

# “Unless You Believe”

by Walton Weaver

The writer of the book of Hebrews says, "And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him" (Heb. 11:6). Regarding faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God Himself said, ". . . for unless you believe that I am He you shall die in your sins" (John 8:24). From these two passages we see the absolute necessity of believing both in God and in Jesus Christ.

In addition to being told that we must believe in God and in Jesus Christ, these verses also tell us why we must believe in them, and what it is that we must believe about them. We must believe in God because without faith in Him we cannot please Him. Enoch is given as an example. The Old Testament does not say that Enoch believed in God, but the writer of Hebrews concludes rightly that "without faith" it would have been "impossible" for Enoch to have pleased God, something Genesis does assert of him. To please God is to walk uprightly before Him, or to be obedient to Him. One does what God says because he trusts Him; he believes Him. One cannot believe God unless he believes that He exists, and he will not come to God unless he believes that God keeps His promises. Enoch not only believed that God is, but he also believed that God rewards those who seek Him out. We must believe in God as did Enoch.

What must we believe about Jesus Christ? Jesus answers: "Unless you believe that I am He," meaning that we must believe that He is the long awaited Messiah. The word "Messiah" is the Old Testament equivalent to the New Testament word for "Christ." When Peter confessed that Jesus was "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16), he was confessing that Jesus was the Messiah of Old Testament expectation. The reason given that we must believe that Jesus is the Christ is that if we do not believe in Him we "shall die in your [our] sins." So it is a matter of salvation; if we do not so believe in Him we cannot be saved; we will yet remain in our sins.

## Faith and Testimony

Faith does not come to us by a miracle that God works in us, or, in other words, it does not come by a direct working of the Holy Spirit upon us. The apostles were promised the Holy Spirit to guide them into all truth (John 16:13) so that they revealed the truth from God as the Spirit gave them utterance (Acts 2:1-4), and what they wrote were the commandments of the Lord (1 Cor. 14:37). After all the apostles died all others have come to know the truth of God through their written testimony. Even though the New Testament documents were originally given to men by miracle, all since the time of the inspired apostles and prophets in the first century have come to know God's will through their testimony, not by a direct special revelation to them through the Holy Spirit.

Even before God's inspired will had been committed to writing by these apostles and prophets (Eph. 3:3-4) others were expected to receive the testimony of these witnesses. The Holy Spirit was promised to them so that they might become witnesses that their testimony might be received (John 15:26-27; Lk. 24:46-49; Acts 2:32-33). Paul thanked God that the Thessalonians

received his message as it was in truth the word of God, rather than receive it as the word of men (1 Thess. 2:13). What he had preached among them was the word of God because he had received it by revelation (Gal. 1:11-12; 1 Cor. 2:6-13). The proclamation of these men, both in its oral and written form, was their testimony which was to be believed.

Elsewhere Paul asks, "And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent?" (Rom. 10:13-15). Those "sent" were the inspired apostles and prophets who were to bear testimony concerning Jesus Christ, and who were to preach the truth He made known to them through the Holy Spirit (cf. Paul's commission as made known to him by Christ Himself, Acts 26:15-18).

Paul says that "faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17). John says that the signs written in his gospel were "written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name" (Jno. 20:30-31). Peter wrote his epistles that the readers might "remember the words spoken beforehand by the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken by your apostles" (2 Pet. 3:2). The faith of the Corinthians was based upon "the testimony of God" which Paul preached while he was in Corinth, so that Paul could say that their faith did not "rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God" (1 Cor. 2:1-5).

### **Faith and Confession**

Faith that is produced by divine testimony, or that comes by hearing the word of God, is not intended to be an end in itself. The faith that saves is the faith that obeys. "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love" (Gal. 5:6). The purpose of proclaiming the divine message is "unto the obedience of faith" (Rom. 1:5; 16:26). "You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone" (Jas. 2:24). Simply believing the testimony will not bring the salvation desired. The hearing of the word must be united with faith or the word one hears will not profit him (Heb. 4:2). When the word "faith" is used alone in such passages as this it is used in a comprehensive sense to embrace all the conditions involved in salvation. This is made clear when we notice that other conditions are coupled with faith in such a way that it is obvious that they are made equally necessary to salvation.

Such a case appears in Paul's discussion of faith and confession: "If you confess with the mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved; for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation" (Rom. 10:9-10). Because confessing one's faith is made equally necessary with faith itself, it is not true that one is saved by faith alone, as so many people affirm. We are not led to the conclusion of "faith only" just because faith is the only thing named in a given passage. If we followed this line of reasoning all the way through what would we conclude when repentance (Acts 11:18) or baptism (Acts 22:16; 1 Pet. 3:21) are the only conditions named in a given passage?

### **Faith and Repentance**

When the word faith appears alone in a passage of Scripture we also know that repentance is necessarily involved in the salvation under discussion. We know this is true because repentance is specifically commanded in other passages (Acts 2:38; 17:30-31), and in some cases it is clearly preceded by faith. In Acts 2:38, for example, the command to repent is given to people who have clearly been brought to conviction of sin by the sermon preached by Peter (they were "pierced to the heart," vs. 36). It was to believers that Peter said, "Repent, and let each of you be baptized . . ." So we do not conclude that because Paul names only faith in some passages (e.g., Rom. 5:1) that faith is the only thing necessary to salvation, any more than we would conclude that just because Luke tells us that "God has granted to the Gentiles . . . repentance that leads to life" (Acts 11:18) this means that faith is excluded because it is not named in the same verse. This shows us that when such terms are used alone they are used in a comprehensive sense.

### **Faith and Baptism**

What we have said about faith in relation to confession and repentance also applies to faith and baptism. Sometimes we find baptism is the only thing commanded in a particular text of Scripture. Ananias does not tell Saul to believe, or confess his faith, or to repent. It is clear that when Ananias comes in to him Saul is already a penitent believer, so he simply tells him to "arise and be baptized and wash away thy sins" (Acts 22:16). If we were to use this case as some use verses that name only faith we would contend that one is saved by "baptism only." But we know that other things are necessary.

Baptism is linked with faith in relation to salvation by Jesus when he said, "He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved" (Mk. 16:16), just as baptism is linked with repentance in relation to remission of sins in Acts 2:38. Even though faith is the only thing named in a given passage, and baptism is the only thing named in another, we understand that neither of these alone brings salvation or the remission of sins.

### **Conclusion**

All must agree that we are saved by faith. The only thing that must be decided is, at what point in one's faith does Scripture teach that one is saved, or his sins are remitted? Is it prior to confession of one's faith? No. Is it before one repents? Again, the answer is, no. Is it before and without baptism in water for the remission of sins? Because of the clear statements of Scripture we must also answer, no.