

# Salvation and Works: Part II

By Greg Witherow

[Note: In our first essay two prominent and widely respected evangelical theologians stated that the Catholic Church does not teach salvation by works. Their testimony helps put to rest any claims that are otherwise. In this essay we will begin to lay the groundwork for what the Church does believe. We will start by establishing Christ as the final arbiter, indeed the author, of what the Gospel actually is. We will then review how Christ instructed us to embrace the Gospel in order to obtain eternal life.]

In defining a hierarchy of truth the Catholic Church distinguishes the four Gospels from the Epistles<sup>1</sup>. The Catechism states that, “**The Gospels are the heart of all the Scriptures** because they are our **principle** source for the life and teaching on the Incarnate Word, our Savior.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, just as the Old Testament must be understood through the lenses of the New Testament, so the rest of the New Testament must be read through the teachings of Christ as found in the Gospels. This introduces a dilemma in the Protestant-Catholic dialogue on salvation. How so? It is because Protestants look to the Pauline Epistles as the capstone and final arbiter of what the Gospel message is as Paul explains the Gospels better than the Gospels themselves<sup>3</sup>. It is through Paul’s inspired writings that Christ is most clearly preached. Most evangelicals might be surprised to hear this articulated. But this can be demonstrated by asking the question, “Which book(s) stands at the Apex of the New Testament?” Invariably most Protestants will name Romans, with Galatians getting an honorable mention. There is nothing official about this tendency; it is an almost unconscious assumption for most evangelicals. So while Catholics read the Epistles through the lenses of the Gospels, Protestants tend to read the Gospels through the lenses of Paul. In essence, Christ is only understood through a Pauline filter. This has implications.

## **The Harmony of Scripture**

The teachings of Christ and Paul **are never in conflict**. On the contrary, they are in **perfect harmony**, without error, infallible and authoritative<sup>4</sup>. But just as it would be odd to elevate the major and minor prophets of the Old Testament over the Pentateuch (the books of Moses), developing a theology from the prophets and squeezing that theology into Moses, so it would seem strange to **delegate the Gospels as a footnote to Paul**<sup>5</sup>. The Church places Christ as arbiter of what the Gospel is as he is its author and source. Just as we read the Old Testament through the lenses of the New, so we should read the Epistles through the lenses of the Gospels. Reversing the order skews our theology.

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<sup>1</sup> This is why Roman rite Catholics stand and Eastern rite Catholics gather around the priest during the reading of the Gospel. These are outward signs of a heightened respect for the Gospels.

<sup>2</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) #125

<sup>3</sup> As a convert sitting in the pew I found it odd that most homilies were based off the Gospel text and only very rarely from an epistle. Growing up as a Protestant there was always a heavy emphasis on the Epistles.

<sup>4</sup> When speaking of the Apostles Christ stated, “He who hears you hears me”. That’s a stamp of approval!

<sup>5</sup> See the book Born Fundamentalist, Born Again Catholic by David B. Currie on pages 120-121 where this is discussed in more detail.

## Christ Speaks On Salvation

Christ stated in the Gospels the following was necessary for salvation.

1. “He who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life<sup>6</sup>”.
2. “Unless one is born of water and Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God<sup>7</sup>”.
3. “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life<sup>8</sup>”.
4. We must keep the commandments<sup>9</sup>.
5. We must perform works of mercy<sup>10</sup>.
6. In order to be forgiven, we must forgive<sup>11</sup>.

Taken as a whole, Christ's teachings on salvation sound suspiciously Catholic. An evangelical **would never present this list** of quotes (besides the first item) when answering the question, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” as faith in Christ alone is the **ONLY** answer. This list might suffice for showing the evidences of eternal life, but not for obtaining it.

At this point we need to pause and draw distinctions within Protestantism over what “faith alone” means. Calvinists (a minority amongst Protestants) contend works are a **necessary fruit** of true faith. While saved by faith alone, the faith is never alone. Without works there is only a dead and therefore non-saving faith. This is to their credit. Others insist works are desirable, **but not necessary**<sup>12</sup>. But both camps are firm that ONLY faith merits the obtainment of eternal life. The Catholic on the other hand, takes Christ's words at face value. We will now look at some of these passages in more detail.

### “Keep The Commandments”

The story of the rich young ruler is presented in each of the synoptic Gospels. This young man comes to Christ, falls at his feet and with apparent sincerity asks, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” This man is truly a candidate for conversion! How would a Protestant have Christ answer his question? It would go something like this; “**I only require faith (alone) in me** to obtain eternal life.”

But the Commandments, not sola fide, are where Christ directed him. As the man unknowingly loved his wealth more than God, it was demonstrated he failed to keep even the first Commandment. “You lack one thing; go sell what you have and give to the poor and you **will have** treasure in heaven and come follow me.” Works of repentance were a **pre-condition** of following Christ, **not the evidence of salvation**. Christ does not require perfection before we are worthy of him. But he requires repentance of the sin we know of. Christ did not send the man on a wild goose chase, but rather the way of faith.

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<sup>6</sup> John 5:24

<sup>7</sup> John 3:5

<sup>8</sup> John 6

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 19:16,17

<sup>10</sup> Luke 10:25-37 and Matthew 25:31-46

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 6:14,15. It is assumed that we cannot obtain heaven until our sins have been forgiven.

<sup>12</sup> This “Lordship Controversy” is described in the book Faith Alone by R.C. Sproul pages 24-26.

Protestants claim that Jesus was catechizing the man on the hopelessness of salvation via the Commandments. There is some truth to this. Jesus says that a camel will walk through the eye of a needle before a rich man will ever enter heaven. But this highlights the necessity of God's grace, as Christ himself points out, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." Only God *is* good – Man must be *made* good. The young ruler required God's grace in keeping the Commandments (i.e. his sanctification), not his own self-efforts. Only after the man completed his faith with works of repentance could he obtain eternal life. Catholics take Christ's words at face value.

### **"Eat My Flesh And Drink My Blood"**

In John 6 Christ says, "Truly, truly I say to you unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. **He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life** and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is food indeed and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him".

Christ says eating<sup>13</sup> his flesh and blood is necessary for eternal life. How does this jibe with faith alone? Protestants hold that Christ is speaking symbolically in this discourse. As faith alone is the **ONLY** way of salvation Christ **ultimately**, albeit in a round about way is saying "whoever [Insert: has faith - Extract: eats my flesh and drinks my blood] has eternal life". But if this is all symbolic language, isn't this an absolute dreadful way to communicate eternal life is obtained by faith alone? Isn't this tact nearly a sure fire way to **almost insist** the laity comes to the wrong conclusion, a conclusion that will drive these people right out of the kingdom of heaven (which it did)? Can these people be blamed for missing that "Eat My Flesh And Drink My Blood" was the code word for "Faith Alone"?

Earlier in the passage Christ makes it clear that belief (**faith**) **in him is necessary** for salvation. But he didn't stop with a message of faith only. Protestants contend that the wayward disciples misunderstood Christ's "Faith Alone Discourse". Catholics contend that Christ's words be taken at face value.

### **"Must Be Born Of Water And Spirit"**

Christ tells Nicodemus, "Truly, truly I say to you unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God". This sounds serious. The Church has **always** understood this to mean water baptism<sup>14</sup>. This cannot be disputed. At the end of Mark's Gospel Christ says, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who

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<sup>13</sup> The Greek word translated as "eating" is the word for gnawing of food.

<sup>14</sup> Calvin contends that water and Spirit connotes the same thing. In other words, when we are born-again (independent of baptism) the Spirit cleans our souls like the water cleans our bodies. But he concedes that all the Church Fathers saw this passage as speaking about baptism.

does not believe will be condemned<sup>15</sup>”. This all concurs with Peter’s statement “baptism saves us<sup>16</sup>” and the words of Ananias in Acts, “Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins.<sup>17</sup>”

In guiding people onto the path toward eternal life Christ has told individuals to believe in him, keep the Commandments, eat his flesh and drink his blood and get baptized. This is not evangelical language. It is however Catholic language as the Church takes Christ’s words at face value.

### **The Sermon On The Mount: The Gospel**

The Sermon on the Mount is universally regarded as Christ’s greatest and most comprehensive sermon. But some have asked, did Christ present the Gospel in this sermon? Many Protestants grapple with this question<sup>18</sup>. For some the Sermon is a preparation of the Gospel, or an affirmation of the Law, but not the Gospel itself<sup>19</sup>. The reason? Salvation by faith alone is nowhere mentioned. As “faith alone” **is the absolute core of the Gospel** (to the evangelical it is the Main Point, minus it there is no Gospel), lacking such a reference means Christ’s greatest sermon must have been about something else. The following observation is made by a former evangelical, now Catholic.

“[Some Evangelicals] teach that very few, if any, of Jesus’ teachings apply directly to Christians today: the people of Jesus’ time lived under the [Mosaic] law, whereas we live under grace. I know of one speaker affiliated with the Moody Bible Institute, who refused to speak on any book of the Bible outside of the Pauline epistles, because none of them applied to present day Christians<sup>20</sup>”.

### **Sola Gratia (Grace Alone)**

Catholics on the other hand contend Christ proclaimed the Gospel in the Sermon, as a **working faith**<sup>21</sup> saves us. Catholics are called to keep the Commandments, eat Christ’s flesh and blood, be baptized and most importantly believe - not as evidence of our salvation but as God’s work in us to obtain it. As our sanctification is only obtainable through God’s grace, we take **Zero Credit** for it, as we are not the source of it. But God makes what is impossible for Man possible. He makes us a new creation from the inside out. In our next essay we will demonstrate how Paul and Christ are in harmony, examine the Catechism of the Catholic Church and view our topic as found in Tradition.

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<sup>15</sup> A person who does not believe but is baptized will not be saved. A person who was baptized and then stops believing will not be saved. But a person who believes and is baptized will be saved. If baptism (or the desire for it) is not required for salvation, Christ is being misleading with his words.

<sup>16</sup> 1 Peter 3:21 – also see Peter’s words in Acts 2:38

<sup>17</sup> Acts 22:16

<sup>18</sup> Specifically, dispensationalists debate this topic. For a definition of dispensationalism see the following web site. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dispensationalism>

<sup>19</sup> Read Matthew 5-7. If this is the Gospel, where is faith alone? This is why Protestants say we need Paul.

<sup>20</sup> Born Fundamentalist, Born Again Catholic, page 120. Only a dispensationalist evangelical would utter this line of thinking. A Calvinist would reject such notions. But such views are found amongst Protestants.

<sup>21</sup> Galatians 5:6