Several times in the New Testament, in addition to the example just cited, the question was put to Jesus or his apostles, "What must I do?" or some similar question. Whether it was the rich ruler, the three thousand Jews on the day of Pentecost or Saul of Tarsus on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians, the answer always came back that there was something that they needed to do.

From all of this we conclude that salvation is conditional. There are conditions laid down by God with which we must comply if we would spend eternity with God in heaven.

### **The Nature of Faith**

Perhaps it would be helpful to investigate a little further the nature of faith. Faith has been defined as conviction or trust. It is an intellectual decision to accept certain things as true. It is a decision to trust someone or something

For example, John wrote near the close of his gospel account of Jesus, "Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name." John expected people to consider the evidence that he had set forth concerning Jesus. From that evidence he expected that people would make a decision about whether they would believe that Jesus is the Son of God, or whether they would refuse to believe.

In the Great Commission, Jesus sent his disciples out with these words, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned." Jesus expected his disciples to present the evidence that he had died for the sins of the world, been buried and had been raised on the third day. From that evidence he expected that people would make a decision to believe or disbelieve.

But there is another important aspect of faith. That aspect is that obedience is often inseparable from faith. Faith and obedience are not two competing principles, but are part of one and the same principle.

For example we have this passage from the Gospel according to John: "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."

The opposite of faith in this passage is not unbelief, but disobedience. Obedience is implied in faith. It is understood as a component of true faith. There is no such thing as true faith apart from obedience.

Let me give you an example. Someone cries out, "Fire, fire!" People react in one of two ways. One yawns and says, "Sure and it's going to snow in July." He stands where he is. He does nothing because he does not believe.

Another hears the same cry and goes running from the building, in fear for his life. Why? Because he believed the person who cried, "Fire." In this example, faith requires action. Unbelief requires no action.

Over and over again in the Bible, the actions of faith are emphasized. Noah believed God and built the ark. Abraham believed God and left his home, his family and his relatives. Moses believed God and returned to Egypt to free God's people, the Israelites.

The eleventh chapter of Hebrews illustrates over and over again this principle. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old gained approval." In example after example, the writer details the deeds of those who believed. From Abel, through Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses and many others, we are told of what faith accomplished. Faith and obedience are not two separate principles, but go hand in hand together. There is no true faith without obedience.

Whether one reads Paul's great letter to the Romans or James's letter to the scattered Jewish Christians, the same faith is being advocated, a faith that obeys God. And Abraham is the "poster boy" for faith that both of them hold up before their readers. In the first chapter of Romans, Paul even speaks of the "obedience of faith."

### **The Basis for Salvation**

But proper faith alone is not sufficient. There must be proper faith in the true God. And it is the true God alone who has offered salvation unto people.

Salvation has always been dependent upon the mercy of God. From the beginning down to our own days, salvation has been based on an acceptable sacrifice offered as an atonement for sin. Without atonement, faith is of no avail.

It is also evident that an atonement based on what we do is not sufficient. What we do is a matter of using what has been given us. That is what we owe to God, always. Sin is a failure to offer that which we owe to God. Replacing sin with righteousness only offers to God what should always have been offered. Today's righteousness does not make up for yesterday's mistakes.

Those who trust in their works to save them have missed the point. Their works are what they owe to God. Those works do not make up for their failures and everyone has failed in some way at some time.

God Himself offers the sacrifice of atonement. He sent His only Son to be the atonement for the sins of the world. What He expects is that people will believe Him. He expects that people will believe that Jesus is His only Son and that they will believe that Jesus died for their sins.

Every sacrifice offered in the Old Testament was a testimony to God's plan for saving people. Those sacrifices testified to God's requirement that there be a sacrifice for sins. And those sacrifices offered week after week, month after month, year after year, testified to the fact that they did not satisfy the justice of God.

God's justice was satisfied only when His Son, Jesus of Nazareth, went to the cross at Golgotha and died. At his death, Jesus cried out, "It is finished." The writer of Hebrews tells us, "For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified."

The Christian system is the only one that offers a complete plan of salvation for every person. It is a system based on the only true God. It is based on the only true sacrifice for sins. It is based on a true faith that is obedient to the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the only system that can bring a lasting peace and a fellowship with the one true God.

### **Why Don't People Believe the Bible?**

In my experience, most people who do not believe the Bible are people who have been convinced by someone else that they should not believe it. They are not people who made a thorough investigation of the subject and came to the conclusion that the Bible was not

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the Word of God.

In thousands of Bible studies with people over the past 40 years I have answered many questions about the Bible. Many of these people have been influenced by television shows that they have watched or unbelieving preachers who have belittled the Bible.

While many excellent documentaries have been produced, ones about the Bible have generally aimed at creating doubt, confusion and unbelief in the Word of God. There is an "elite" group of intelligentsia that do not want people to believe in the Bible. They have been sowing their seeds of doubt whenever and wherever possible.

What is amazing is the amount of time and effort that has been spent proving that the Bible is not the Word of God? Why not simply ignore the book if you do not like it? If someone "gets on your case" about doing or not doing something because of what the Bible says, then just tell them to "take a hike."

But I digress. Getting back to why people do not believe the Bible, there has been only one main reason with which I am familiar. In my experi-

ence, they have come across something in the Bible that they do not want to do. The command is clearly in the Bible, but obedience is difficult or perhaps even painful. Rather than change their life, the Bible's credibility as a book from God is attacked.

It is pretty hard to say, "No," to God. It is far easier to say no if one can first of all find some reason to attribute the problem to some source other than God. "That's just Paul," for example. Or, "the Bible has been translated so many times that it is not reliable anymore." (Whatever that is supposed to mean.) A translation of the Bible is made by reading the original Hebrew or Greek and putting it in English.

The Bible, for the most part, is not hard to understand. People do not believe the Bible because they do not want to believe it. They would rather not be burdened with following God's rules. It is more fun or it is easier to get what one wants without the restrictions that God has placed upon people in the Bible.

The problem is that, while one may reject the Bible, the words of the Bible will be the standard by which your life will be judged in eternity.

**We welcome the readers of our first edition of "Straight Bible Talk", an in-depth discussion of timely Biblical topics**

**Editions will be mailed quarterly to the residences around our new facilities at 595 Tolland Tnpk Manchester CT**