

Ask and You Shall

Receive:

Questions & Answers

by Various

CALVIN AND CALVINISM

Q In the conclusion of Shawn Lazar’s recent article, “Cheap Grace or Cheap Law,” he implied that Calvin denied “faith alone in Christ alone.” I have long thought following comments made by Zane Hodges that Calvin & Luther agreed with it, that they thought assurance was the essence of saving faith. Is that wrong?

A. Thanks for your question. First, let me clarify that I didn’t mention Calvin, so much as Calvinism, and there’s a big difference between the two. Calvinism as a movement encompassing many different people, including the Dutch Dort Calvinists, the Westminster Presbyterians, the Puritans, the New Calvinists, and so on. So even if Calvin himself believed that salvation was strictly by faith, not works, and that assurance was of the essence of saving faith, it is pretty conclusive that later Calvinists, and others in the Reformed tradition, did not.

Second, unlike Hodges, I am agnostic about John Calvin’s personal beliefs. Hodges accepted the arguments of R. T. Kendall and M. Charles Bell to the effect that Calvin believed assurance of salvation was the essence of saving faith. But their conclusions were rejected by other scholars, such as Richard A. Muller, in *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*. Part of the problem is that there is no reason to assume that Calvin was consistent in his beliefs. I’m sure he did say things that suggested assurance was of the essence. But he also wrote that the elect are known by the “signs” of the Holy Spirit working in their lives. Pending further study, I prefer to reserve judgment on where Calvin stood.

—Shawn Lazar

FOUR QUESTIONS ON THE ATONEMENT

Q. You defend the universal atonement. But if Christ’s atonement on the cross actually achieved universal propitiation, why would anyone be condemned?

A. There are many passages that teach the doctrine of an unlimited atonement (i.e., Isa 53:6; John 1:29; 3:16-17; 12:47; 2 Cor 5:14-19; 1 Tim 2:3-4; 6; 4:10; Heb 2:9; 2 Pet 2:1; 3:9; 1 John 2:2). But many people are unclear on what the cross was meant to achieve. The Biblical

testimony doesn't always fit neatly into our theological traditions, and we should all strive to be good Bereans, and make our beliefs fit the Bible—not the other way around.

So, for example, your question assumes that a universal atonement would lead to universal salvation. Maybe you also assume that the atonement is an all or nothing affair, that removing sins (John 1:29) is tantamount to giving people everlasting life. But that is not true. Having your sins removed and being given everlasting life are two very different things.

For example, read the famous judgment scene in Revelation 20:11-15. We know this is the Great White Throne Judgment, the one for unbelievers. Notice that it mentions two sets of books: there are the books of deeds (plural), and then there's the Book of Life (singular). What purpose do they serve?

We read that the people are judged according to the works recorded in the first set of books (vv. 12-13). But does it say they are *condemned* because of those works? No, it doesn't. Rather, in v 15 we are told these people are cast into the lake of fire *because they were not found in the Book of Life*.

It seems the books of deeds are opened to prove to each unbeliever that their works give them no claim to eternal salvation (and to determine their degree of eternal torment). But that does not mean their deeds decide their eternal fate. On the contrary, Rev 20:11-15 suggests their eternal fate hinges on whether or not they're in the Book of Life. And how does one get into that? By believing in Jesus for everlasting life (John 3:16, 36; Phil 4:3; Rev 22:17). If you believe in Jesus, you're in the Book of Life. And what happens if you don't believe? John 3:18 is perfectly consistent with Rev 20:11-15: people who do not believe are condemned now and will be eternally condemned if they die in unbelief. They are not condemned because of their deeds. They are condemned because they lack God's own eternal life.

Q. But if Jesus paid the penalty for sin, how can unbelievers pay for it again in hell?

A. Don't be so quick to assume the penalty for sin is *eternal* death. In Romans 6:23, Paul says the penalty for sin is *physical death*. And as you know, everybody dies, even Christians (short of the rapture, of course). The cross did not take that penalty away.

In fact, we would hesitate to say the cross paid the penalty for sin. We would say that Jesus took away the sin of the world (John 1:29; 1 John 2:2), and His resurrection is proof that we who believe in Him will be raised with glorified bodies (John 11:25). But whether we believe in Him or not, we all suffer the penalty by dying. The cross, or the resurrection that followed, may take the *sting* of death away, by promising that all believers will be resurrected to eternal glory, but it doesn't actually take the penalty of death away.

Q. But if the propitiation was intended to remove guilt why are men still guilty?

A. You assume the atonement was meant to remove guilt. Was it? Consider Romans 3:23, where Paul says that all men are guilty before God: "We all fall short, [present tense] of the glory of God." If the cross removes guilt, why would Paul say that Christians are presently guilty?

You might reply that you think Paul was speaking about a believer's experience *before* they came to faith in Christ. We were guilty before, but no longer. In that case, consider 1 John 1:7-9. It shows that even born-again people need forgiveness, which is only available if they walk in the light of God's Word and confess their sins.

Positionally, we are forensically justified the moment we believe in Christ (Rom 4:22-24), which implies we are simultaneously always sinners in need of justification (*simul iustus et peccator*). But experientially, it seems that we should not assume the cross was meant to remove our guilt. It makes that removal *possible* for confessing Christians, but it's not automatic.

Q. How can people be condemned to the lake of fire as a judgment/penalty when the propitiation, redemption, and reconciliation of Christ has removed sin as an obstacle between man and God?

A. People are not condemned to the lake of fire because the obstacle of sin has not been removed for them.

The cross had many different effects. Some were universal. Some were particular. We have been arguing that one of the universal effects of the cross was that it removed sin as a barrier to everlasting life for all people (John 1:29). But the atonement does not mean that all people are automatically forgiven, or that sin's penalty (i.e., physical death) has been removed for all. You and I die because we are sinners, even though we are born again and justified.

Think about Adam and Eve. When they ate the fruit from the forbidden tree, God did not declare them "sinners" (although they were); God declared them "dead." The result is that every human being is mortal, and what's worse, we are estranged from God's own eternal life; "alienated from the life of God" (Ephesians 4:18). Therefore, since that time, what we have needed is not only to have our sins forgiven— you might say that only brings us back to a neutral position—but also to have God's own life in us (i.e., everlasting life).

So when people are cast into the lake of fire, it's not because the obstacle of sin hasn't been taken away, it's because they remain estranged from the life of God; it's because they lack everlasting life, and so their names are not written in the Lamb's Book of Life (Revelation 20:15). The lake of fire is the default position for people lacking God's life.

We're sure these answers will raise many questions in your mind. If so, please send them in!

—Steve Lewis and Shawn Lazar

ARE WE IMMORALISTS?

Q. I've seen your video stating that no person can lose their salvation after they have received it. You as well as many other churches use the Holy Ghost's name to support the belief that it's God's will that people willfully sin until their death, after their salvation. That implies the Holy Ghost supports these sins. You teach that a saved person could molest, rape, and slowly cut the body parts of every little child in this world, but God would bring no judgment upon them, due to all their future sins being forgiven. How could you have such a reprobate mind?

A. You got all that from just one of our short videos? It's unwise and unfair to accuse anyone of such horrible beliefs without gathering more info. Please visit our website (www.faithalone.org), or read just about any of our books, magazines, or journal articles, and you will quickly learn two things.

First, it is true that we affirm the doctrine of eternal security ("once saved always saved"). We do that on the basis of Jesus' promise that believers would never perish, and would never be snatched from either His or His Father's hands. That is a guarantee, because, as Jesus explains: "My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all" (John 3:16; 10:28-29). If you think you can lose your salvation, you must also think you are greater than the Father!

Second, in reading our materials, you will quickly see how much emphasis we put on the topic of temporal judgment for sin. The latest example would be Zane Hodges' commentary on Romans, entitled, *Romans: Deliverance from Wrath*. If you were familiar with our literature, you would know we definitely hold that God punishes the sins of believers in this life. Examples would include Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11), the Corinthians who were improperly celebrating the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:30), and even Moses, whom God prevented from entering the Promised Land (Numbers 20:12).

What does this mean in practice? It means that contrary to your assumptions, we would hold that a believer who committed the horrible sins you mentioned would be out of fellowship with God, would lack spiritual blessing, and would suffer severe temporal judgment from God, up to and including his premature death. We would also say that such a believer would suffer shame at the Judgment Seat of Christ, and loss of rewards for all eternity. But it's true, they would still be eternally secure.

In sum, it is absolutely wrong to think the doctrine of eternal security means that God approves of sin, or denies that He punishes it temporally, and we teach no such thing.

—Shawn Lazar

THE DESERTED ISLAND ILLUSTRATION

Q. I appreciate Bob's article "Another Look at the Deserted Island Illustration" (JOTGES, Spring 2013, pp. 3-20). In the article, you affirm that Hodges said, and you agreed, that what we need to know about Jesus "starts with, but is not necessarily limited to, knowledge that Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose bodily from the dead three days later" (p. 4). In your commentary on John in the Grace New Testament Commentary, commenting on John 2:20, you wrote, "Since the disciples were born again before they believed in Jesus' resurrection (cf. 2:11; 3:16), and since John's Gospel was written after the resurrection to tell people how they could have eternal life (20:31), belief in Jesus' resurrection is not a condition of eternal life." So, I would like to ask two questions for clarification, if I may: (1) How do your statements in the article and in the commentary fit together? and (2) Is there a difference between "the gospel" and "the saving message"?

I hope those sound like questions for clarification, not for confrontation! Thanks in advance for your reply.

A. Great questions!

The two statements harmonize in that there is a difference between the condition of everlasting life, which is simply faith in Christ for that life (John 3:16; Acts 16:31; 1 Tim 1:16), and what is needed to bring a person to believe that. While people in the very presence of the Lord of glory came to faith in Him with no knowledge of His upcoming death and resurrection, they had the advantage of seeing Him and hearing Him. There was a powerful witness in His presence and in actually hearing His tone of voice, the conviction in His voice, and the authority with which He answered objections.

The death and resurrection of Jesus are the ultimate proofs that His promise of life is true. Once a person grasps the finished work of Christ on the cross, then believing in Him for everlasting life is quite logical and reasonable. That is not to say that all who believe in the cross and empty tomb are born again. One must believe the promise of life to all who simply believe in Jesus. Most people in Christianity today believe that Jesus died on the cross for our sins, rose bodily from the dead, and that He will give everlasting life to those who persevere in good works. It is our job to show them that the promise is to "whoever believes in Him" (John 3:16) not to *whoever behaves in Him*.

In terms of your second question, yes, there is a difference between the gospel (1 Cor 15:1-11) and the saving message/message of everlasting life (John 3:16; 5:24; 6:35; Gal 2:15-16; Eph 2:8-9).

The term *gospel* is not even found in John's Gospel, the only book in the Bible whose specific purpose is to lead unbelievers to faith in Christ for everlasting life (John 20:31).

The *gospel* is the good news that Jesus died on the cross for our sins, was buried, rose from the dead on the third day, and then appeared to many people for over a month.

The *message of life* is the promise that whoever believes in Jesus for everlasting life has that life.

In other words, the gospel is the good news about Jesus Christ which should lead us to believe in the message of life.

—Bob Wilkin

Q. Some Jehovah's Witnesses came to my house. They said they believe in Jesus as their Savior, but they don't believe he is God. They showed me several verses where Jesus seems to speak as if he and God were two separate beings. If they are separate, how can Jesus be God?

A. Good question. For the JWs (and for Muslims and Mormons) whenever Jesus talks with God, or about God, or distinguishes His will from the Father's will, they interpret that as meaning that Jesus is clearly one being, and God a totally separate being. Therefore, they reason, God is not Jesus, and Jesus is not God. Period. The assumption is that each person must have their own being. But Christians do not share that assumption.

When we read those same texts, we readily admit that Jesus and God the Father are two different *Persons*, but we also affirm they share the same *divine substance, or being*. That is the heart of Trinitarian theology: distinguishing between the Persons of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and the loving substance that all the Persons share in.

I know how daunting that idea can be, and you're probably wondering how anyone could have come to that conclusion. I don't have enough space to give much detail here, but consider three lines of evidence.

First, the Bible clearly says there is only one God (Deut 4:35, 39; 6:4; 2 Sam 7:27; 2 Kings 5:15; Psa 86:10; Gal 3:20; Eph 4:6). Monotheism is a must.

Second, the Bible also says there are three Persons (Father, Son, and Spirit) who are distinct from each other, and yet who are somehow united in their actions. Just ask yourself these three questions:

1. Who raised Jesus from the dead? The Son (John 2:19-22; 10:17,18)? The Holy Spirit (Rom 8:11)? Or the Father (Rom 6:4; 1 Thess 1:10; Heb 13:20; Acts 13:30; 17:30, 31)?

2. Who created the world? The Son (John 1:3; Col 1:16, 17)? The Holy Spirit (Gen 1:2; Ps 104:30)? Or the Father (Gen 1:1; Heb 11:3)?

3. Who justifies man? The Son (Rom 5:9; 10:4; 2 Cor 5:19, 21)? The Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:11; Gal 5:5)? Or the Father (Ex 31:13; 2 Cor 5:19, 21)?

It seems as though all three were involved in the same actions, suggesting plurality within God.

Finally, the Bible says that God *is* love (1 John 4:8). Somehow, love does not just characterize God's actions, but love is His very being.

So the question is, how do you reconcile monotheism, plurality, and love?

Well, the early Christians concluded that the Godhead must exist as a loving communion of three Persons. Love is the foundation of God's being. But in its very nature, love requires plurality, i.e., it requires another person to love. So there is one God, who exists as three Persons, Father, Son, and Spirit, whose common being is their eternal reciprocal love.

So when we read Bible passages like Matt 3:16-17, where Jesus gets baptized, the Spirit descends, and God the Father says, "This is My beloved Son," Christians see that as just one example (out of several dozen) of the Trinity in action. It's a mystery, but it's a beautiful mystery, one that emphasizes, that God's love for the world (John 3:16) is an expression of His eternal Trinitarian life. —Shawn Lazar

Mail your questions to Grace Evangelical Society, post them on our Facebook page, or email them to shawn@faithalone.org.