

A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE: ORTHODOXY, THE RIGHT JESUS, AND ETERNAL LIFE

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I. INTRODUCTION: ERROR AND CHRISTIAN FAITH

Many years ago, before YouTube, before even “Candid Camera,” television host Art Linkletter made a big hit with the “Kids Say the Darndest Things” segment on his weekly show. Children would say cute things that struck his studio audience (and millions of homemakers tuning in for the late-afternoon show) as just crazy enough to laugh Mr. Linkletter all the way to the bank. Now those “kids” have all grown up, but they have not changed a bit. I know, because I have met them. In church. Christians still say (and believe) the “darndest things.” Recently I learned that one self-styled Christian group was teaching that degenerate descendants of the cursed seed of Ham were still alive in the Northeastern United States. Why do we not hear about them on the news? They congregate only at night, and they travel only along the open spaces under high-tension power lines.

Of course, these haywire beliefs make great job security for theologians; without them, would anyone believe correctly? Someone must straighten out the multitudes. Of course, there is the small matter that such thinkers contradict each other on points far and wide, large and small, from the number of angels on the head of a pin to the age of the universe. Even so, we may yet turn the others around before too long (although to say so may add one more “darndest thing” to the growing list).

Fortunately, haywire beliefs need keep no one from eternal life. Readers of this journal hold that faith in Jesus Christ for eternal life is a sure bet. I will argue in this paper that as it is Jesus Himself who offers that life, He lets neither the quality of belief about Himself (orthodoxy), or quantity of these beliefs (ignorance), stop Him. Jesus Himself gives eternal life to anyone who simply comes to believe He can do so. In other words, “the right Jesus” is the one who gives life to anyone who can believe it so, just as He promised. Jesus is exactly the “right kind of Person” to be able to do this, and He is unhindered to do so by any other beliefs, haywire or not, or lack of beliefs, which we may hold.

This perspective is, of course, far from universal. To some, the idea that one can be certain of eternal life without knowing a substantial theology of Jesus Christ is itself a “haywire belief,” to be resisted as if it were cultic. (Having recently written on this topic,¹ I have quickly become aware of its opponents’ very determined point of view.) This paper will respond to the idea that belief of a certain theological framework about Jesus is a necessary aspect of faith for eternal life. We will assert that “faith,” which in the biblical sense does not require orthodoxy, in this respect differs not at all from good common sense about belief. Further, this “common-sense” view of faith is far more direct and effective in dealing with cults than the “right Jesus” approach. Finally, I intend to show it more broadly scriptural than the view emphasizing orthodoxy for salvation.

II. LOOKING FOR “MR. RIGHT”: BELIEF AND SAVING BELIEF

To begin with an everyday example, a woman I recently met, about fifty years old, with at least some college education, reported she will not fly. This woman was otherwise very reasonable, but she still will not board an airplane; flight is too dangerous for her. My psychologist brother-in-law reports that this woman represents a fair-sized class of

¹“Alp Upon Alp,” *Grace in Focus*, Grace Evangelical Society, 24:1 (January/February 2009).

people; in his practice, he has helped such people gain the confidence necessary for taking flight. On the other hand, my four-year-old granddaughter gives absolutely no thought to the dangers of air travel. Armed with her mother's and father's assurance alone, she anticipates flying to see her extended family with relish. What is the difference between my granddaughter and the grandmother who will not fly? The granddaughter has every good and right reason to believe her parents; meanwhile, the older woman apparently has found no one yet to convince her that flight is safe.

Of course, great numbers of fliers board aircraft every day completely and blissfully unaware of the underlying mechanics. Lifting a 350-ton conveyance 32,000 feet in the air and descending safely to the passenger's destination thousands of miles distant, often across vast spaces of water, must, after all, depend on very strong principles. But few passengers give any thought to the physical laws of Bernoulli or Newton that underlie aeronautical lift. How many consider the billions of dollars spent every year to orchestrate departures and arrivals and to keep pilots and support staff trained and disciplined? Fliers of course really need not know the sustaining principles to be confident of their destination. It is enough, and millions find it so, to depend on what can be as simple a reason as "my mommy said I'm going to go see Grandpa."

Christian faith is much the same. A four-year-old can have full confidence, with none of the underlying knowledge, that her flight will arrive where and when it should. Should we think it necessary that an inquirer know the principles of substitutionary atonement, or hypostatic union, or any number of other truths about Christ before believing His promise of eternity? To ask the question in this way is to highlight the illogic of requiring theology before claiming eternal life. Truth naturally helps toward the saving persuasion, but what is absolutely necessary may be completely different for each individual; a checklist cannot be prescribed. It is belief in the bottom line, eternal life, that counts; instrumental beliefs are just that—the means of attaining to faith.

Consider another common-sense example: the starry-eyed teenage girl who heads off for the first time in her father's

classic car. All she may know is that the process of turning the ignition and steering while applying pressure to the gas will transport her to Johnny's house. Need she understand anything of mechanical engineering? Combustion? The friction coefficient of rubber on roadways? For that matter, what difference does it make if she holds to an unorthodox theory; say that "flubber" fuels the car? Or if the flier believes the "flubber" theory of flight? Inadequate and unorthodox evidence can negatively influence belief, it is true, but belief may equally well arise without any understanding of the instrumentals. Again, the application to Christian faith is transparent; the underpinnings of Jesus' ability to grant eternal life assists in bringing people to faith, but for an evangelist to require them as an article of faith is overreaching.

More to the point under consideration, consider the case of the young woman who begins looking for "Mr. Right." She hopes one day to meet a man (if not "Johnny") whose vow of love and life-long care she can believe, and so live happily ever after. She may very well find "Mr. Right" without the soundness of wise parental counsel, private investigators, data from online dating applications, or even responses to a personal questionnaire. Intuition, his wink, the color of his truck, or any number of considerations may bring the young woman to the conviction (true or false) that she has finally found "Mr. Right." Ultimately, however, it is not *correct* information about Prince Charming, but *persuasive* information, that wins her heart.

Likewise with orthodoxy about Christ. In this respect, the "right Jesus" to believe for eternal life is no different from the "Mr. Right" of teenage dreams. Can I be convinced, based on information hopefully helpful but sometimes haywire, that Jesus' promise of eternal security to believers is mine for the believing? If so, I have believed in the "right Jesus," simply the Man, Jesus, whose enormous promise of eternal salvation is rendered credible by the manifold witness of the NT.

In all this, the critical issue is not correctness or comprehensiveness, but credibility. While sound information lends credentials to any proposition or person, correctness is a secondary consideration. I come to believe in Jesus not through

an airtight perception of His person or work, but because my data—accurate, extensive, or not—lead to the conviction that He gives me eternal life. To insist on orthodox Christology or soteriology as a mark of the faith valid for that eternal life is to misunderstand the process of believing in Jesus Christ. It converts the evangelist into a dogmatist; it throws up theological “Alp upon Alp” between the prospective believer and the goal of eternal life. And, I am saying, it manifests a lack of common sense whenever it does so.

This common sense about Christian faith is of course also the biblical sense. To paraphrase the argument of Gordon H. Clark’s *Faith and Saving Faith*, they are of the same kind. To believe in Jesus Christ is to be persuaded of the proposition, from evidence of varying quality and quantity, that Jesus is the Guarantor of eternal life to all believers. For the readership of this journal, a detailed proof of this contention should be unnecessary. Below, nonetheless, is a review of several passages illustrating the point.

In Paul’s evangelism, the man Jesus—not the orthodox Person of systematic theology—is the object of faith (Acts 13:38), and eternal life is the end result (13:46, 48).² Paul’s preaching is likewise in perfect harmony with his own testimony, as stated in 1 Tim 1:16: “However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to *believe on Him for everlasting life*.” For Paul, Christian belief is no different from believing in the pilot to carry me safely to a destination or believing in Prince Charming for the happily-ever-after. Paul was convinced from the moment he met the Savior (“it is *Jesus*, whom you are persecuting”—Acts 9:5) that Jesus was Lord of life, and that he (Paul) had received it.

As might be expected from its stated purpose, however, the Gospel of John provides the preponderance of clear NT examples of common-sense faith in Christ (John 20:30-31). Here, where belief in Jesus is equivalent to recognizing Him

² For an extended treatment of this argument, see Zane Hodges, *Did Paul Preach Eternal Life? Should We?* (Dallas, TX: Kerugma, Inc., 2007).

as Christ,³ Guarantor of eternal life, every account of conversion richly illustrates the simple sense of faith described above. John's record of Jesus' first converts highlights Jesus' power to effect this persuasion. Despite his very brief introduction, Andrew's conviction of Jesus' Messianic identity (1:41) already on his first day with Jesus prompts him to bring his brother Peter to Christ. Similarly, having heard only two statements from Jesus, Nathanael believes in Him (1:49).⁴ Such openness "surprises" even Jesus: "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these" (1:50). Nathanael's dramatic shift from his momentarily earlier skepticism ("Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?") may have been naïve. Naïve or not, however, Nathanael's faith stands as a record of Jesus' instantaneous credibility. Naturally, both Andrew and Nathanael previously possessed a framework of anticipation about the coming Messiah (alloyed though it was with misconception). It was however what little they knew of Jesus the person, and not any systematic theology or catechism, that brought the saving persuasion to these men.

Among these earliest disciples, Philip is the patron saint of such faith. When he invites his friend Nathanael to Christ,⁵ Philip identifies Him as "Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." In this theologically unsophisticated invitation, Jesus is named only by family name and hometown,⁶ and likely then only to distinguish Him from other men so named. Even then, of course, calling Jesus "the son of Joseph" is technically incorrect. Against a backdrop of John the Baptist's lofty affirmation regarding Jesus' parentage (1:34), Philip's confession stands as a patent unorthodoxy. He is appar-

³"pisteuein eis Xriston Ihsoun (Gl. 2:16), eis auton and eis Eme (often in Jn.) etc. simply means pisteuein oti Ihsous epethanen kai enesth ... (1 Th. 4:14; cf. R. 10:9) or oti Ihsous estin Xristos (Jn. 20:31) etc. In Jn. esp. pisteuein eis and pisteuein oti are constantly used interchangeably in the same sense." Rudolph Bultmann, "pisteuw," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT)*, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-c1976), 203.

⁴The two confessions of 1:45 and 1:49 are literarily equivalent to that of 1:41.

⁵See previous footnote. "Him of whom Moses and the prophets wrote" is in context a Messianic assertion.

⁶Greek word order.

ently blissfully in error about Jesus' exalted Person⁷ (as of course might well be expected on day one), but this error does not keep him from the saving belief⁸ that Jesus is Christ.⁹ Philip's belief is inerrant nonetheless. As with the rest of John 1:41-54, Philip's confession serves the author's purpose to corroborate the overwhelming early credibility of Jesus, the man, as the Christ. As such, the story is an eyewitness account with its warts, not a reflection of the Gospel writer's own mature faith. Philip's example serves to establish that knowing the identity of Jesus, not the orthodoxy, is sufficient grounds for the faith that saves. Simply "finding" Jesus as the Messiah (1:45) is perfectly adequate for that.

Other Johannine examples of this unsophisticated faith include the woman at the well, whose regenerating belief apparently did not require Jesus to be deity. Her persuasion about eternal life is more directly explained by her persuasion that Jesus was the Messiah, the Prophet who would tell the truth about all things (John 4:25-26). Fully apart from knowing whether Jesus was God, she could aptly reason that the promise of eternal life to her if she believed (John 4:14c), as it was from the lips of the truth-telling Prophet, should be believed. There is likewise no record that her fellows, the townspeople of Sychar, recognized Jesus' deity (John 4:42; cf. 20:31a, 1 John 5:1), but their faith also stands in John's record as exemplary. The blind man of John 9 similarly lacked only the knowledge about the identity, not the Person, of the man standing before him (John 9:36-38) before he came to the faith that in the Gospel of John imparts eternal life.

These examples are only to be expected in a book where "believing in Jesus Christ" (John 6:47 [*Maj*]) is most perfectly

⁷ Cf. 1:18; see also 7:27-29.

⁸ Cf. 20:30-31.

⁹ Philip's statement that Jesus is *apo Nazaret* may also represent a technical factual error. Nathanael's response that nothing good comes *ek* ("out of") suggests source and hence likely birthplace. Philip does not correct the misimpression; likely, he also incorrectly believed at that time that Jesus was born in Nazareth, rather than Bethlehem. Further, of course, Philip is apparently nowhere near the persuasion that Jesus is the Word made flesh (1:17), whose origin would necessarily be heaven. None of these misimpressions, however, affects the validity of his faith in Jesus as Christ, nor its inevitable issue, eternal life (20:31).

illustrated by John 3:14-15. There, Nicodemus needed only acknowledge the identity of the person who was shortly (cf. John 2:19-21) to hang on a cross (cf. John 8:28, 12:32-34), and God would in response give him eternal life, the life that issues from the new birth under discussion (John 3:3, 5, 7-8; cf. also 1:12-13). According to John, belief that the man Jesus is the Guarantor of eternal life is sufficient.¹⁰ While Christology and soteriology are a major theme of the Fourth Gospel, there is life offered for a look to the Savior, with no limits on the level of information or orthodoxy prompting that look. The book also suggests the age-long pertinence of the message, as if applicable to some pre-Pauline period only; John concludes the book with the Guarantor of the promise still afoot on earth, not absent and ineffectual to fulfill it.

John's Gospel exemplifies most clearly the belief in Christ that is not unlike all other belief; the persuasion of Jesus as Savior follows the common sense of all persuasion. Pre-qualifying through orthodoxy, according to the NT as a whole, as well as to John, is not necessary for eternal life. It is the credibility of its Guarantor, not the correctness or completeness of one's view of Him, that brings people to the faith in Jesus Christ that saves forever.

III. THE "RIGHT JESUS" AND CULT ERRORS

I am convinced that standing alone, this principle can counter the concerns of those who worry about the professions of cult adherents. Much concern about correct theology in evangelism is from those who properly wish to protect the ranks of Christianity from cults. The "right Jesus" approach serves as a convenient Shibboleth to ferret out professing believers whose religious ties are suspect.¹¹

¹⁰ Bultmann's view is noteworthy here: "It is characteristic that in [John], as distinct from [Paul], the cross of Jesus is not the real offence, i.e., the fact which throws doubt on His claim. The offence is His humanity as such, i.e., the fact that His divine quality is not demonstrable." Rudolph Bultmann, "pisteuw," in TDNT, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-c1976), 224, footnote 354.

¹¹ This paper acknowledges legitimate pastoral concerns with cultic influence in a church setting, as well as the necessity of indoctrination. The issue under

But this strategy of screening is as unnecessary as it is flawed. The doctrinal legalism¹² which results from insistence on orthodoxy is flawed in its departure from the adequacy of faith in Jesus simply understood. But this strategy is also unnecessary. When cultists say they believe in Jesus Christ, they do not usually mean that they believe in Jesus to give or to have given them eternal life. Cultists are typically “works” people. Their final salvation depends not on something so simple as believing a promise, but ultimately on the dedicated works associated with their belief. In the experience of this writer, cult adherents essentially universally deny that Jesus (or anyone else.) can give anyone an irrevocable eternal life. That a person could be eternally saved with no deference to the cultist’s group, books, or style of works, is anathema. In my conversations, cultists often believe they have eternal life only by searching their scriptures, rather than by believing Christ for that life. An effective antidote to this presupposition is simply to bring the discussion to its “bottom line,” Jesus’ ability to impart eternal life to every believer, and not to raise the bar of orthodoxy.

Of course, in an important sense, cultic legalism is not at all unique; this error is the same kind we encounter in essentially every unbeliever. The reason many contemporary unbelievers remain in unbelief is the same reason cult adherents do not believe: they have not yet been persuaded that Jesus is able to impart life in response to simple belief of a promise. We should therefore dispense with tests of orthodoxy and rather use an approach that brings to light Jesus’ claim to impart eternal life. The ultimate issue after all is not Jesus’ nature, but His claim (whatever that nature) to give life. The evangelist drawn into Christological dispute has lost sight of the goal. A pure Christology can of course assist greatly in convincing the inquirer that Jesus is the “right kind” of person to be awarding eternal life to anyone who simply believes Him. But to require cult adherents—or

consideration in this paper however is evangelism strategy. The message to the unchurched, it is argued, should be short on dogmatics and long on rhetorics.

¹²Zane Hodges, “The Hydra’s Other Head: Theological Legalism,” *Grace in Focus*, Grace Evangelical Society, 23:5 (September/October 2008).

anyone else—to believe in the “right Jesus,” simply turns evangelism into polemics.

I have said above that cultists “usually” do not acknowledge Jesus as the Guarantor of eternal life to believers, but I do not believe that to be universally so. One Saturday a decade or so ago I answered a knock on my door at home, and engaged a man and his young protégé in a short conversation about the Bible and Jesus Christ. A few weeks later, the same man returned, this time with an elder of their church. After a few Saturdays, the man brought a man whose hometown in another state suggested him as a more or less “official” representative of the church. After listening to their brief presentation, I asked the articulate new evangelist if Jesus’ promise in John 5:24 (using their Bible, which offered a serviceable translation here) did not seem to promise passage from death to an irreversible eternal life at the moment a person believed that promise. To my surprise, the man admitted that it did. Even more surprising, however, was his profession that he believed it. He clearly stated that he knew his eternity was secure, whether he knocked on another door as long as he lived.

How to explain such an encounter?

The man (or I) may possibly have misunderstood a critical part of the discussion. I would not put this past my own imperfect presentation, although I have very carefully considered this method of bringing the issue to a head before and since.

The man may have been so entangled in legalism that he did not consider the contradictions of the “official” positions of his church to the utterance he had just made. (The same myopia can afflict even the orthodox.) As an official in the church, however, it seemed unlikely that he could have overlooked the tension between his words and the church’s words.

The man may, just then as we spoke, have been convinced by simple exposure to Jesus’ direct promise of eternal life. Because this was a brief conversation, I have doubted this possibility. Admittedly, however, the disciple Nathanael passed from thorough skeptic to confessing believer in a matter of moments (see John 1:46-50), based on a similarly

simple exposure to Jesus' words. We believers should never underestimate the power of the clear promises of Jesus (John 3:14-16, 5:24, 6:47, 10:27-28, and 11:25-26, among others) to impart eternal life. The man may never have "put it all together" as he did at that very moment, when he heard Jesus for himself.

I tentatively offer one last possible explanation for the man's response. Is it not possible that the man fully believed Jesus' promise of eternal life, and *at the same time* believed in some imperfect theory about Jesus' nature? The scriptural examples given above would seem to suggest this as a possibility. If this is the case, need we necessarily deny the man's regeneration?

I was intrigued to learn recently that aerodynamic science still is not fully agreed on the precise physical force that causes lift. Some cite Bernoulli's principle of fluid mechanics, while some believe that Newton's law ("every action brings an opposite and equal reaction") better explains flight. Presumably, one view may one day triumph, and the other view be rejected as irrelevant or flawed. In the meantime, however, both views fully admit to the bottom line, namely that flight occurs.

Need the Christological views of a cult adherent, repugnant to a thorough student of scripture, necessarily rule out the possibility of holding a sincere belief in eternal life through Jesus Christ, despite even rank errors in understanding the principles underlying that life? Even if such belief would seem a remote possibility, it strikes the present writer as presumptuous to deny it out of hand.

There may be other explanations behind the man's apparent profession on that day. Whatever that brief discussion represented, however, there seems no need to deny such professed faith by consigning it to a "wrong Jesus." Jesus makes the promise of eternal life to anyone who believes, no matter the background. I for one would not presume to counsel Jesus to refuse such inquirers eternal life.

An evangelist need not require correct theology from those of cultic persuasion as a condition of eternal life, any more than from everyday unbelievers. Can knowing the deity of

Jesus Christ help someone toward believing His ability to impart life? The question need hardly be asked. But I, as the evangelist, should not allow such issues to dominate or sidetrack fruitful discussion about eternal life; I should stay on message, press the point that Jesus claimed to give such life to anyone who believes, and answer questions that arise around this saving proposition. I should not plunge by default into theology, except as it may help an open inquirer grasp why Jesus can make such a claim. I will by this means avoid “winning arguments but losing souls,” which (if my experience is any measure) occurs all too frequently with those of us who lay claim to biblical knowledge.

IV. “ANOTHER JESUS”?

While an uncomplicated faith in Christ for eternal life hence not only accords with common sense and proves practicable in witness to cult adherents, there remains a final challenge. Some who hold to the “right Jesus” perspective believe that various scriptural statements absolutely insist on orthodoxy as a condition for salvation. Among these, 2 Cor 11:4 is representative, and is worthy of a brief consideration. In this passage, expressing his jealousy for the spiritual wellbeing of the church he had fathered, Paul says, “For if he who comes preaches *another Jesus* whom we have not preached, or [if] you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted—you may well put up with it.” Paul is worried that the liberal spirit of the church may welcome someone whose views of Jesus may endanger their continued growth and happy presentation before Christ at His coming. But if “another (wrong) Jesus” is given sway, then as today, the argument goes, salvation is impossible; orthodoxy is here a necessary condition of final salvation.

Of course, as stated above, several weaknesses of this view are immediately apparent.

Unless we are convinced either of the unregenerate state of the Corinthians¹³ or of the necessity of their perseverance in faith in “the right Jesus” before their eternal life could be assured,¹⁴ there is no need to conclude that Paul’s worry about “another Jesus” was a concern for the eternal destiny of his readers. Final salvation is clearly not at stake in “wrong Jesus” faith, as far as this passage is concerned. It simply cannot be argued here that faith placed in “another” Jesus cannot “save” in the final sense; Paul is concerned with the deleterious effects of wrong doctrine on sanctification,¹⁵ not on justification.

Paul’s fear was rather that the Corinthian believers might stray from “the Jesus whom [he] preached.¹⁶ But who was “that Jesus”? According to the historical record, it was a Jesus whose death and resurrection proved He is the awaited Messiah (Acts 17:2-4), but not necessarily that He is a substitutionary sacrifice or the hypostatic union of God and man (Acts 13:16-41, a fuller description of Paul’s standard synagogue “stump speech,” similarly calls Jesus simply the “man” whose career proved Him Messiah).¹⁷ As such, the Jesus Paul preached to the Corinthians was He who gave “us” our Christian existence, as he had previously reminded them in 1 Cor 8:6. Of course, this is very close to saying that Jesus is He who gives eternal life, as Luke also explicitly includes as the critical crown of Paul’s evangelistic proclamation of Jesus.¹⁸

Of course, Paul’s *teaching* ministry later likely elaborated about Jesus’ Person. But as for that Jesus who gave them

¹³ But cf. 2 Cor 10:15, to name one passage in the immediate context, among many in the two books, affirming Paul’s view of their spiritual state.

¹⁴ But cf. 1 Cor 6:3, 11b, 14, 15, 19 as one instance of Paul’s assurance of his readers’ future, weak and subject to straying though they may be.

¹⁵ Paul’s concern is that a false teacher will come “to you” (believers).

¹⁶ I.e., preached when he evangelized the Corinthians. That is when the Corinthians “received the Spirit,” and “accepted the gospel,” as described in the balance of 11:4. Paul’s later ministry is normally described as “teaching,” not “preaching.” Likewise, when the false apostles preached, imparted the spirit, and proclaimed their gospel, these would have characterized the initial activities, the evangelistic phase, of their ministry.

¹⁷ We may assume that the initial speech as recorded in Acts characterized Paul’s similar synagogue presentation in Corinth, Acts 17:2-4.

¹⁸ Hodges, *Did Paul Preach Eternal Life?*, 14-15.

eternal life, the record indicates Paul gave them nothing to be believed beyond His identity as the historical character whose home was Galilee in Palestine. To stray from the Jesus preached by Paul would be a terrible tragedy for the Corinthians, but to do so would not in any way suggest that this theologically unelaborated Jesus “cannot save” eternally.

For Paul, in fact, the “Jesus other than whom we preached” was rather an absurdity. “Yet for us [Paul and his readers] there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but *one Lord, Jesus Christ*, through whom all things came and through whom we live” (1 Cor 8:6). There is really no “other” Jesus of Nazareth than He whom Paul preached, the historical person who, contrary to expectation but proven by his ministry, is He who gives eternal life to believers. Using similar terminology, Paul dismisses “another gospel” in Galatians as in fact “not another” (Galatians 1:6; Greek *allos* is used there for “another” gospel as here for “another” Jesus); just as there is no reality to that false message as “gospel,” there is in reality no “other” Jesus to be preached.

Paul’s worry for the Corinthians then was that his readers might fall under sway of a non-entity; it was not that they were in danger of a spiritual being somehow “like” Jesus but not He. Paul’s use of this literary foil should well have provoked the very shame intended by the verse. The naïve hospitality of the Corinthians could result in their yielding to the oratorical spell of false “apostles,” whose message and spirit could undermine or destroy their spiritual health and prospects. But to presume by this verse that Paul was worried about the Corinthians believing (for eternal life or otherwise) in a literal “wrong Jesus” stretches credulity. There is no literal “right” or “wrong” Jesus in which to put one’s faith for eternal life. There is only one Jesus, about whom, on a very broad range of topics, one may believe correctly or not.¹⁹

¹⁹The lively rhetoric around disparate views of God in the three Abrahamic faiths provides an analogy. Clearly, the theology proper of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity are at odds. To call the Deity of these religions “different Gods” may well score a striking rhetorical point. But as all three faiths are monotheistic, it is more accurate to say that all three faiths affirm the same one Creator God, but are at odds in their ascriptions. These are not “different Gods”; they are

But as to the supposed necessity of belief in “the right Jesus” for eternal life, 2 Cor 11:4 has nothing to say at all.

A legitimate application of this verse is that wherever we meet false teaching about Jesus Christ, we should oppose it. We should, as Paul did, propound orthodox Christology as a means to the holy presentation of those we serve; impure teaching will always affect standing at the *Bema*. But 2 Cor 11:4 in no way legitimizes expecting orthodox Christology either as a precondition or inevitable accompaniment of regeneration; we should remove the verse from our tool chest when trying to certify worthy candidates, or even true converts, of our evangelistic efforts.

V. CONCLUSION

The Scriptures—including 2 Cor 11:4—simply confirm the thesis argued earlier. Any conception of belief in Jesus Christ that requires orthodoxy for salvation is in violation, not only of the biblical model, but also of the common-sense principles by which we come to believe in anyone for anything. Only by overlooking the normal processes of believing can the preacher require orthodoxy as a necessary concomitant of final salvation. The message of salvation through faith alone in Jesus Christ, perfectly or imperfectly understood, alone, is alone the message that God will continue to use to bring eternal life to a dying world.

Praise God for His mercy.

“different” Gods. Likewise, the “different” Jesus whom Paul resisted was likely not literally “another” Jesus, but the same Jesus described so differently (Paul does not directly identify the “differences”) as to render Him nearly unrecognizable, save, of course, for the saving name. (Cf. the poem “The Blind Men and the Elephant” by John Godfrey Saxe [1816-1887]. By their descriptions, if you didn’t know better, you’d think the blind men were each describing a different animal!)

