

Chapter 9

Theological Correctness

Theological correctness refers to the insistence of many religious conservatives upon the profession of certain theological beliefs as a necessary condition of Christian salvation and inclusion in the family of God. For many Christian conservatives the Gospel of Jesus Christ is good news, it would seem, only for those who are fortunate enough to be exposed to this belief system and subscribe to it. It doesn't matter how religious, moral, or otherwise deserving an individual might be, salvation and entrance into God's heavenly kingdom is only available to those who subscribe to a very detailed system of theological beliefs about the work and person of Jesus Christ. In other words, in order to be saved one must not only be spiritually, morally and ethically correct, but theologically correct as well.

Just how detailed is this system of necessary and required beliefs? Well, in the view of many conservative Christians, it is more detailed than you might think. For example, it is not enough to be a follower of Jesus Christ and seek to obey his religious and ethical teachings. There are certain specific teachings about his person and ministry that you must also subscribe to. You must believe that He is not only the Son of God, but is uniquely the "*only begotten*" son of God and at the same time He is also God Himself. Additionally, you must believe in the atonement, and not just any definition or theory of the atonement will do. You must believe in what is referred to as the substitutionary atonement, that Jesus on the cross of Calvary took upon himself the sins of all mankind, and paid the penalty for your sins. In order to be saved you must receive Christ as your personal Savior and Lord and ask forgiveness for your sins based on Jesus shed blood on the cross of Calvary. In other words, it is not enough just to believe that Jesus is the unique son of God, and is actually God himself, the third person of the Trinity, and that He died for the sins of mankind, but you must also believe that he rose bodily from the dead and is alive today, and you must enter into a personal relationship with him and ask him to forgive your sins based on his shed blood on Calvary. And you need to be sincere about it! Hypocrites and unbelievers will definitely not be admitted into Heaven. Exactly how strong or perfect your belief or faith must be has never been made clear. Just to be sure, it would help to produce a sufficient amount of follow-through and good works as evidence that your faith is genuine.

Naturally the above level of theological correctness would pretty much rule out 99 percent of the people on earth as candidates for salvation. Most Roman Catholics wouldn't make it, because they rely mostly on their good works for salvation and have little understanding of the principle of salvation by "*grace apart from works.*" Mormons are excluded because although they believe that Jesus is the Son of God they don't believe he is the unique Son of God and that He is actually God Himself. And of course, Mormons don't really believe in the Christian God, because they believe that God was once a man and that it is possible for men to actually become gods. Boy, talk about theological incorrectness! Jehovah's witnesses are excluded because they don't believe in the Trinity or that Jesus was the unique son of God, and they rely mostly on their own good works for their salvation. Many, if not most, Christian liberals are excluded because

they don't believe in the deity of Christ or the resurrection of Christ or the substitutionary atonement. Even though many of those Christian liberals are deeply devoted to God and seek to follow the teachings of Christ, they are not technically born again or saved.

If most professing Christians are not theologically correct enough to enter Heaven, what chance is there for the Hindu, Moslem, Buddhist, Atheist, or the starving beggar on the streets of Calcutta who doesn't have even the slightest clue that he is loved by God.

Nevertheless, the Bible does teach that theological correctness is an important part of the salvation process. The issue I have with those who insist on theological correctness as a condition of salvation concerns the timing of it. Becoming saved and experiencing Christian salvation is a process that does not occur at any one instantaneous point in time. None of us are completely saved yet. The converse is also true. No one is completely lost. I believe that Christ made provision on Calvary for the salvation of everyone, and everyone is in the process of becoming fully saved. God is at work in our lives before, during and after our profession of theologically correct beliefs about Jesus Christ. In my view, religiously devout individuals who are genuinely seeking to please God, though misinformed on many important theological points of doctrine, may be closer to God, and farther along in the salvation process, than individuals who subscribe to all the correct doctrines but are not seeking to please God in many important aspects of their lives. Filling the gaps in our theological understanding is something that God will do for all of us sooner or later. For most, this will not occur until after death.

Experiencing Christ

As part of my research for a thesis which I wrote in college, I surveyed the beliefs of a variety of Christian denominations. I developed a doctrinal questionnaire and administered it to the entire congregations of several Christian churches. One of the questions listed several "fundamental" Christian doctrines which included the following: Belief in the Deity of Christ; the Substitutionary Atonement; the Virgin Birth of Christ; the Resurrection of Christ from the Dead; acknowledgment of Christ as Lord of one's life; repentance from sin; the literal, verbal inerrancy of the Scriptures; and a few others. The question was, "*Which of the items on the list are absolutely necessary for salvation?*" As one might expect, members of the more liberal denominations checked fewer items on the list than members of the more conservative denominations. Many members of very conservative fundamentalist congregations checked every single item on the list.

The conditions for salvation are further complicated by the difficulty of establishing exactly how much belief or faith would be required. Belief, or faith, is characterized in many Bible passages as being strong or weak in various circumstances and from one individual to the next. How would one distinguish between saving faith and faith which doesn't quite cut it? This is not an easy question to answer.

In the case of the prerequisite of repentance from sin and acknowledging Jesus Christ as Lord of one's life, how is it possible to know for sure just how much repentance is required or to what degree a person must yield to the Lordship of Christ in his or her life?

The problem resolves itself, however, if you define a Christian to be a person who has a personal relationship with Christ, rather than a person who merely subscribes to a system of beliefs. As you know after reading this far into this book, I believe that everyone is in the process of becoming saved. I believe that one day all creation will become fully reconciled to Christ. I believe that Christ died for the benefit of all mankind, and because of this all mankind will eventually become saved.

Most Christians would agree with the Apostle Paul that we are saved by grace, not works. We come to Christ “as we are” with all of our sinful baggage and with woefully inadequate faith and doctrinal understanding. He turns none of us away (see John 6:37). He loves every one of us with infinite, “*agape*,” love and sees us not only as we are, but also as we will become.

Our salvation is “*in Christ*” (see Rom. 3:24; 8:1; 1 Cor. 1:30; 15:22; 2 Cor. 5:19; 2 Tim. 1:1; 2:10). What that means is that our salvation is in our relationship with Christ. The degree to which we experience Christ in our lives is the degree to which we have become saved. The Gospel of Christ is good news. It is not a set of intellectual, doctrinal, and behavioral barriers which we must overcome in order to be accepted by God.

By regarding Christian salvation as something one experiences, rather than something one acquires at a specific point in time, most of the difficult doctrinal issues resolve themselves. One no longer needs to wonder, “Am I saved or not?” The religious elite of Jesus’ day were harshly criticized by Christ for their hypocritical and self-righteous attitudes. On the other hand, Jesus was welcoming and kind to those who were regarded by the religious elite as the least worthy, such as the woman caught in adultery, the poor widow who only had one small coin to donate, the tax collector, the despised Samaritan, the Roman Centurion, lepers, outcasts of society, and especially children who knew little or nothing about religious doctrine.

No one ever got saved by knowing or believing something about God (see James, Chapter 2). We experience God’s salvation only as we experience Christ himself. Some view the salvation experience as inviting Christ to forgive your sins and asking Christ to come and live inside your heart. If that’s as far as it ever goes, however, it cannot be said that you have become fully saved. You may have taken a very important first step, but you may only be regarded as a “*babe in Christ*” (see 1 Cor. 3:1). If you invite Christ into your life, but don’t allow Him to control various aspects of your life, then He is not really living inside you. Christ is omnipresent. Technically He lives everywhere. He exists inside and outside of everyone. When the Bible refers to Christ as abiding or living inside of you, it is not talking about Christ merely taking up space. When Paul said, “*for to me to live is Christ*” (*Phil. 1:21*), he was saying that he was allowing Jesus to control every aspect of his life. Paul yielded up his body, his hands, his feet, his mind, and allowed Christ to use them as instruments for carrying out the ministry of spreading the gospel. Paul so completely identified with Christ that he could honestly say, “*I no longer live, but Christ lives in me*” (*Gal. 2:20*)

So, exactly how does one go about experiencing Christ, as described above? The key to achieving this is to focus on the relationship with Christ and not on acts of obedience and the avoidance of sin. God loves and accepts you just as you are. There is nothing you can do to be worthy of God’s love or in any way be deserving of the salvation He offers to you in Christ.

Salvation is a gift that God offers to all. There are no preconditions that must be met. All that remains for you to do is to experience it. All you need to do is allow Christ into your life and get to know Him. Thank Him for everything He has done for you and ask for His help and guidance with every important decision you need to make in life. Share with Him all your burdens, heartaches, disappointments, worries and cares. Ask Him to intercede in your life and the lives of those whom you love and those whom you ought to love. Ask Him to help you develop qualities of Godly character and experience the fruit of the Spirit, such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. When you stumble, ask Him to pick you up. When you think wrong thoughts or act in selfish ways or commit wrongful acts, ask Him to forgive you. Ask Him to forgive you for sins which you are not yet willing to give up. It's OK. He understands. Rome wasn't built in a day. Your salvation experience is an ages-long journey that begins with just a few halting steps.

Paul admonishes us to "*pray without ceasing*" (1 Thes. 5:17). Talk to God throughout the day, every day. In the beginning you may only remember to talk with Him once or twice a day, or once or twice a week. That's OK. He is always by your side anyway. He will never leave you nor forsake you. It's hard to discipline yourself to spend hours on your knees each day in fervent prayer, as is the habit of some (not many). I myself prefer a more casual approach. Brother Lawrence, a medieval monk, described his experience with Christ as "*practicing the presence of God.*" It was simply a matter of continually reminding himself that God was present in his life and cared about every daily activity of life. Brother Lawrence played a very humble role in the monastery. He worked mostly in the kitchen and referred to God as "*the God of the pots and pans.*" Even in the most mundane aspects of daily living, Brother Lawrence enjoyed the presence of God.

God's perfect standards of behavior are impossible for anyone to attain in this life. You will never measure up to those standards. The harder you try to please God by measuring up to those impossible standards the more defeated and frustrated you will become in your daily walk with Christ. Most likely, you will give up trying altogether. The secret to making progress in your Christian walk is to not try so hard. Keep the lines of communication open between Christ and yourself. Transfer the load onto the back of Christ and allow him to carry it for you (see Matt. 11:28-29). He wants to live His life through you. When you transfer the burdens of daily living and Christian service to Him, then it becomes His problem and not yours. He is more than capable of doing what you cannot possibly do in your own strength.

Is it really that easy, you might ask? What about passages in the Bible that indicate the necessity of self-denial and sacrifice as a condition of salvation and following Christ? Did not Christ say that if you did not love Him even more than your own family you were not worthy of Him? Did He not say that in order to follow Him you would have to deny yourself, take up a cross of suffering daily? Did He not say that if your righteousness did not exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees you could not enter the Kingdom of Heaven? Did He not say that you cannot serve two masters and that you had to choose between serving the "world" and serving Him? Did not the Apostle Paul say in Romans that a true Christian is one who has yielded himself to Christ as an obedient servant?

Here's my answer. In response to one of those harsh sayings of Jesus, his disciples asked, "*How then can anyone be saved?*" Jesus answer was that with God all things are possible (see Matt. 19:16-27). The process of becoming a Christian and becoming saved is not instantaneous. A Chinese philosopher once said that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. The salvation process involves identifying with Christ and getting to know Him on a more and more personal level as time goes on. Apart from Christ we can accomplish nothing of lasting value (John 15:5). The Christian walk is characterized as a process of letting go, rather than trying harder. It involves stepping aside and allowing Christ to step in. Salvation is a gift, not a result of good works. There is no room for boasting. Christian baptism pictures our salvation as a process of identifying with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. We die to our old way of life and rise up with Christ in newness of life. We shed the old and put on the new. In the words of Paul, "*old things pass away and all things become new*" (2 Cor. 5:17). The key to all this is our relationship with and our identification with Christ. Our salvation is "*in Christ.*" We are only saved to the extent that we abide in Christ.

One day we will become completely saved, and our final redemption will result not from our own efforts but from the work of Christ in our hearts and minds. It is He who is able to keep us safe until that day and eventually present us faultless before the throne of God (Jude 1:24). So, relax, and quit worrying about not being able to measure up. Practice the presence of Christ in your life with every step you take. Be aware of His presence and closeness to you. Bring every care and concern to Him and ask Him to handle it for you. Ask Him for His strength to carry on when faced with difficult, even impossible circumstances. Thank Him continually for the bountiful blessings in your life. The closer you walk with Christ, the more like Him you will become. The more you experience Christ Himself, the more you will experience the fruit of His Spirit in your life. This fruit includes not only the benefits of love, joy, and peace, but also the development of Godly character, which includes traits such as patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Self-denial is a part of that package, but what you receive in return makes everything else pale by comparison. If you want your dog to let go of the dirty old bone he dug up in the back yard present him with a nice juicy steak. That is what God does for you. He wants you to give up your old way of life, but the new life He gives you in return is infinitely better than the one you are leaving behind.

The Importance of Knowing God by the Name Jesus

We need to keep in mind that God the Father and Jesus Christ are in a very real sense one and the same. Jesus is the means by which an unknowable God makes Himself known here on earth. When we pray to Jesus, we are at the same time praying to God. When we address God as our Heavenly Father, we are also addressing Jesus Christ. When we ask for guidance of the Holy Spirit, we are talking to both the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ. In the Bible they are used interchangeably. Try not to get too hung on the name, Jesus. Yes, there is something wonderful about that name. But, we don't worship a name. We worship the person behind that name. Jesus was the name given to God incarnate during His earthly sojourn. Who really knows what name He went by in the heavenly realms before His incarnation? Who really knows what name He goes by today in the heavenly realms? We know from the Near Death Accounts (NDEs), that in

Heaven communication is telepathic and no actual words are involved. People are recognized in ways that do not involve physical names. When the Bible says that Jesus has been given a name which is above every name and that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, I believe the reference is to the person behind the name, not the name itself.

Why do I say all this? The reason is that many devoutly religious people of other faiths, who do not know God by the name Jesus, are not excluded from the salvation that God freely offers to all. Jesus listens to their prayers, just as He listens to ours. You might believe that not addressing Jesus by name is theologically incorrect. In my view, that is an error that can be easily corrected later in this life or in the next. God is at work in all of our lives before, during, and after our profession of faith in Jesus Christ.