

WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

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Vince Lombardi is widely recognized as one of the greatest football coaches of all time. Legend has it that on one occasion, after a particularly tough loss for his team, he gathered his players in the locker room for the usual postgame speech. In a short but poignant statement, the coach cut right to the heart of the matter. Holding up a football, Lombardi quipped, "Gentlemen, *this* is a football." His point was not lost on the players: Their performance in the game that just concluded had evidenced an utter lack of competency in the very basic fundamentals of the game.

A survey of the state of American evangelicalism reveals a similar incompetency when it comes to the basics of the Christian faith—namely, the Gospel. There is a crisis regarding the nature of the gospel within evangelical theology today and very little is being done to address the issue. While most evangelicals agree that Jesus Christ is the object of saving faith, there is widespread inconsistency regarding the specific content of saving faith. What is it about Jesus Christ that one must believe in order to have eternal life? Are there certain non-negotiable truths that must be included in a gospel presentation in order for it to be considered the pure gospel? An abandonment of certainty, as well as a general disdain for absolute truth within the postmodern ideological milieu, have created fertile ground for erroneous gospel presentations—each competing for legitimacy within the evangelical church at large.

Perhaps most disturbing is the fact that each of these inherently contradictory gospels is welcomed as a legitimate pretender to the true biblical gospel and few, if any, evangelical leaders seem concerned with the transparent incongruity. This suggests at least a couple of possibilities. (1) Either various evangelical pastors, scholars and leaders are not really paying attention to what other evangelicals are saying about the gospel and thus have not noticed the incongruity; and/or (2) each evangelical pastor, scholar, or leader does not hold his or her particular view of the gospel with any degree of conviction and is thus open to embracing competing views on the matter. Either explanation does not speak well of the state of evangelicalism today.

What is needed today is a Lombardi-style critique in which pastors and evangelical leaders confidently raise their Bibles and remind the church, “This is the Gospel!” This chapter examines in detail the precise content of the gospel. What are the core essentials of the Gospel? Although the widespread mishandling of the gospel within contemporary evangelicalism presents a seemingly insuperable threat to the historic Christian faith, the battle is not lost. If the body of Christ will return to the centrality of the Scripture, and the clarity of the simple gospel it proclaims, revival and true evangelistic success will reshape the evangelical landscape.

What is the Gospel?

Charles Ryrie rightly observes, “Confusion abounds with respect to the content and presentation of the Gospel of the grace of God. Some do not present it purely; some do not present it clearly; some do not present it sincerely. But because God is gracious, He often gives light and faith in spite of our imprecise witness.”¹ Notwithstanding God’s graciousness, one should not abandon precision and accuracy as a hopeless, elusive goal in presenting the gospel, lest evangelicals presume too much upon God’s grace.

In seeking to identify the pure gospel, several preliminary determinations must be made. First, to what does the term *gospel* refer and how is it used biblically? Is it acceptable to use the term *gospel* as a reference to that which must be believed in order to obtain eternal life? Is not the term used in Scripture to refer to something broader than merely the content (or object) of saving faith?² Clearly defined terms are vital if one is to develop an accurate, biblical standard of the Gospel.

In order to determine how much deconstruction the gospel has suffered, one must first establish the identity of the biblical gospel. Three considerations help to identify the pure gospel in Scripture. First, how is the biblical term *gospel* (εὐαγγέλιον) used? This first consideration leads to a second one: what is the good news, broadly speaking, about God's plan of salvation for mankind? Finally, the third consideration concerns the narrow sense of the word gospel: what precisely must someone believe in order to have eternal life?

Exegetical Considerations

Even a casual survey of the usage of the term *gospel* (Gk. εὐαγγέλιον) in Scripture reveals that it is *not* used in a technical sense.³ There is no inherent, technical meaning of *gospel*. Rather, its meaning is determined by the context in which it is used. Although attempts have been made to demonstrate a technical meaning of the term, such efforts are an example of what D.A. Carson calls *the fallacy of false assumptions about technical meaning*.⁴ "In this fallacy, an interpreter falsely assumes that a word always or nearly always has a certain technical meaning—a meaning usually derived either from a subset of the evidence or from the interpreter's personal systematic theology."⁵

Εὐαγγέλιον is used seventy-six times in the New Testament. It is normally translated *gospel* or *good news*. The verb form, εὐαγγελίζω, is usually translated *preach the gospel* or *preach the good news*. It is used fifty-four times in the New

Testament. A survey of the New Testament usage helps clarify the various nuances of the word and one quickly concludes that the term *gospel* is not a technical term. The specific *good news* under consideration differs from context to context.

For instance, in Luke 1:19, the angel Gabriel brings Zechariah *good news* about the miraculous birth of John the Baptist. In Luke 2:10 the *good news* pertains to the birth of the Savior as announced to the shepherds in the fields. In Matthew 4:23 Jesus is described as proclaiming the *good news* about the coming Messianic Kingdom to Jews, and so on. Likewise in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) the term εὐαγγέλιον is used in a generic sense to mean *good news*. In 2 Samuel 4:10, to cite only one Old Testament example, news that Saul had died was described as *good news* by a messenger to David.

When it comes to the *good news* about man's salvation, appeal is often made to 1 Corinthians 15:1–8 as the definitive content of the so-called technical gospel. But even when the term is used in the context of man's eternal salvation, one finds that it seems to have both a broad and narrow sense. For instance, the good news Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 15 appears to be broader than the precise content of saving faith. That is, it includes components that one is not required explicitly to affirm if he is seeking to secure eternal salvation. In the passage below, the underlined portions indicate Paul's detailed description of the good news that he declared.

Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time (1 Cor 15:1–8).

Paul lists nine things (underlined) that elaborate on the *good news* he had proclaimed to the Corinthians.⁶ It is self-evident when one compares Scripture with Scripture that Paul does not intend to include all nine of these facts as part of the precise content of saving faith, since nowhere are individuals exhorted, for example, to express faith in the fact that Jesus “was seen by Cephas” in order to be saved. Yet this eyewitness account (and others) is part of the *gospel* as articulated in 1 Corinthians 15.

Sometimes, as with Paul’s famous statement in Romans 1:16, εὐαγγελίζω is used with reference to the content of saving faith since it results in eternal salvation to those who believe it.⁷ Other times, as with the introductory statement in Mark’s gospel, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1), the *good news* is broader, including not just the narrow content of saving faith but the entire story about Jesus’ life, ministry, atonement and resurrection.

A survey of the biblical usage of the term *gospel* suggests that it is not a technical term in Scripture referring exclusively to that which must be believed in order to secure eternal life. It also suggests, however, that the term in fact is used sometimes in this sense and therefore it is acceptable for evangelicals to use *gospel* as a general designation for the content of saving faith. Evangelists are not wrong when they say, for example, “If you believe *the gospel* you can be saved.” Such usage is consistent with both historic and biblical uses of the term. What is more important than validating the usage of the word *gospel* is ensuring that the precise content of saving faith, whatever its label, is articulated clearly and accurately.

God’s Plan of Salvation

The good news of man’s salvation includes three primary aspects. In the first place it emphasizes the bad news that man is a sinner in need of a Savior. Secondly, it presents the good news that God has provided this Savior through His Son, who died and

rose again. Finally, a gospel appeal intended to accurately portray the means of securing eternal life must include the condition of obtaining eternal life, namely faith alone in Christ alone. These three points may be characterized as: *the predicament, the provision, and the profession.*

The Predicament

Accurate gospel presentations must begin by establishing the need for salvation. The gospel message in the New Testament occurs in the context of man's sinfulness. It begins with a premise: man is a sinner in need of a Savior. Paul sets the example in this regard in the book of Romans by discussing man's predicament in the first three chapters. Romans 3:23 states, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." If one does not acknowledge he is a sinner, he remains ignorant of his predicament and thus unable to receive salvation.⁸ Indeed, what makes the gospel message *good news* is that it solves man's predicament. Man's sinfulness, if not remedied, results in eternal damnation. "For the wages of sin is death..." (Rom 6:23a).⁹

Accordingly, then, the salvation that is offered as part of the gospel message involves deliverance *from hell* and *into eternal life*. It is surprising how many so-called evangelical gospel presentations ignore the discussion of sin, hell and even *heaven*. For many postmodern evangelicals, the appeal in the gospel message is to a life of earthly meaning, purpose, contentment or prosperity and the like. Salvation is often generically offered but not sufficiently identified.

The Provision

The gospel also announces the solution. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, paid the penalty for mankind by dying on the cross. He rose again the third day and offers freely to all deliverance from hell and the gift of eternal life. "...the gift of God is eternal life

through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom 6:23b).¹⁰ Romans 5:8 states, “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Though a discussion of God’s plan for the salvation of mankind can and often does include much more than this, it must at a minimum include the death and resurrection of the Savior, for it is precisely His death and resurrection that identify Jesus Christ as the Savior.

For one to place his faith in Jesus Christ as his personal Savior, he needs to know who Jesus is and what He did for him. Saving faith involves faith in a Person—Jesus Christ. Yet it necessarily involves faith in certain propositional truths about Christ that are essential to the gospel. It is not enough to say merely, “trust in Jesus” when the name *Jesus* has no context or meaning to the hearer.

We must give people something to believe. Since it is the object of faith that saves, there must be meaningful content about that object, which is Jesus Christ Himself. We should present Jesus as the Son of God who died for our sins (John 1:29) and rose again. Content-less emotional appeals are not enough. It will do no good to call people to believe in something empty or erroneous.¹¹

As Bing correctly points out, trusting in Jesus for eternal life entails belief in certain propositions about Him. This is an important point that will be expounded further in the pages to follow.

The Profession

Having explained man’s predicament and God’s solution, an accurate gospel presentation concludes with a *call to faith*. The instrumentality of faith in securing eternal salvation is undeniable in Scripture.¹² Jesus said, “Whoever *believes* in Me has everlasting life” (John 6:47, et al.). Here is where most gospel presentations go awry. It is typical for evangelistic presentations to include man’s predicament and God’s solution (although as mentioned, this is not always the case); yet upon coming to the moment of “What must I do to accept God’s provision?” many gospel presentations lead the hearer

down a dead end street. The call to action in the typical postmodern evangelical gospel is a far cry from *faith alone in Christ alone*—and in many cases, *faith* is absent altogether.

The Content of Saving Faith

The *predicament*, the *provision* and the *profession* aspects of the gospel of salvation all set the stage for the moment when the lost person places his faith in the *correct object* thereby securing eternal life. When one's faith secures eternal life, it may be termed *saving faith*.¹³ What is this specific object of saving faith—the “irreducible minimum” of the gospel?¹⁴ Saving faith is actually quite simple. Jesus likened it to the faith of a child (Matt 18:3–4; 19:14). Regarding the simplicity of saving faith, A. T. Pierson writes,

You have what you take, do you not? It is a very simple thing to take what is given to you, and so to have it. That is, practically, *all there is in faith*. We may make faith obscure by talking too much about it, leading others to infer that there is in it some obscurity or mystery. Faith is very simple: it is taking the eternal life that is offered to you in Christ.¹⁵

Pierson's statement is a helpful reminder that saving faith entails faith in a Person—Jesus Christ—coupled with faith in what Jesus Christ offers. That is, there is a *personal* as well as a *propositional* component to saving faith. Discussing saving faith in terms of belief in a *proposition* often makes some evangelicals uneasy. It intellectualizes the notion of saving faith too much, they might say. Yet it will be demonstrated below that the object of saving faith necessarily involves both personal trust in Jesus as Savior, as well as knowledge of certain propositional truths about Him.

A profession of saving faith zeroes in on the correct kernel of salvific truth within the broader good news about man's salvation. There are many aspects to God's plan of salvation which, while relevant as a backdrop for salvation in the context of evangelism, are nevertheless not required to be affirmed consciously by those seeking to obtain

eternal life. For example, depending on the audience, one might begin an evangelistic appeal by explaining the grand metanarrative of Scripture. Or, one might focus only on the events surrounding Calvary. Some evangelists might employ evidentiary apologetics; others might use the Romans Roadmap. An evangelistic discussion also might emphasize any one of various non-negotiable truths such as the Trinity, inerrancy, full humanity of Christ, or the hypostatic union of Christ. But one does not have to affirm explicitly these truths in order to receive eternal life.

In the course of explaining the gospel, at some point the moment comes when, having sufficiently addressed man's predicament and God's provision, the sinner is ready for specific instruction on how to appropriate God's free gift of eternal life by professing faith in *something or someone*. It is this precise content that is the focus of the present chapter. In the following pages, it will be demonstrated that *saving faith is the belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God who died and rose again to pay one's personal penalty for sin and the one who gives eternal life to all who trust Him and Him alone for it.*¹⁶ Consider more carefully each component of this definition.

(1) "*Jesus Christ*"

The centrality of Jesus Christ as the object of saving faith is indisputable. "For God so loved the world that He gave *His only begotten Son*, that whoever believes *in Him* should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16, emphasis added). Jesus affirmed this truth many times, "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes *in Me* has everlasting life" (John 6:47, emphasis added).¹⁷ Paul inseparably links man's salvation with the person and work of Jesus Christ in Romans 5:8, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, *Christ* died for us" (emphasis added). And again in his response to the Philippian jailor, "Believe on the *Lord Jesus Christ*, and you will be saved, you and your household" (Acts 16:31, emphasis added). In his

Gospel, John tells his readers, “And truly *Jesus* did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that *Jesus* is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in *His name*” (John 20:30–31, emphasis added). Any gospel presentation that lacks explicit reference to Jesus Christ cannot rightly be considered the pure gospel.

(2) “*The Son of God who died and rose again*”

Yet, as mentioned, belief in Jesus requires an understanding of *who He is*. It is not belief in an undefined, ambiguous name. It is belief in the *person* behind the name. Saving faith is faith *in Jesus Christ*, which necessarily entails belief in certain propositions about Him.¹⁸ Although the concepts of *person* and *proposition* are not technically identical, there is an inseparable correlation. Belief in a person involves belief in propositions related to that person. As one writer aptly put it, “For sure, I believe that salvation is through faith alone in Christ alone. But my faith is in *the Christ who died in my place, paying the penalty for my sin.*”¹⁹ To omit the death and resurrection of Christ from the gospel is to have improperly “bifurcated the person and work of Christ.”²⁰

In identifying the content of saving faith, it is best to speak of faith in the person of Jesus Christ—viz. the Jesus of the Bible—and then expand on this idea by addressing those identifying facts about Him that must be included in the kernel of salvific truth. For instance, one must understand that Jesus is the Son of God who died and rose again. To believe in Jesus as the Son of God who died and rose again is to accept Him as uniquely qualified to impart eternal life (cf. John 11:26–27). It is to understand, on some level, that He is the Son of God—a title that distinguishes Him from every other person in the history of mankind. To be sure, saving faith does not require the affirmation of a fully developed doctrine of the deity of Christ. Indeed, the term *deity* may not even come

up in an evangelistic encounter. Yet, saving faith involves recognizing—however rudimentary this recognition may be—that Jesus *is God in the flesh*.

John begins his Gospel with a strong affirmation of this fact. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and *the Word was God*” (John 1:1, emphasis added). He then goes on to explain that accepting this premise is necessary if one desires to become a child of God (i.e., to be saved). “He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as *received Him*, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who *believe in His name*” (John 1:11–12, emphasis added). John equates “receiving Him” (Gk. ἔλαβον) with “believing” (Gk. πιστεύουσιν) in His name. To “believe in His name” is to accept that Jesus is who John said He is—the eternal Word of God “[who] became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14a). It is to “welcome the Word in faith.”²¹ John goes on to explain, “[We] beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14b).

In spite of many who rejected the Word, there were some who received Him. This provides the initial identification of “believe” by equating it with “receive.” When we accept a gift, whether tangible or intangible, we thereby demonstrate our *confidence in its reality and trustworthiness*. We make it part of our own possessions. By being so received, Jesus gives to those who receive him a right to membership in the family of God.²²

By expressing confidence that Jesus has given “membership in the family of God” on the basis of one’s faith in Him for it, one of necessity must believe that He is qualified or capable of giving the very gift He promises. At the outset of His Gospel (and throughout) John seems to connect Christ’s self-identification as the Son of God with His ability to save.

For instance, later in his Gospel, John records an exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees in which Jesus alludes to His own deity. Jesus said, “If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also” (John 8:19). Shortly thereafter, Jesus declares, “[I]f you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins” (John 8:24). The New

International Version translates this verse, “[I]f you do not believe *that I am the one I claim to be*, you will indeed die in your sins” (John 8:24, emphasis added).

Although this is a loose paraphrase of the Greek phrase (ἐὰν γὰρ μὴ πιστεύσητε ὅτι ἐγὼ εἰμι, lit. “for if you do not believe that I am”), it nevertheless captures well the sense of Jesus’ statement in light of the context. Saving faith involves faith in Jesus as the Son of God—the One who is able to forgive sin and grant eternal life.

In John 11:26, Jesus tells Martha that she must believe in Him if she is to have eternal life. “Whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?” Her response in the next verse indicates that belief in Jesus means belief in His ability as the Son of God to impart life: “Yes, Lord, I believe that *You are the Christ, the Son of God*, who is to come into the world” (John 11:27, emphasis added). John reiterates this point in John 20:31, the purpose statement for his entire Gospel, “[B]ut these are written that you may believe that *Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God*, and that believing you may have life in His name” (emphasis added).²³

In these verses, “Christ” (Χριστός) and “Son of God” (υἱός του θεου) are in apposition to one another, indicating that “Son of God” is a Messianic title denoting not only the Jewish expectation of a King according to the Davidic Promise (cf. 2 Sam 7:12–16), but the divine origin of the King. Tom Constable comments,

That [Martha] truly understood and believed what Jesus revealed about Himself is clear from her reply. She correctly concluded that if Jesus was the One who would raise the dead and impart spiritual life He must be the Messiah. She clarified that what she meant by “Messiah” was not the popular idea of a revolutionary leader but the biblical revelation of a *God-man* whom God promised to send from heaven (cf. 1:9, 49; 6:14).²⁴

Constable’s use of the phrase “God-man” is instructive. It suggests, as the present writer likewise contends, that identifying Jesus as the *Son of God* meant, on some level, recognizing His transcendence. Certainly, it would be an oversimplification to suggest that the title *Son of Man* is a synonym for *deity* or *God*. But undoubtedly it conjured up

in the minds of the original readers Old Testament prophecies that identify the future Messiah as divine.

For instance, Isaiah 9:6–7 connects the promise of a Messianic “Son” with the idea of His deity by referring to Him as *Mighty God* and *Everlasting Father*.

For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, *Mighty God, Everlasting Father*, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace There will be no end, Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, To order it and establish it with judgment and justice From that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this (Isa 9:6–7, emphasis added).

And the famous prophecy of Daniel 7:13–14 likewise highlights the deity of Christ by speaking of Him as “One *like* the Son of Man” (Dan 7:13, emphasis added).

I was watching in the night visions, And behold, *One* like the Son of Man, Coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, And they brought Him near before Him. Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, That all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion *is* an everlasting dominion, Which shall not pass away, And His kingdom *the one* Which shall not be destroyed (Dan 7:13–14).

This prophecy refers to the Second Coming of Christ at the end of the Tribulation (i.e., Daniel’s seventieth week) to establish the Messianic Kingdom. The phrase “Son of Man” highlights the fact that He will be a human offspring, yet the qualifier “like” implies something more than mere humanity.²⁵

In first century Jewish thought, the concepts of *Messiah* and *deity* were closely linked, though not entirely crystallized.²⁶ A well-developed understanding of the doctrine of the deity Christ, and even more so the Trinity, was lacking. These doctrines did not take shape fully until later in Church history. Yet saving faith involved the rudimentary affirmation of Christ as uniquely divine or transcendent on some level. In Jesus’ day, this was linked to His identification as Messiah. Those seeking eternal salvation had to affirm that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah and that as such, He was

the Son of God. Today, however, saving faith does not necessarily require recognition that He is the Messiah, even though affirming Him as the only One who can forgive sin and give eternal life remains an essential component of the gospel.²⁷

Jesus' death and resurrection, more than anything else, sets Him apart as unique among men. Ultimately, His death and resurrection attest to His deity even if early believers did not entirely make this connection. In fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, the Son of God died and rose again to pay man's penalty for sin (cf. Ps 16:9–11; 68:18; 110:1; Isa 53:4–10). The New Testament further suggests that His death and resurrection are related to His deity (Matt 12:39–40; Mark 8:31; Luke 11:29–30; 24:26; John 2:19–21; Acts 2:23–24, 29–32; 1 Cor 15:3–4).

The object of saving faith, then, must include the essential truth that Jesus Christ is *the Son of God who died and rose again*. This does not mean that one must affirm a fully developed doctrine of the deity of Christ with all of its theological intricacies; nor does it mean that one must explicitly articulate the phrase *deity of Christ* as part of his profession of faith.²⁸ Rather, believing in Jesus as the Son of God means understanding that Jesus is who He said He is: the divine Son of God who alone can forgive sin and grant eternal life (cf. John 11:25–27).²⁹

(3) “*To pay one’s personal penalty for sin*”

Identifying Jesus as the object of saving faith necessarily involves understanding not only that He is the Son of God who died and rose again, but also the *significance* of His death and resurrection. It involves recognizing that His death and resurrection serve as the basis for His substitutionary atonement for sin. In John 4:24, the Samaritans affirm that Jesus “is indeed *the Christ, the Savior of the World*” (emphasis added). Just as to be “the Christ” is to be “the Son of God” (see discussion above), likewise to be “the Christ” is to be “the Savior.” Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd *gives His*

life for the sheep. Therefore My Father loves Me, because *I lay down My life* that I may take it again” (John 10:11, 17, emphasis added). He also said, “[I]f you do not believe that I am He, you will *die in your sins*” (John 8:24, emphasis added).

At the outset of Jesus’ earthly ministry, John the Baptist declared that Jesus is “the Lamb of God *who takes away the sin of the world*” (John 1:29, emphasis added). That Jesus came into the world to rescue man from the penalty of sin is affirmed frequently in the New Testament. For instance, the angel’s announcement to Joseph regarding Jesus’ birth includes the proclamation, “[Y]ou shall call His name Jesus, for He will *save His people from their sins*” (Matt 1:21, emphasis added). Similarly, the angelic announcement of Jesus’ birth to the shepherds refers to Jesus as the “Savior,” a reference to His atoning work on the cross (Luke 2:11; cf. Isa 53:4–6). Paul makes Christ’s atoning work central to His incarnation, “This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world *to save sinners*, of whom I am chief” (1 Tim 1:15, emphasis added). And John describes Jesus as “the *propitiation for our sins*, and not for ours only but also for the whole world” (1 John 2:2, emphasis added).

Saving faith includes the specific content that Jesus’ death and resurrection involve *personal, substitutionary atonement for sin*. The general belief that Jesus died and rose again is not, in and of itself, enough to save. Rather, one must believe that Jesus died and rose again *for him personally*. Peter explicitly identified this content when he challenged Cornelius’ household, “To [Jesus] all the prophets witness that, through His name, *whoever believes in Him will receive remission [i.e., forgiveness] of sins*” (Acts 10:43, emphasis added). Likewise Paul in his Pisidian Antioch sermon proclaimed, “Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to *you the forgiveness of sins*” (Acts 13:38, emphasis added). There is a personal, substitutionary component to the evangelistic call to saving faith.

Saving faith involves recognizing that Jesus is the answer to one's sin problem. Before being rescued one must first recognize he is in danger. And before one can be saved he must first acknowledge he is a sinner. Absent a proper understanding of sin and its consequence, one cannot express saving faith because he has no impetus to do so. Romans 3:10 establishes the universal fact that all have sinned. "As it is written: 'There is none righteous, no, not one.'" So too does Romans 3:23, "[F]or all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Yet it is further necessary to ensure that the consequence of sin is properly defined. If, in acknowledging his sinfulness, one understands merely that his present life is experientially depreciated or otherwise practically devalued, he has not comprehended the full gravity of sin. To truly comprehend man's sinfulness, one must acknowledge that sin has created a disconnection with God that has eternal ramifications. Acknowledging one's sinfulness includes recognizing the *consequence of sin*, namely, separation from God which results ultimately in eternal damnation in hell. Sin separates man from God (cf. Gen 2:7; Rom 5:1–10; 6:23). But this separation goes beyond mere relational or experiential enmity. It also is much broader than mere temporal, earthly displeasure or discontentment. Ultimately, the separation caused by sin includes eternal, spatial separation if left unremedied.

Jesus' contrast between the unbelieving rich man and the believing beggar named Lazarus illustrates that the eternal consequence of sin is confinement in a place of torment for those who do not believe the gospel (Luke 16:19–31). This place of torment for the unsaved is separated from the dwelling place of believers by a "great gulf" (Luke 16:26). The ultimate result of man's enmity with God because of his sin is *eternal separation from God* in a place of torment. This ultimate place of torment is described in Scripture as a "lake of fire" (Rev 20:15) that involves being "tormented day and night forever and ever" (Rev 20:10).

When Jesus says that those who fail to believe in Him will “die in their sins” (John 8:24), He means that they will die without having remedied their sin problem by believing the gospel and thus will pay the ultimate consequence for their sin. In John 3:16 Jesus describes this as “perishing.” “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him *should not perish* but have everlasting life” (emphasis added). Perishing (Gk. ἀπόληται) is thus contrasted with eternal life (Gk. ζωὴν αἰώνιον). To perish is to fail to secure eternal life and instead to experience the opposite: eternal torment. Thus, saving faith has as its content belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God who died and rose again to pay *one’s personal penalty for sin* thus rescuing him from hell. To omit the eternal aspect of sin’s consequence and focus only on the temporal, earthly consequence is to preach a deficient gospel.

(4) “*Gives eternal life to all who trust Him ... for it*”

To be rescued *from hell*, though, has a corresponding antithesis. In being rescued from hell, one simultaneously receives *eternal life*. Not only does saving faith require the correct understanding of the consequence of sin, but it also necessitates a proper understanding of the very nature of salvation. *What is it that one secures by expressing saving faith?* The very adjective *saving* in the phrase *saving faith* suggests a definable commodity.

In identifying the nature of *salvation*, one cannot appeal merely to the lexical meaning of the term. Although evangelicals customarily use the term *salvation* to refer to *eternal salvation*, a survey of biblical usage indicates a broader range of meaning. Indeed, most often temporal deliverance of some kind is in view. A brief excursus on the meaning of the term *salvation* is in order.

The terms *save* (Gk. σώζω) and *salvation* (Gk. σωτηρία) carry the primary meanings of *rescue* and *deliverance*, respectively.³⁰ The context must determine whether

the deliverance in question is temporal in nature—such as deliverance from sickness or danger—or eternal in nature—that is, deliverance from the penalty of sin, namely, hell. For instance, the verb *save* (Gk. σώζω) occurs 109 times in the New Testament.³¹ Only forty-one of these occur in the context of eternal salvation. The remaining occurrences refer to temporal deliverance from physical harm, sickness or danger (fifty times); eschatological deliverance into the Messianic Kingdom (fifteen times); or eschatological deliverance at the Bema Judgment (three times). Similar data exist for the noun *salvation* (Gk. σωτηρία).³²

Thus, in seeking to answer the question, “What is it that one secures by expressing saving faith?” one cannot appeal to a supposed intrinsic meaning of the term *salvation*. Instead, one must examine the context surrounding biblical offers of salvation. In so doing, one finds that the essence of what is provided in eternal salvation is *eternal life*. Saving faith rescues one from eternal torment in hell and secures eternal life in heaven.³³ While there are many additional benefits that accompany eternal salvation—Lewis Sperry Chafer lists thirty-three—the *sine qua non* of eternal salvation is the receiving of eternal life.³⁴

The Bible repeatedly characterizes eternal salvation in terms that transcend this present life. Eternal salvation passages in Scripture are rife with terms like “eternal life,” “everlasting life,” “never perish,” “never die,” etc. Consider the following passages where references to the eternal nature of eternal salvation have been italicized for emphasis.

Now behold, one came and said to Him, “Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do *that I may have eternal life?*” (Matt 19:16)

And these will go away into *everlasting punishment*, but the righteous into *eternal life* (Matt 25:46).

[T]hat whoever believes in Him should not perish but *have eternal life*. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but *have everlasting life* (John 3:15–16).

He who believes in the Son *has everlasting life*; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him (John 3:36).

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me *has everlasting life*, and *shall not come into judgment*, but has passed from death into life (John 5:24).

And Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me *shall never hunger*, and he who believes in Me *shall never thirst*” (John 6:35).

And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may *have everlasting life*; and I will raise him up at the last day (John 6:40).

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me *has everlasting life* (John 6:47).

Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood *has eternal life*, and I will raise him up at the last day (John 6:54).

This is the bread which came down from heaven—not as your fathers ate the manna, and are dead. He who eats this bread *will live forever* (John 6:58).

Most assuredly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My word he *shall never see death* (John 8:51).

And I give them *eternal life*, and they *shall never perish*; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand (John 10:28).

And whoever lives and believes in Me *shall never die*. Do you believe this? (John 11:26).

[A]s You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give *eternal life* to as many as You have given Him. And this is *eternal life*, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent (John 17:2–3).

Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, “It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves *unworthy of everlasting life*, behold, we turn to the Gentiles” (Acts 13:46).

Now when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. And as many as had been *appointed to eternal life* believed (Acts 13:48).

[S]o that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness *to eternal life* through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom 5:21).

But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, *and the end, everlasting life*. For the wages of sin *is* death, but the gift of God *is eternal life* in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 6:22–23).

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* (1 Tim 1:16).

Paul, a bondservant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, according to the faith of God's elect and the acknowledgment of the truth which accords with godliness, *in hope of eternal life* which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began (Titus 1:1–2).

[T]hat having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to *the hope of eternal life* (Titus 3:7).

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life—the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and *declare to you that eternal life* which was with the Father and was manifested to us (1 John 1:1–2).

And this is the promise that He has promised us—*eternal life* (1 John 2:25).

And this is the testimony: that God *has given us eternal life*, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, *that you may know that you have eternal life...* (1 John 5:11–13).

These passages provide ample evidence to confirm that the essence of eternal salvation is the receiving of *eternal life*. To define eternal salvation in terms that emphasize only earthly hope, meaning, or purpose in this life to the exclusion of the eternal aspect, as many postmodern evangelicals are wont to do, is to eviscerate it, change its essential nature, and transform it into a subjective experience focused entirely on man's feelings, emotions, and present, temporal existence.

Even in eternal salvation passages where the word *eternal* (or its equivalent) is not used explicitly, it can be demonstrated that implicit within the context is the concept

of eternity. For instance, Paul's discussion of salvation in Romans often focuses on such words as justification or righteousness. One might ask, how does "being justified" imply "having eternal life in heaven?" The answer is found in the meaning of justification. To be justified (Gk. δικαιώω) means to be declared righteous. Jesus made it clear that man's self-righteousness was not enough to enter the kingdom (Matt 5:20). Paul echoes this thought in Romans 9:30–10:4.

What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith; but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone. As it is written: "Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and rock of offense, And whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame." Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. For Christ *is* the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

Paul's reference to Israel being *saved* is in the context of national deliverance into the future Messianic Kingdom. This is indicated by Paul's quotations of Joel 2:32 (Rom 10:13), Isaiah 59:20 (Rom 11:26), and Psalm 14:7 (Rom 11:26)—all Old Testament passages that refer to Israel's deliverance into the promised eternal kingdom. Paul's point in Romans 9–11 is that God has not cast away national Israel forever. A remnant of Jews is experiencing salvation in the present Church Age and one day in the future, all of national Israel (cf. Rom 11:25–26)—not just a remnant as in the present day—will experience national deliverance into the eternal Messianic Kingdom (cf. 2 Sam 7:16). Believing Jews in Paul's day understood that justification makes one righteous enough to enter *the eternal kingdom* and that this justification comes only by faith (Rom 5:1). In any event, justification is not an end in itself, but a means to an end.

Using similar systematic theological linking, the same argument can be made to demonstrate that other salvation terms and phrases likewise carry an implicit eternal aspect.³⁵ While eternal salvation is described in Scripture using a variety of forensic theological terms, the essence of eternal salvation is the *securing of eternal life*. When one expresses faith in a particular object in order to secure salvation, his expectation of what that salvation actually consists of is an essential component of his faith.

Consider again Jesus' dialogue with Martha in John 11:25–27. As discussed above, Jesus required Martha to believe that *He was who He said He was*—namely, “the Christ, the Son of God”—in order to receive eternal life. But this is not all Jesus required Martha to believe. Jesus also expected Martha to believe that *He would do what He said He would do*. Jesus said, “He who believes in Me, *though he may die, he shall live*. And whoever lives and believes in Me *shall never die*” (John 11:25–26, emphasis added). Then Jesus asked Martha, “Do you believe *this*?” The pronoun *this* (Gk. **ΤΟΥΤΟ**) refers not only to the fact that Jesus is the Son of God (as indicated by Martha's response in v. 27), but that He gives eternal life to those who trust Him for it. Thus, the *goal* of saving faith is part and parcel to the *object* of saving faith. That is, saving faith naturally requires an awareness of what one is receiving as a result of his faith.

The goal of saving faith is not a mystery. It is not ambiguous. Contrary to prevalent postmodern evangelical thought, it is not focused on psychological and emotional benefits in this present life. Indeed, in defending the resurrection of the saved to eternal life, Paul states emphatically, “If *in this life only* we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable” (1 Cor 15:19, emphasis added). The goal of saving faith is deliverance from hell and the securing of eternal life beyond the grave. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow captures this important point eloquently in his poem *A Psalm of Life*. The second stanza reads: “Life is real! Life is earnest! And the grave is not its

goal; Dust thou art, to dust returnest, was not spoken of the soul.”³⁶ Saving faith, then, is the belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God who died and rose again to pay one’s personal penalty for sin and the one who *gives eternal life to all who trust Him* for it.

(5) “*Him alone*”

But there is one final yet equally indispensable component of the content of saving faith: the *exclusivity* of faith in Jesus Christ. One cannot be said to have expressed saving faith if, while expressing faith in Jesus Christ for eternal life, he simultaneously has as the object of his faith additional competing interests. That is, if one believes that eternal life is gained by trusting Christ *and* doing good works; or by trusting Christ *and* being baptized, etc.; or if one expressly believes that faith in Christ is just one valid pathway among many to eternal life (e.g. those who espouse evangelical pluralism), then his faith is not in the proper object and thus is not *saving faith*.³⁷ Faith that does not rest solely on Jesus Christ as the only One who can pay the penalty for sin and give the gift of eternal life is not saving faith.

That Jesus demands exclusivity is indicated by His statement to the disciples in the upper room. “I am the way, the truth, and the life. *No one comes to the Father except through Me*” (John 14:6, emphasis added). Peter likewise affirms the exclusivity of faith in Christ in his address before the Sanhedrin.

[L]et it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of *Jesus Christ of Nazareth*, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole. This is the “stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.” Nor is there salvation in any other, *for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved* (Acts 4:10–12, emphasis added).

Similarly, the Apostle Paul leaves no room for alternate routes to eternal salvation.

For this *is* good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and *one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus*, who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time (1 Tim 2:3–6, emphasis added).

Saving faith is faith in *Christ alone* for eternal life. Insisting on the exclusivity of Christ is especially important in light of the present postmodern mindset.

Today's evangelist is called to proclaim the gospel in an increasingly pluralistic world. In this global village of competing faiths and many world religions, it is important that our evangelism be marked both by faithfulness to the good news of Christ and humility in our delivery of it. Because God's general revelation extends to all points of his creation, there may well be traces of truth, beauty and goodness in many non-Christian belief systems. But we have no warrant for regarding any of these as alternative gospels or separate roads to salvation.³⁸

This soteriological confession captures well the exclusivity saving faith.

Case Studies from the Book of Acts

The establishment of these five core essentials of saving faith—viz. (1) Jesus Christ; (2) the Son of God who died and rose again; (3) to pay one's personal penalty for sin; (4) gives eternal life to all who trust Him and (5) Him alone for it—is a matter of theological synthesis.³⁹ By linking Scripture with Scripture, one can conclude that these five essentials comprise the kernel of salvific truth that must be believed if one is to receive eternal life. Moreover, a survey of various gospel presentations from the book of Acts validates these essentials.

When examining the evangelistic pericopes in the book of Acts one must keep in mind a key hermeneutical principle of narrative literature. It is a general rule of literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutics that historical narratives in Scripture, such as those in Acts, are not intended to give exhaustive or comprehensive doctrinal details. Thus, not every gospel presentation in Acts explicitly lists all of the content that is necessary for

saving faith. Sometimes knowledge of one or more component of the object of saving faith on the part of the target audience is presumed.

Narratives record what happened—not necessarily what should have happened or what ought to happen every time.... *All* narratives are selective and incomplete. Not all the relevant details are always given (cf. John 21:25). What does appear in the narrative is everything that the inspired author thought important for us to know. Narratives are not written to answer all our theological questions.⁴⁰

For instance, Paul’s gospel presentation in reply to the Philippian jailor is quite terse: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). Undoubtedly, implicit within “Jesus Christ” is an awareness of the essentials: His identity as the Son of God, His death and resurrection, His offer of forgiveness of sins and eternal life, and His exclusivity. The alternative is that Paul preached, and Scripture recorded, an incomplete gospel—an alternative that must be rejected.

Similarly, Peter’s famous Pentecost sermon in Acts 2 contains implicit references to Jesus Christ as the Son of God (2:36); and the remission of sins (2:38).⁴¹ But Peter does not mention specifically the *eternal destiny* of those who believe nor the *exclusivity of Christ*. Presumably the *exclusivity of Christ* and *eternal life* aspects of the gospel are here bound up in Peter’s references to Old Testament Messianic passages (Joel 2:28–32; Pss 16:8–11; 110:1). The Jewish audience, in acknowledging that Jesus was *the* long-awaited Messiah, thereby affirmed His exclusivity (cf. Acts 4:12) and as the Messiah, they likewise understood that He was the one who would usher in the *eternal* Kingdom as promised in 2 Samuel 7:12–16.⁴²

Peter’s sermon before members of Cornelius’ household comes close to explicitly affirming all five components of the object of faith—and may in fact do so. He introduces Jesus Christ at the outset (Acts 10:36) and implies His divine, transcendent nature as the Son of God by referring to Him as “Lord of all” (Acts 10:36) and the one “ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead” (Acts 10:42). Peter proclaims

the death and resurrection of Christ (Acts 10:39–40) and explains that He is the source of forgiveness of sins (Acts 10:43). The only one of the five essentials that must be inferred is the exclusivity of Christ, but this inference is not at all strained when one considers Peter’s statement that “all the prophets” witnessed to Him—that is, Jesus is *the* fulfillment of the Messianic promise, thus excluding any other pretenders to this claim.

Paul’s sermon on Mars’ Hill is particularly intriguing (Acts 17:22–34). Of note is the fact that according to the recorded text of his message, Paul does not mention directly the name *Jesus Christ*. Instead he refers to Him as “the Man” whom God has ordained (v. 31). Yet undoubtedly the audience knew precisely to whom Paul was referring (cf. 17:18). Paul clearly refers to Jesus’ *death and resurrection* (vv. 31–32) and, like Peter’s sermon just discussed, the reference to Jesus as the one who will “judge the world” implies deity.

But conspicuous by their absence in Paul’s Mars’ Hill sermon are any explicit references to *sin* or *eternal life*. It is possible that his reference to Jesus judging the world “in righteousness” (v. 31), as well as his exhortation to “repent” (v. 30), could be taken as implicit challenges for his listeners to deal with their sin, but more likely the challenge to repent simply represents Paul’s call for members of his audience to change their minds about their view of God and Christ in general.⁴³ One must keep in mind that historical narratives contain only snapshots of what happened at a moment in time. Not everything that happened in a given situation is preserved in the inspired text of Scripture.

Explicit reference to Jesus’ substitutionary atonement for sin and the hope of eternal life is evidently not contained in this particular sermon because the broader context already provided such information to the people. Perhaps these topics had been addressed by Paul as he reasoned in the synagogue with Jews and Gentiles alike prior to his climactic address in the midst of the Areopagus (cf. 17:17). Presumably he had presented the gospel more fully and with greater detail during those discussions.

One could examine every evangelistic appeal in the Book of Acts and yet it is difficult to build a theology of the pure gospel from these narrative texts *alone*. This is because the recorded content of the gospel message is necessarily impacted by the context in which it is given, the selectivity of Luke, and the prior knowledge of the audience. Nevertheless as the preceding discussion illustrates the core essentials of the gospel message are validated either implicitly or explicitly by the narrative literature of the New Testament. By means of the systematic study and comparison of various New Testament passages, one can reach a determination regarding the precise content of saving faith with confidence.

Summary of the Content of Saving Faith

The goal of this chapter has been to demonstrate that saving faith has a clearly definable and non-negotiable content and to articulate that content precisely. The proclamation of the gospel is “in this sense, an intellectual exercise; it is a truth-conveying exercise.” It is a “battle for the minds of men and women.”⁴⁴ Therefore, as Carson emphatically insists, *content* is critical.

American evangelicalism is in desperate need of intellectual and theological input. We have noted that not a little evangelical television is almost empty of content. It is mawkishly sentimental, naively optimistic, frighteningly ignorant, openly manipulative.... [E]ntertainment is not enough; emotional appeals based on tear-jerking stories do not change human behavior; subjective experiences cannot substitute for divine revelation; evangelical clichés can never make up for lack of thought. The mentality that thinks in terms of marketing Jesus *inevitably* moves toward progressive distortion of him; the pursuit of the next emotional round of experience easily degenerates into an intoxicating substitute for the spirituality of the Word. There is a non-negotiable, biblical, intellectual content to be proclaimed. By all means seek the unction of the Spirit; by all means try to think through how to cast his content in ways that engage the modern secularist. But when all the footnotes are in place, my point remains the same: the historic gospel is unavoidably cast as intellectual content that must be taught and proclaimed.⁴⁵

The “intellectual content” that comprises the content of saving faith includes five essential components: (1) Jesus Christ, (2) the Son of God who died and rose again, (3) to pay one’s personal penalty for sin, (4) gives eternal life to those who trust Him and (5) Him alone for it. These five essentials, however they may be expressed or articulated, must be included as the content of saving faith and the content of saving faith must *not* include anything that contradicts these five essentials.

Saving faith is the belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God who died and rose again to pay one’s personal penalty for sin and the one who gives eternal life to all who trust Him and Him alone for it. There is nothing magical about these particular English words; nor is it suggested that saving faith necessitates the articulation of a particular formula, verbiage or incantation. What is important to recognize is that saving faith has a *particular, non-negotiable content*.

In light of (1) a prevalent inconsistency among evangelicals when it comes to the precise definition of the gospel, (2) a lack of awareness of or attentiveness to this inconsistency, and (3) perceived indifference toward accuracy in one’s soteriological method, the future of American evangelicalism in this postmodern era may seem bleak. With clouds of confusion obscuring the essence of the gospel one wonders how long evangelicalism can continue in its role as the primary conduit of God’s salvific message. Yet the believer is reminded that although “the grass withers, and its flower falls away, the Word of the Lord endures forever” (Isa 40:8). There are places, occasions and individual voices where the gospel message echoes forth unencumbered and pure. On a good day, one can descry (if only barely) glimmers of hope and pockets of revival. May these bright days increase as the evangelicals confidently raise the Bible and proclaim, “This is the Gospel!”

ENDNOTES

1. Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systemic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 387.
2. The phrases “object of faith” and “content of faith” sometimes are used interchangeably. Although some scholars have sought to establish a theological distinction between the “object of faith” and the “content of faith,” viz. “object” meaning God and “content” meaning specific truths about God’s plan of salvation (cf. Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, rev. and expanded. ed. [Chicago: Moody Press, 1995], 115.), such distinctions are subtle and unwarranted insofar as the two aspects of saving faith are inseparable. That is, although there is a semantic distinction in identity between the *object* and *content* of faith, it is a distinction without separation. One cannot trust in a person (i.e., “object”) without believing specific propositional truths made by or about that person (i.e., “content”). For example, if one trusts in Jesus as the *object* of his faith, but the specific *content* of his faith is that Jesus is the Easter Bunny, his faith will not result in eternal salvation. For this reason, the present writer prefers to see “object of faith” and “content of faith” as distinct but inseparable elements of saving faith, and thus usually both components are implied when reference is made to one or the other.
3. H. A. Ironside gives a helpful seven-fold categorization of the *gospel* in the New Testament in chapter two of his classic book, *God’s Unspeakable Gift*. See H. A. Ironside, *God’s Unspeakable Gift* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1908).
4. Cf. Jeremy D. Myers, “The Gospel Is More Than ‘Faith Alone in Christ Alone,’” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 20, no. 2 (Autumn 2006): 33–56. Myers concedes that the term *gospel* has various referents throughout the New Testament, yet he argues that there is one “broad New Testament *Gospel*” that includes various truths related to salvation. In so doing, he creates a *de facto* technical meaning of the term. One implication of this conclusion is that since, in his view, the term *gospel* refers technically to the broad message of salvation, Myers is uncomfortable applying the term in a narrow sense to refer specifically to the kernel of salvific truth that must be believed to be saved. He writes, “saying that one has to believe the gospel to be saved is like saying that one has to believe the Bible to be saved. Such a statement is not wrong; it’s just too vague” (p. 51). But if, as the present writer contends, the term *gospel* has no technical meaning in and of itself, but rather refers simply to contextually-determined *good news*, why cannot the term be used to refer to the specific good news that must be believed in order to be saved? Additionally, it should be noted that Myers’ article is written from the perspective that saving faith requires no particular content other than Jesus’ guarantee of eternal life. In other words, Myers suggests that one does not necessarily need to know anything about Jesus’ work on the cross or relationship to the Father in order to be saved—a point with which the present writer strongly disagrees.
5. D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 45.
6. Some might point out that the post-resurrection appearances of Christ could be combined into one category, thus creating only four components of the gospel here: (1) Christ died; (2) was buried; (3) rose again; (4) and was seen by witnesses. Nevertheless, the point is that belief in Christ’s burial and post-resurrection appearances, whether specifically or generally identified, are nowhere listed as components of saving faith.
 Some also might suggest that Paul’s description of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15 is actually too *narrow*, rather than too *broad*, in that it omits certain content that is necessary as the object of saving faith. They might point out, for instance, that there is no explicit mention of “forgiveness of sins.” Yet upon careful scrutiny, it can be concluded that in fact Christ’s substitutionary atonement for sin is addressed in verse three: “Christ died for our sins;” and the fact that *belief* in this reality is necessary for eternal salvation is seen in verse eleven: “so we preach and so you *believed* [emphasis added].” Furthermore, if the context is expanded to include the remainder of chapter fifteen, the “forgiveness of sins” issue is covered in verse seventeen. Indeed, all of the components of saving faith, which will be quantified in the next section, are contained in 1 Corinthians 15.

It also has been noted that the repeated phrase “according to the Scriptures” (vv. 3, 4) may well mark out the core essence of the gospel, thus relegating the post-resurrection appearances to a place of supporting material as distinguished from the components that are a required part of the content of saving faith. That is, the death and resurrection of Christ are part of the explicit content of saving faith; whereas the burial and post-resurrection appearances of Christ are merely supporting evidences of His death and resurrection.

7. See also Mark 1:15; Acts 15:7; Rom 10:16; 2 Cor 4:3–4; 9:13; 11:4; Eph 1:13; Col 1:5; 1:23; 2 Thess 1:8; 2:14; 1 Pet 4:17. The suggestion that *salvation* in Romans 1:16 refers to *sanctification* and not *justification* is utterly unwarranted and out of step with the context. The gospel Paul desired to preach in Rome, which to that point he had been unable to do in person (cf. 1:15), is the good news about how to obtain eternal salvation. This fact is indisputable when one considers Romans 15:20, where Paul claims that his target audience for the gospel proclamation in Rome are those who have never before heard about Christ. “And so I have made it my aim to preach the gospel, *not where Christ was named*, lest I should build on another man’s foundation” (emphasis added).

8. Ignorance about sin does not excuse one from believing the gospel. According to Scripture all men are without excuse when it comes to salvation because of God’s general revelation (cf. Rom 1:18–32; Ps 19:1; Acts 14:17). Yet before one can receive salvation by faith alone in Christ alone he must first acknowledge the specific nature of his predicament—namely, that his personal sinfulness has consigned him to hell.

9. It is acknowledged that this famous verse occurs within a broader section of Romans in which Paul is addressing the believer’s sanctification and on-going struggle with sin. Yet this does not preclude the use of this verse as a proof-text for the consequences of sin in the life of the unbeliever. The point Paul is making in Romans 6 is that the believer has been set free from both the *penalty* and *power* of sin and that he should no longer behave as if he is a slave of sin. Romans 6:22 assures the believer that he has been set free from sin and has received everlasting life. Romans 6:23 then serves as a summary statement (note the explanatory *for*) contrasting the unavoidable consequence for those who are still in positional bondage to sin with the gracious end that awaits those who have received the “gift of God,” namely, “eternal life in Christ Jesus.” Paul’s point is that the believer has been set free from sin (which if left unremedied would have resulted in eternal damnation; 6:23a) and has received the gift of God (which is the present possession of eternal life; 6:23b).

10. See previous note.

11. Charles C. Bing, “The Condition for Salvation in John’s Gospel,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 34.

12. For a listing of 160+ verses demonstrating justification by faith alone, please visit www.notbyworks.org.

13. Saving faith refers to faith that is in the proper object. Not all faith saves. But what makes faith non-saving is when its object is misplaced. Thus, there is a distinction between what may be termed *generic* faith and *saving* faith. Generic faith is faith in any object. Saving faith is faith in the saving object, namely the Gospel.

14. Keith A. Davy, “The Gospel for a New Generation,” in *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 354. The present writer is borrowing Keith Davy’s term “irreducible minimum,” even though Davy does not share the present writer’s view on the content of saving faith. The term “irreducible minimum” is helpful in that it frames the discussion of the content of saving faith in terms of its precision. Some evangelical scholars, especially some who share the present writer’s concern over the infusion of works and other performance-oriented components into the gospel, dislike the term “minimum” when referring to the content of saving faith. Yet, it is difficult to see why this phrase would be a concern. Perhaps the concern reflects the influence of postmodernism’s celebration of imprecision.

The issue at hand is: Is it possible for one to know what he has to believe in order to receive eternal life? The answer to this question *has to be yes*, otherwise no one could ever be saved. And since it is in fact possible to know what one has to believe in order to receive eternal life, then the natural and

necessary follow-up to that question is: “What is it?” What is the precise content of saving faith? The issue is *precision*. At a time when postmodern evangelicalism is comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty, it is crucial that the church quantify accurately the biblical content of saving faith.

15. Arthur T. Pierson, *The Heart of the Gospel: Sermons on the Life-Changing Power of the Good News* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1996), 46–47, emphasis added.

16. There is a tendency on the part of some, particularly some from the Reformed tradition, to create a distinction between *belief* and *trust* wherein *trust* is said to involve elements of personal obedience or a pledge of allegiance to the object of one’s faith. Those who hold this view suggest that *believing* in Jesus is not enough; one must *trust* in Him (i.e., promise to obey Him) in order to be saved. It is the contention of the present writer, however, that *saving faith* does not require elements of obedience or a personal pledge of allegiance.

Other evangelicals who likewise reject the notion that *saving faith* requires obedience still prefer to see a semantic distinction between *belief* and *trust*. For them, *belief* more naturally relates to *propositional* truths and *trust* more appropriately relates to a *person*. While the semantic distinction between faith in a person and faith in a proposition is worth noting (as discussed above), it is the present writer’s contention that the terms *faith*, *belief* and *trust* (along with their corresponding verb forms) are synonymous, referring to “the assurance or confidence in some stated or implied truth.” The fact that this truth may relate to a *person* or to *propositions about that person* does not alter the meaning of faith. Furthermore, given the popular Reformed delineation of *belief* and *trust* wherein *trust* is said to require obedience, it is probably best to avoid making sharp distinctions between such English words as *belief*, *trust* and *faith*. The pertinent issue when quantifying saving faith is the *content of faith*, not the *kind of faith* (i.e., belief versus trust).

17. See also John 6:35; 7:38; 11:25–26; 12:46, et al.

18. In recent years, some theologians have departed from the biblical view of the gospel by suggesting that one can believe in Jesus for eternal life without conscious knowledge that He died and rose again for one’s sins. For these theologians, knowledge of Christ’s death and resurrection as a payment for one’s sins is optional as part of the content of saving faith.

The view that one can believe in Jesus for eternal life without knowing that He died and rose again has been variously termed the “crossless gospel,” the “promise-only gospel,” the “contentless gospel,” the “minimalist gospel,” and the “refined gospel.” This view is being propagated primarily by the Grace Evangelical Society (www.faithalone.org) and such notable theological scholars as Zane Hodges, Bob Wilkin and John Niemela (www.mol316.com), to name a few. Some who hold this view have adopted the label “the refined view,” indicating that the accepted view of the gospel throughout two thousand years of church history has been incorrect and that they now have provided a long-overdue corrective. Hodges refers to the traditional evangelistic model (e.g. requiring conscious knowledge of Jesus’ death and resurrection), as “flawed.” Cf. Zane C. Hodges, “How to Lead People to Christ, Part 1,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 13 (Autumn 2000): 8. Hodges elsewhere states, “The simple truth is that Jesus can be believed for eternal salvation *apart from any detailed knowledge of what He did to provide it.*” Zane C. Hodges, “How to Lead People to Christ, Part 2,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 14 (Spring 2001): 12, emphasis added. See also Zane C. Hodges, “How to Lead People to Christ, Part 1,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 13 (Autumn 2000): 3–12.

For Hodges and others who hold this view, the gospel is limited to: “Belief in Jesus Christ as the guarantee of eternal life.” Hodges writes, “People are not saved by believing that Jesus died on the cross; they are saved by believing in Jesus for eternal life, or eternal salvation.” Hodges, “How to Lead People to Christ, Pt.2,” 10. According to Hodges, details such as who Jesus is (i.e. the Son of God) and His work on the cross are not relevant to the precise content of saving faith. To be clear, proponents of this view believe Christ died and rose again; *they just do not believe one has to know about Christ’s death and resurrection to be saved.*

The present writer applauds the quest for precision in the content of saving faith by those who hold this view; yet, in a tragic example of a theological method gone awry, they have gone too far. Their theological method manifests several errors such as [1] an unbalanced appeal to the priority of the Johannine Gospel (Consider Hodges’ statement, “All forms of the gospel that require greater content to

faith in Christ than the Gospel of John requires are flawed.” Hodges, *How To Lead a Person To Christ*, Part 1, p. 8. And, “Neither explicitly nor implicitly does the Gospel of John teach that a person must understand the cross to be saved.” *Ibid.*, p. 7.); [2] A failure to acknowledge and correctly handle the progress of revelation in Scripture (See the present writer’s discussion of this issue in note twenty-seven below.); [3] A failure to acknowledge the changing content of saving faith within each dispensation (In support of their position that saving faith today does not require knowledge of Christ’s work on the cross, adherents of this view often will appeal to the fact that Abraham and other OT saints did not believe in the death/resurrection of Christ. Such an argument evidences a departure from the foundational dispensational understanding regarding the changing content of saving faith. It is self-evident that OT saints did not believe explicitly in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, since the events of Calvary had not occurred yet. But it does not follow from this observation that someone *today* could be saved without knowledge of Christ’s work on the cross. See note twenty-seven below.); [4] An improper theological synthesis when comparing Scripture with Scripture; and [5] The tendency to read a presupposed theological conclusion into a given passage, thus obscuring the plain, normal sense of the passage.

Sadly, in their commendable effort to eliminate any elements of works or human effort from the gospel, they have stripped it of key salvific components. One proponent of this view stated that it is possible for a person to get saved in the present age by believing in Jesus, and then die and go to heaven, whereupon he is surprised to learn that the Jesus who saved him also died and rose again for his sins. (Bob Wilkin, Question & Answer time following Wilkin’s presentation at the 2007 Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in San Diego, CA, entitled, “Our Evangelism Should Be Exegetically Sound,” November 15, 2007.) According to Wilkin, as long as one believes that Jesus guarantees him eternal life, he can be saved, even if he does not know that Jesus is the Son of God and even if he knows nothing about Jesus’ work on the cross.

Yet, several New Testament passages indicate that explicit knowledge of Jesus’ death and resurrection *is* necessary for eternal salvation. A detailed critique of the so-called “crossless gospel” is beyond the scope of this present work, but a couple of passages are worth noting here. In 1 Corinthians 1:17–18 Paul references the gospel he preached and refers to the “cross of Christ” and the “message of the cross.” Three verses later in 1:21, he states that one is saved by believing the message he preached. Two verses after that, he affirms once again the content of his message, which, when believed, results in salvation. He states, “we preach Christ crucified...” (1:23). This passage inseparably links the work of Christ on the cross to the content of saving faith. Later in 1 Corinthians 15, in a passage previously discussed in this present work, Paul states that one is saved by believing the gospel, which he then defines as including the death and resurrection of Christ. Galatians 1:8–9 also is instructive here. In Galatians 1:8–9, Paul states plainly that any gospel other than the one he had preached to the Galatians during his visit to them is a false gospel. Scripture provides a record of the precise gospel that Paul preached to the Galatians during his first missionary journey. That record is contained in Acts 13. There, one finds that the gospel Paul preached included quite naturally the death and resurrection of Christ (cf. Acts 13:28–30; 38–39). When synthesizing Galatians 1 with Acts 13, the conclusion can only be that any gospel that omits the death and resurrection of Christ is a *false gospel*. Many additional passages could be cited that affirm the centrality of the cross in the gospel message, but these should suffice to render the view discussed above as warrantless and unbiblical.

For a detailed treatment of this erroneous view of the content of saving faith, see Tom Stegall’s 5-part series in *The Grace Family Journal*. Tom Stegall, “The Tragedy of the Crossless Gospel, Parts 1–5,” *The Grace Family Journal* (2007). Available online at <http://www.duluthbible.org/246451.ihtml>. See also Gregory P. Sapaugh, “A Response to Hodges: How to Lead People to Christ, Parts 1 and 2,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 14 (August 2001): 21–29.

19. Sapaugh, “A Response to Hodges...,” p. 29, emphasis added.

20. *Ibid.*

21. George R. Beasley-Murray, “John,” in *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 36 (Dallas: Word, 1998), 12.

22. Merrill C. Tenney, “The Gospel of John,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 9, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 32, emphasis added.

23. See also John 1:49, “Nathanael answered and said to Him, ‘Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’”

24. Thomas L. Constable, *Expository Notes on John* (Garland, Tex.: Sonic Light, 2005), 178, emphasis added. Leon Morris concurs with Constable, “[Martha’s] faith is not a vague, formless credulity. It has content, and doctrinal content at that.... First, Jesus is ‘the Christ’ i.e., the Messiah of Jewish expectation. Secondly, He is ‘the Son of God.’ It is an expression that can mean little more than that the person so described is *a godly man*, but it can also point to a specially close relation to God. It is in the latter sense that it is used throughout this Gospel, and, indeed, John writes explicitly to bring men into faith in Jesus as the Son of God (20:31). There can be no doubt that Martha is giving the words their maximum content.” Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 551–52, emphasis added.

25. Cf. Renald E. Showers, *The Most High God: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Bellmawr, N.J.: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc., 1982), 80–81. Showers suggests that the identification of the Son of Man in this passage as “coming with the clouds of heaven” further implies His deity. He writes, “Several Old Testament passages declared that the clouds are the chariot of God (Ps 104:3; Isa 19:1). Thus, the fact that this Son of Man was coming “with clouds of heaven” indicated that He also was deity. Daniel was seeing a person who was deity incarnated in human form. Who was this unique person? Ancient Jewish writers believed that He was the Messiah. Jesus Christ believed the same, for, when He presented Himself as the Messiah during His first coming, He frequently claimed to be the Son of Man who would come with the clouds of heaven (Matt 24:30; 25:31; 26:64). The Apostle John recognized Jesus as this person (Rev 1:7, 13; 14:14).” John F. Walvoord agrees, “The expression that He is attended by ‘clouds of heaven’ implies His deity.... Clouds in Scripture are frequently characteristics of revelation of deity (Exod 13:21–22; 19:9, 16; 1 Kgs 8:10–11; Isa 19:1; Jer 4:13; Ezek 10:4; Matt 24:30; 26:64; Mark 13:26).” John F. Walvoord, *Daniel: The Key to Prophetic Revelation* (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute, 1971), 167.

26. Jesus’ interaction with Philip in the Upper Room (John 14:7–11) indicates that while the disciples believed Jesus to be the Messiah, they were not entirely clear on the concept of His deity.

27. Although a detailed defense of dispensational theology, vis-à-vis the distinction between God’s program for the Church and God’s program for Israel, is beyond the scope of this present work, it should be pointed out that the precise content of saving faith changes with each new dispensation in human history. That is, although sinners in all ages have been saved by grace through faith alone, the object of saving faith is not the same in each age. Abraham, for example, was saved by faith but his saving faith did not have as its specific object a Redeemer named “Jesus” as required in the present age (cf. Gen 15:6). During Jesus’ earthly ministry, saving faith required the affirmation that Jesus was Messiah. Today, during the present church age, characterized among other distinctions by a “blindness” for Israel (Rom 11:25), saving faith does not have Christ’s Messiahship as part of its core essence.

Recognition of the distinction in the unique content of saving faith within each dispensation is a hallmark of dispensational theology. Consider the following quote from the doctrinal statement of Dallas Theological Seminary, widely acknowledged as the dispensational standard-bearer since its foundation in the 1920s. “We believe that according to the ‘eternal purpose’ of God (Eph. 3:11) salvation in the divine reckoning is always ‘by grace through faith,’ and rests upon the basis of the shed blood of Christ. We believe that God has always been gracious, regardless of the ruling dispensation, but that man has not at all times been under an administration or stewardship of grace as is true in the present dispensation (1 Cor. 9:17; Eph. 3:2; 3:9, asv; Col. 1:25; 1 Tim. 1:4, asv). We believe that it has always been true that ‘without faith it is impossible to please’ God (Heb. 11:6), and that the principle of faith was prevalent in the lives of all the Old Testament saints. *However, we believe that it was historically impossible that they should have had as the conscious object of their faith the incarnate, crucified Son, the Lamb of God* (John 1:29), and that it is evident that they *did not comprehend as we do that the sacrifices depicted the person and work of Christ.*” (From Point 5 of the Dallas Theological Seminary doctrinal statement, available at <http://www.dts.edu/about/doctrinalstatement/>, emphasis added.) n.b. The statement explicitly acknowledges the fact that the precise content of saving faith in the present age (viz. the “person and work

of Christ”) differs from the precise content of saving faith for Old Testament saints, for whom it was impossible for the crucified Son of God to be the “conscious object of their faith.”

For further study on dispensational soteriology see Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Salvation* (New York: C. C. Cook, 1917), 42–53, Robert Paul Lightner, *Sin, the Savior, and Salvation: The Theology of Everlasting Life* (Nashville: T. Nelson Publishers, 1991), 158–77, Earl D. Radmacher, *Salvation*, Swindoll Leadership Library (Nashville: Word, 2000), 113–28, Rylie, *Dispensationalism*, 105–22.

28. Appeal often is made to 1 John in support of the contention that explicit belief in the deity of Christ is a necessary component of saving faith. Passages such as 1 John 4:2, 15; 5:1, and 5:20 are interpreted as requiring a belief in the deity of Christ in order to be a Christian. A closer examination of the context of these passages, however, reveals that they are not referring to the essence of saving faith but rather to the requirement for believers to maintain right fellowship with God. 1 John is written to encourage believers to maintain fellowship with God through the Son. This concept of *fellowship* is expressed through the Greek word μένω (lit. “remain”), usually translated “abide.” To abide in Christ is to remain in right fellowship with Him. See Joseph C. Dillow, “Abiding Is Remaining in Fellowship: Another Look at John 15:1–6,” *BSac* 147, no. 585 (1990): 44–53.

In this context of abiding in close fellowship with Christ, John cautions believers, “Whoever confesses that *Jesus is the Son of God*, God abides in Him and he in God” (1 John 4:15, emphasis added), and “Whoever believes that *Jesus is the Christ* is born of God...” (1 John 5:1, emphasis added). While these verses often are taken as indicating that denial of Christ’s deity indicates that one is not a Christian, this is not John’s point. John’s point is that believers cannot abandon their belief in the deity of Christ, as the false teachers of that day were encouraging them to do, and yet remain in *right fellowship* with Him.

John’s use of μένω in John 15:1–8 (The Upper Room Discourse) helps clarify its use in 1 John and further demonstrates that “abiding in Christ” is not equivalent to “being a Christian” since in the Gospel of John context Jesus commands the Eleven (Judas was no longer present) to “abide in Me” in order to *bear much fruit*. That the Eleven are already believers at the time of Jesus’ statement is beyond dispute. Jesus’ command to “abide in Him” was not an evangelistic appeal but rather a call to the disciples to walk in close fellowship with Him in order to bear fruit and glorify God (John 15:8). For an excellent discussion of John’s use of the word “abide” see Gary Derickson and Earl Radmacher, *The Disciplemaker* (Salem, Ore.: Charis Press, 2001), 332–35. For a helpful exposition of John 15:1–8 see Gary Derickson, “Viticulture and John 15:1–6,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2005), Derickson and Radmacher, *The Disciplemaker*, 149–95, 326–29.

29. It should be noted that even though explicit affirmation of the doctrine of the deity of Christ may not be a necessary aspect of saving faith, if one explicitly *denies* or *rejects* Christ’s deity at the time of his profession of faith, such a denial likely indicates that his belief is misplaced. That is, one cannot trust in Jesus alone as the giver of eternal life while simultaneously denying His deity. Simply put, saving faith must not deny the deity of Christ though it is not necessarily required to affirm it explicitly in so many words.

30. Cf. *BDAG*, 3d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 982, 985.

31. For a more thorough discussion of σωζω see Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings* (Hayesville, N.C.: Schoettle Publishing Co., 1992), 111–33, Radmacher, *Salvation*, 3–14. Although the present writer is not always comfortable with Dillow’s handling of individual biblical passages—especially when it comes to his conclusions about some of the implications of the believer’s rewards at the Bema Judgment—his work in *the Reign of the Servant Kings* is an excellent resource.

32. See for example Radmacher, *Salvation*, 3–14.

33. While it is the *eternal* aspect of salvation that is essential in the gospel, it is worth noting that the biblical phrase *eternal life* has both a *present* and *future* reality. At the moment of conversion, one receives (present possession) eternal life. John’s gospel often highlights the present reality of one’s newly obtained eternal life, at times even shortening the reference to life (i.e., omitting the qualifier eternal). E.g. “The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they *may have life*, and that

they may have it more abundantly” (John 10:10, emphasis added). By contrast, Paul’s epistles often emphasize the future reality of eternal life. E.g. “...having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to *the hope of eternal life*” (Titus 3:7, emphasis added).

Eternal life ultimately involves spending eternity with God in the new heavens and new earth during the eternal state (cf. Rev 21:1–27). When the present writer refers to a believer “going to heaven,” *heaven* serves as a metonym for the afterlife for believers. It is understood that during the first one thousand years following Christ’s return believers will not be in heaven *per se*, but rather on the old earth where they will serve with Christ during the millennial portion of His eternal reign.

34. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 Soteriology (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 234–66.

35. For example, “peace” (Rom 5:1), “reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:17–21), “forgiveness” (Acts 13:38), “redemption” (Gal 3:13), and others.

36. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “A Psalm of Life,” in *One Hundred and One Famous Poems*, ed. Roy J. Cook (Chicago: The Reilly & Lee Co., 1958), 123.

37. D.A. Carson has written a monumental work on the influence of postmodern thinking on the present culture and the resultant rise of evangelical pluralism. In *The Gagging of God*, Carson writes, “The loss of objective truth and the extreme subjectivity bound up with most forms of postmodernism have called forth, in the religious arena, a variety of responses. These are most commonly reduced to three: (1) Radical religious pluralism: ...this stance holds that no religion can advance any legitimate claim to superiority over any other religion...(2) Inclusivism: This stance, while affirming the truth of fundamental Christian claims, nevertheless insists that God has revealed himself, even in saving ways, in other religions. Inclusivists normally contend that God’s definitive act of self-disclosure is in Jesus Christ, and that he is in some way central to God’s plan of salvation for the human race, but that salvation itself is available in other religions. (3) Exclusivism: This position teaches that the central claims of biblically faithful Christianity are true. Correspondingly, where the teachings of other religions conflict with these claims, they must necessarily be false. This stance brings with it certain views of who Jesus is, what the Bible is, and how salvation is achieved.” Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism*, 26–27. See also Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips, eds., *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 7–26. Those postmodern evangelicals who eschew clarity and purity in the gospel, if not fully committing themselves to an *inclusivist* view of the gospel, are nevertheless embracing incipient forms of it.

38. From Chapter Six of *The Amsterdam Declaration, 2000: A Charter for Evangelism in the 21st Century*, cited in J. I. Packer and Thomas C. Oden, *One Faith: The Evangelical Consensus* (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 137.

39. This is an important point that must not be passed over too quickly. One arrives at the essence of the gospel via theological synthesis, not arbitrary proof-texting. That is, there is no single verse that states in so many words, “Thus saith the Lord: the precise content of saving faith is...” As with all doctrine, the content of saving faith is determined based upon a comparison of Scripture with Scripture that takes into account the progress of revelation. Some within evangelicalism, who have rightly been termed “minimalists,” have stripped the gospel of some of its essential elements based upon an improper hermeneutic that fails to acknowledge the role of theological synthesis in the Bible study process. For instance, a small minority of evangelical theologians now suggest that conscious knowledge of Christ’s work on the cross is optional when it comes to saving faith (see note nineteen above).

This view is based upon, among other things, the naïve observation that nowhere does Scripture call man to “believe in Christ’s death and resurrection” in order to be saved. But if the same theological method were to be applied to other doctrinal matters, several foundational standards of Christian orthodoxy would come under question. For instance, doctrines such as the Trinity, the hypostatic union, and the inerrancy of Scripture are all matters of theological synthesis and not based upon a single proof-text. To be clear: These doctrines are true and indispensable. The point is, however, that they are developed through a

proper hermeneutic that takes into account the literal-grammatical-historical context of a given passage, and then synthesizes the meaning of one passage with the meaning of other passages, thus resulting in a comprehensive statement of biblical doctrine. For a more in depth critique of the view that one can be saved apart from knowledge of Christ's work on the cross, see note eighteen above.

40. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 84, emphasis original. See also Walter A. Henrichsen and Gayle Jackson, *Studying, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Lamplighter Books, 1990), Elliott E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1990).

41. Although Peter does not use the term "believe," his exhortation that his listeners "know assuredly [v. 36]" (Gk. ἀσφάλως γινωσκέτω) is semantically similar. BDAG defines the qualifier ἀσφάλως when used with the verb γινώσκω ("know") as "pertaining to being certain, assuredly, certainly" (BDAG, 147). It will be demonstrated later in this chapter that this is the essence of belief: to know with certainty. Thus, Peter's audience in Acts 2 experienced saving faith in Acts 2:37 when, according to Luke, they were convinced (Gk. Κατανύσσομαι) of the truthfulness of Peter's gospel message. Understood in this way, Acts 2:38 then becomes not an evangelistic appeal but a call to discipleship (repent and be baptized). See discussion of the meaning of *faith*, as compared with *saving faith*, below.

42. That the Messianic/Davidic promise of a Kingdom for Israel included the idea that this Kingdom would be *eternal* is clear in the Old Testament. Cf. 2 Sam 7:13, 16; 1 Kgs 9:5; 1 Chr 17:14; 22:10; 28:7; Ps 45:6; 89:34–37; 145:10–13; Is 9:6–7; Dan 4:3, 34; 7:14, 27; 9:24; 12:2.

43. There are at least three broad ways in which repentance has been understood by theologians: (1) *A willingness to stop sinning and surrender to the Lordship of Christ as an inseparable part of saving faith.* Saving faith, it is suggested, must include repentance as so defined. Adherents of this view include John Gerstner, J. I. Packer, John F. MacArthur, James Montgomery Boice, John R. W. Stott and most Reformed scholars who view faith as requiring obedience to be valid. Stott provides a good summary statement of this view: "Repentance is a definite turn from every thought, word, deed and habit which is known to be wrong.... It is an inward change of mind and attitude *towards sin* which leads to a *change of behavior*." John R. W. Stott, *Basic Christianity* (London: Intervarsity Press, 1971), 110, emphasis added. Notice the emphasis on sin and behavior.

(2) *A complete change in one's thinking about God and Christ.* This is the classic dispensational view of Lewis Sperry Chafer and H. A. Ironside and the view of the present writer. Ironside describes repentance as "a complete reversal of one's inward attitude.... To repent is to change one's attitude toward self, toward sin, toward God, and toward Christ." Harry A. Ironside, *Except Ye Repent* (New York: American Tract Society, 1937), 5. This view of repentance has some merit since the lexical meaning of the biblical term repent (μετανοέω) is "to change one's mind" and the words repent and repentance occasionally *do* refer to the process of salvation as whole viz. "a change of mind about God, Christ and the means of salvation" (cf. Luke 24:47; Acts 11:18; 17:30; 20:21; 26:20; Rom 2:4; Heb 6:1). Yet, it may be an oversimplification of the issue since there are times when repentance clearly involves a call to change one's actions (i.e., stop sinning). Most often, the terms in Scripture carry the connotation of *a change of mind about sin* with the result that one stops sinning (cf. Luke 13:3, 5; Acts 8:22; 2 Cor 7:9, 10; 12:21; 2 Tim 2:25; Heb 6:6; 2 Pet 3:9; every occurrence in the book of Revelation). When used in this way (i.e., change your sinful behavior), Scripture never indicates that repentance is a *condition for eternal life* (as adherents to the first view suggest). Rather, it is a generic call upon all men, saved and unsaved alike, to stop sinning or face the consequences (either temporally or eternally). For an overview of the biblical usage of the terms *repent* and *repentance*, see *Appendix C: A Survey of the Biblical Usage of the Words Repent and Repentance*.

(3) *The Roman Catholic view* wherein repentance is defined in terms of confession and doing acts of penance. This view is based upon Roman Catholic tradition rather than sound biblical exegesis and therefore may be rejected.

44. D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 507.

45. Ibid., 508, emphasis original. Carson rightly insists that saving faith is an intellectual exercise and that the gospel has a definable content that must be believed. However, for Carson this is not all there is to saving faith. Carson suggests that the gospel also has an “affective element” that requires an “appeal to the will” (Ibid., 507). According to this view, saving faith occurs only when the sinner has both assented to the truth of the gospel’s content and, by an act of his will, volitionally consented to follow and obey Christ. This view of saving faith is quite common and owes to the influence of the Reformed tripartite view of faith as *notitia, assensus, and fiducia*.