

Anchored in Christ

The Solid Rock in the Storms of Life



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To Jerry and Gerrie White

*who have been an inspiration to
my entire family of an enduring
faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.*

With Special Thanks to Brian and Linda Rowberg

There are not words enough to thank Brian and Linda for their incredible perseverance and encouragement in editing. They have labored with me for over seven years, helping me soften, clarify, and articulate my thoughts. Without their experience and dedication, this book would have been vastly inferior to what it has become. Thank you, dear friends, for entering into the yoke with me.

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Foreword

Understanding Biblical doctrine is required for a God-honoring life. Only right thinking leads to holy and righteous living.

The Bible is our only source and final authority for God's truth (doctrine) as we see from 2 Timothy 3:16. It alone is the written record of God's self-disclosure, and this finds its perfect, beautiful, and complete expression in the Person of Jesus Christ (Colossians 2:9). He is all the fullness of God disclosed in human form, and in that disclosure as a genuine human being Jesus reveals what every human being is supposed to be (John 1:14). Jesus Christ is both revelations: God revealed perfectly, and a human being living as God purposed. If we are to know God intimately and to live like Jesus humbly, then we must know the truth, richly found in Christ the living Word (2 Peter 3:18). This knowledge comes through accurate understanding of the truth, revealed in the written Word by the Holy Spirit. Such understanding requires carefully and diligently applying our minds and hearts to study, meditation, and application of the essential theological truths so indispensable to true Christianity (2 Timothy 2:15). Neglecting this pursuit leads to spiritual anemia in Christians, their families, and their churches.

Bishop J. C. Ryle of England (1816-1900), whose sound and respected Biblical teaching still speaks through his excellent books, wrote, "It was doctrine in the apostolic ages which emptied the heathen temples, and shook Greece and Rome. It was doctrine which awoke

Christendom from its slumbers at the time of the Reformation and spoiled the Pope of one-third of his subjects. It is doctrine which gives power to every successful mission, whether at home or abroad. It is doctrine—doctrine, clear ringing doctrine—which like the rams' horns at Jericho, casts down the opposition of the devil and sin.”

False doctrine was a constant threat to the New Testament church. Paul wrote Timothy a solemn charge to preach the word at all times by reproving, rebuking, exhorting, and instructing. He then cautioned Timothy, “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires” (2 Timothy 4:3).

We live in that day Paul foretold. False teaching has always been a threat to the stability and health of the church, but today in much of Christendom it is epidemic. There exists obvious and blatant heresy in some places; but in more subtle ways for evangelical Christians, much teaching today is man-centered instead of God-centered. The present trend focuses on what we need for a happy life rather than on what truly pleases God and exalts Jesus Christ. This trendy teaching emphasizes how to be blessed, feel good about yourself, and prosper in life, as if God exists solely for the sake of the believer.

With this off-center emphasis, many Christians ignore and keep silent about numerous core and vital truths because they make us uncomfortable. These neglected but very essential truths are the ones that convict us and humble us and make us ashamed. But this shame is necessary before we can wholeheartedly turn to the Savior for His ministry of grace and mercy that will free us, heal us, and transform us.

We must be anchored in this clear Biblical doctrine: God alone is the center of the universe and all things are from Him and through Him and to Him, for His glory forever (Romans 11:36). The plain path to a life of profound love, fullness of joy, and an ocean of peace is marked by sound Biblical doctrine. We need the whole gospel! We must have a thorough mental grasp and a deep heart revelation by the Holy Spirit of who God is, what He is like, what He has done, and what He will yet do. We must know deeply in our souls who we are, what we are really like, what we have done, and what is ours in our union with Christ because of His grace.

How can a father and mother help establish their children in the ways of God if they themselves do not have a thorough understanding of sound Biblical doctrine? How can older believers and pastors and Bible

teachers carefully pass the baton of truth to subsequent generations in life's relay race if they do not have a firm grasp on the baton themselves? How can Christians build up one another in the faith today—when fierce hurricane winds of false teaching are blowing against God's people—if they do not possess the strategic building stones of sound doctrine?

Norm Wakefield has served you wonderfully in his book, *Anchored in Christ*. It is a gift to you, and an excellent expression of God's grace. Out of his passion to know Biblical truth (sound doctrine) accurately, to live that truth in his own life faithfully, and to minister that same truth effectively, he has written from his heart to your heart. How different that is from just passing knowledge from his head to your head, a purely mental exercise. This book is not an academic approach like a scholarly work. Norm presents the truth simply from God's Word, explaining Biblical truth with Scriptural references. He shares truth made sensible for daily living, as doctrine was meant to be. This is not a book for mere casual reading, however. It is easy to understand, but it should be read with your Bible nearby and pen in hand for underlining, notations, pondering and digesting. We must love God with our minds as well as our hearts. Like good, healthy, solid food, *Anchored in Christ* will nourish your soul, change your thinking, and wonderfully affect the way you live—all for God's glory.

I have known Norm and his precious family for many years. I have witnessed his passion for the truth and his passion to share the truth across America because of his deep concern for the condition of the church. He knows this condition well because he has crisscrossed our country for years ministering in conferences and churches. He has witnessed and felt among Christians the great need for sound doctrine that is so necessary if they are to be anchored in Christ.

Meditation on God's Word accompanied with prayer for revelation leads to transformation for God's glory. This book is an excellent tool to help you. Take it, read, think, contemplate, pray, and digest. You will be renewed in your mind and therefore be transformed in your life (Romans 12:2).

Jerald (Jerry) R. White, Jr.

Introduction

Foundations are important! We know how vital foundations are in childhood, in business, in a culture, or in a building, but do we understand the importance of a true and strong spiritual foundation? Everyone recognizes the importance of the formative years in childrearing. If the child is trained well in the early years of life, he will enjoy the blessings of such training through his entire life. On the other hand, if bad habits were established while he was young, decades may pass before he overcomes those character flaws. In the meantime, his life will be filled with frustration and trials. The early training of children, or the lack thereof, will ripple in a significant manner throughout their lives.

The business world provides another example of the importance of foundations. People can go along fine for a while as they seek to establish a new business, but as the months and years roll on, they find themselves overwhelmed by consequences from poor planning in the initial stages of development. I've seen companies fold because they failed to test and develop their product wisely. Other businesses fail because they didn't have a clear foundational mission and vision statement. It should not surprise anyone when a corporation goes bankrupt because its executives were not held accountable to a foundational standard. Precautionary measures should have been installed in the operation of the corporation in its initial stages. In business, the foundational development is vital.

In an even broader illustration, a culture's foundation dictates its strengths and weaknesses. The strength of a family is vitally related to the strength of the marriage that produced it. If marriages are falling apart on a large scale in a culture or society, we should not be surprised by the increase in poverty, teen pregnancies, abortion, teen suicide, and lower educational performance. More importantly, as an increasingly large number of families become dysfunctional, we should expect fewer qualified, trustworthy, and righteous leaders to rise up to lead the culture back to sound foundations. If the foundational unit of society—marriage and family—is not secure, righteous, and protected, then forthcoming generations will suffer tremendous grief and pain.

But the best picture of the importance of foundations is illustrated by the field of building construction. The foundation is the most important aspect of a structure. If you've done remodeling work on a house that was not square or level, you know the builder must work with the state of the foundation, from the floor to the roof. If it is skewed, the things built on top of it will not fit quite right. Tension and frustration may result. Later, the occupants must live with the problems produced by the foundation.

In a region that suffers earthquakes, the foundations of buildings are of great concern. Perhaps you recall, as I do, seeing news coverage of the earthquake damage in San Francisco and Northridge, California, and in Turkey and Japan. Images come to mind of collapsed buildings, buckled roads, pancaked freeways, and selfless rescuers searching for survivors.

For many, the violent jolts of an earthquake are analogous to what they experience spiritually on a daily basis. And the aftershocks continue to rock their structures. Some have found their faith able to withstand the shaking, but others are buried beneath the rubble of a defective faith, crying for help.

If you can relate to this, then you know how important spiritual foundations are in life. Foundations anchor the soul to the unshakable. It is my prayer that this book will be as effective as a rescuer when he breaks through to a trapped victim of a terrible earthquake. I trust God will pull you up, bring healing, clean off the faulty foundation, and build a new, strong foundation for faith that can withstand every shockwave that comes.

There may be others who don't feel at all shaken or in danger of a spiritual, structural collapse of faith; yet their foundations are weak and vulnerable, much like a building that survives the small temblors, but

hasn't been tested by the "big one." If inspected carefully, these structures show that their foundations do not satisfy God's building codes.

You may be one of those who have the foresight to prepare for the future. You long to be anchored in solid rock. I hope this volume may anchor you in Christ, thus providing an unshakable security and faith, no matter what magnitude of spiritual "earthquake" may occur.

The old hymn, *The Church's One Foundation*, states a great truth. "The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ, her Lord." We must be anchored in Jesus and His Word. The Word of the Lord is eternal, and so this book is filled with scripture. I hope that after you have finished it, your Bible will never be the same to you. And by God's grace, neither will your responses to the shakings in your life.

Can you imagine the owners of buildings that have toppled in an earthquake reconstructing new structures on the same foundations? Wisdom requires a complete destruction of the old foundation and the establishment of a new, firmer foundation. Those new buildings need to be anchored more deeply and securely.

That same wisdom may be applied to the person whose faith has suffered collapse during a moral or spiritual earthquake. Before we construct a building that brings glory to God, there may need to be some demolition work. This may be hard to acknowledge. But the evidence is obvious in the church today in the United States: many spiritual buildings are swaying, cracking, and crumbling due to relentless quakes and aftershocks of trials and temptations.

We all know some, if not many, who lie buried beneath the rubble of what was supposed to be a house of faith. Why are many in the church today so shallow, sensual, powerless, and like the world? Why does the church resort to worldly marketing philosophies and methods to fill its pews?

We must put our foundation to the test: what is the basis for our faith? The conflict we feel because of the events of our lives is a spiritual *fault* in the foundation that is a nemesis to faith. The fruit of the Spirit of God is contrasted with the deeds of the flesh (Galatians 5:19-24). We are supposed to live in the love, peace, joy, and power of Jesus Christ. When we don't, it is right to ask, "Why?"

Are you spiritually hungry and do you desire to be holy? Are you tired of not being what the Bible says you ought to be? Tired of committing, recommitting, and rededicating, only to have your faith shaken by

the next quake? Perhaps you're on the verge of despair. You're buried beneath the rubble and feel that if someone doesn't rescue you quickly, you might as well give up and die.

Despair comes from not understanding God and His ways, and our faith shakes when the events of life don't match with our understanding of God. But there's a *reason* why so many have a vulnerable faith. The problem doesn't lie in God's powerlessness to save or in a lack of sincerity and desire to have a house of faith glorifying to God. More than likely, it has to do with the foundation. Perhaps we are not securely anchored in the Solid Rock. Maybe we've been building on sand instead of stone.

Through this book we will re-examine and reconsider foundational scriptures—scriptures introduced during childhood or one's first exposure to the gospel presentation. Sadly, many of the verses used in modern evangelism have been extracted from their context and used to accomplish an end for which the verses were not written. They have been abused and misused.

The result has been tragic! Millions of professing Christians and many who have fallen away from the church have spiritual foundations built on half-truths and error. Consequently, they drift like a ship without an anchor. Their lifestyles reveal all-too-little evidence of the presence of the living Lord Jesus Christ. Many people sincerely believe they are Christians bound for glory but instead are deceived and bound for eternal destruction. Someone has cried, "Peace, peace" when there is no basis for peace! One reason for this is the many popular scripture verses that have been abused and misused.

In the first part of this book, we will re-examine some foundational scriptures. The result may be quite shaking! You may feel like your basis for faith has been demolished. Earthquakes test the foundation until all that remains is that which cannot be shaken. The truths of God's Word will be like a rescuer pulling you out of the rubble. Rebuilding can be uncomfortable. It takes time, effort, study, and patience. But it is worth it! And please understand that my motive is love for both the truth and you when I say, *if your basis for faith can be demolished, it needs to be*. Wrong use and interpretation of scripture cannot anchor your soul in Jesus. So, we'll put those scriptures back in their contexts, and then begin to rebuild the foundation.

Understanding who and what God is, God's purposes for creation, the fall of man, and sin form the core of the second section. If our ideas about God are askew, we'll find ourselves in error regarding man

and sin. Quite often a person's faith fails because of the sin he sees in himself and in others. Why has God allowed sin? Why does He allow men to do terrible things to innocent people? Do we have an answer to the thousands and millions who die because of natural disasters? What about unanswered prayer? When we have a firm foundation regarding God and His purposes, these kinds of questions don't stumble us.

The third part of this book is dedicated to how God works in preparing His people for salvation. We'll investigate effective ways to present the scriptures and the gospel. One chapter will specifically address the evangelization of our children. How do we lead our children to Christ so they can be anchored in Him?

I trust the Lord to make your study both refreshing and stimulating. I hope your faith and your love for Jesus Christ will be renewed. Additionally, I think you'll find your mind and heart stimulated to investigate the scriptures more diligently. And when you have finished reading, I pray you'll stand before God and face life well anchored in the Lord Jesus Christ and His Word.

Part 1

Abused Scriptures

One

Joshua 24:15

And if it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

A portion of Joshua 24:15 may be one of the most popular quotations from the Bible. Portions of it adorn Christian homes all across our country. Many families have, “Choose you this day whom you will serve” engraved or embossed on a plaque in their family rooms, entry ways, or bedrooms. Most evangelists would consider their gospel presentation deficient if they didn’t quote part of this verse as an appeal to choose for Christ.

Have you ever questioned the idea of accepting Christ or choosing Jesus as Lord and Savior as the way of salvation? Perhaps you would be surprised to discover such an idea distorts the truth about salvation and how it is acquired. It is important to recognize (contrary to the popular interpretation of this verse) that salvation doesn’t come because an individual chooses to accept Christ. More importantly, this verse doesn’t teach that each man has a free will with which he may choose to accept or reject Christ.

It is significant to note that the whole verse is usually not printed or given in most evangelistic presentations. The truncated version can

be misleading. Indeed, if the verse is examined within its immediate context, we find it teaches just the opposite of what it appears to teach when we only consider, “Choose you this day whom you will serve... as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” There’s much more to this passage of scripture.

Before we examine the passage, it is also helpful to consider the reasoning behind its current popular presentation. The *false* assumption is that if God holds a person responsible for obedience, then he must naturally have the freedom of will to obey. But this is not the case. Although man does have the physical ability to obey, he doesn’t naturally have the spiritual freedom of will to make a choice resulting in salvation. The truth is that apart from union with Jesus Christ and the ensuing work of the Holy Spirit in one’s heart, a command to obey can only reveal a person’s hostility toward God and his inability to please God in the flesh.

Therefore, pulling this verse out of its context may lead someone to think his *choice* is the foundation for his relationship with God. He may think his destiny depends upon his decision. Furthermore, if that is true, then the logical conclusion is that the power source for his continuing to live the Christian life is his *choice*. But that teaching will not stand the test of God’s Word or the reality of life. In fact, it leads to a shakable faith. Let’s think about what happens when we receive a command from God.

The Power Source

Have you ever considered what a command from God reveals? When God makes a command, it exposes man’s heart condition. If a person can obey, it shows the power of God at work in his heart. On the other hand, if he cannot obey, it reveals his will still lies in bondage to a darkened heart. Here’s an example we can easily understand. When parents express their desires to their son, the condition and direction of the son’s heart is revealed by his response. If his heart is toward the parents, obedience will follow. But if not, then a conflict will arise.

Here is what was happening in Joshua 24. Joshua’s challenge to the nation of Israel created a situation designed to reveal the heart condition of that generation. His last recorded sermon to the nation of Israel preceded their occupation of the Promised Land. As we look at these verses in their context, we find that Joshua tested the fathers of

Israel by giving them some choices. But they aren't the choices implied in most gospel presentations. He first gave the command, then offered some alternative choices.

Now, therefore, fear the Lord and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. And if it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord (Joshua 24:14-15).

The Israelites were commanded to fear the Lord and serve Him. That is the obvious first choice. But it may be surprising to notice that "Choose whom you will serve" is not only referring to the Lord, but to various idols. Even more surprising might be the realization that Joshua didn't think they could choose God and walk that choice out faithfully!

And the people answered and said, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; for the Lord our God is He who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, and who did these great signs in our sight and preserved us through all the way in which we went and among all the peoples through whose midst we passed. And the Lord drove out from before us all the peoples, even the Amorites who lived in the land. We also will serve the Lord, for He is our God."

Then Joshua said to the people, "You will not be able to serve the Lord, for He is a holy God. He is a jealous God; He will not forgive your transgression or your sins" (Joshua 24:16-19).

Joshua saw their spiritual inability to choose for God. He knew they would not and could not choose to serve God, but they *could* choose which idol they would serve.

"If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then He will turn and do you harm and consume you after He has done good to you." And the people said to Joshua, "No, but we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:20-21).

But they were spiritually blind. They wrongly concluded that if given the choice between God and idols, they could choose to serve God. Notice carefully Joshua's response.

A Surprising Reply

And Joshua said to the people, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen for yourselves the Lord, to serve Him." And they said, "We are witnesses" (Joshua 24:22).

Have you ever heard this warning by an evangelist to those who would choose for Christ? Joshua declared that they witnessed against themselves and would not serve God. So he sealed their testimony with a command.

Now therefore, put away the foreign gods which are in your midst, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel. And the people said to Joshua, "We will serve the Lord our God and we will obey His voice."

So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made for them a statute and an ordinance in Shechem. And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God; and he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak that was by the sanctuary of the Lord.

And Joshua said to all the people, "Behold, this stone shall be for a witness against us, for it has heard all the words of the Lord which He spoke to us; thus it shall be for a witness against you, lest you deny your God" (Joshua 24:23-27).

As you read on to the end of the book of Joshua and into the first chapters of Judges, Joshua's words were verified. As long as Joshua and his generation were around, the people worshiped and obeyed God. But as soon as they died, the people turned to idols. We see the same testimony today. As long as there is a strong spiritual leader present, those who don't have the Spirit of God assume a form of godliness. But when the godly influence is removed, their true powerlessness and lack of spiritual life is exposed in their apostasy.

In reality, these verses teach that even though *man has a responsibility* to worship God with his whole heart, *he does not have the spiritual freedom of will* to do so. Natural man, although he knows God's laws, is helpless without the Spirit of God to enable him to obey.

This conclusion drawn from these verses may be confirmed in numerous passages. Romans 7:15-8:3 accentuates this doctrine. Paul summarized this section of his letter with the following:

For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For what the Law could not

do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh (Romans 8:2-3).

Responsibility Does Not Imply Freedom of Will

The important point for doctrinal foundational purposes is this: *responsibility does not imply freedom of will*. In fact, if we tell people to believe when they do not have the Spirit of God at work in their hearts, their attempts at being responsible for believing will only prove they *cannot* believe. For instance, telling them to have an unshakable faith will reveal their shakable faith. The powerlessness of the flesh will be unveiled just as it was in Israel.

Telling people to choose to believe puts them in a position for God to witness against them when they choose to obey. I can hear someone reacting, “But the Bible tells us, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.’” Please think carefully about what I’m saying. I’m not saying we shouldn’t tell people they *must* believe on the Lord Jesus Christ in order to be saved. I’m saying we shouldn’t tell them they *can choose to believe*. A person can’t just choose to believe. The person’s choice to follow Jesus proceeds from Spirit-born faith in the heart. We’ll talk about this later in the chapters on John 3:16 and Romans 10:9-13. For now, consider the importance of telling the truth to a person about his powerlessness to submit to Christ and about his need for a Savior. God’s Word testifies that man is dead in his sin and does not have the ability to choose to do good by God’s standards. Romans 3:11-12 confirms this teaching:

As it is written, “There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one.”

So, using Joshua 24:15 to teach that man has a free will is using it to teach the opposite of what the passage actually emphasizes. Your faith will have a more secure base if you build with this truth: *man is not able to choose for God without the enabling work of God’s Spirit*. An unshakable faith is not based upon man’s ability to choose (and isn’t the emphasis in most manmade religions always on *man’s* glory?), but on God’s Spirit working to produce fruit for *God’s* glory. The fruit of the Spirit of God when the gospel is presented anchors faith in the work of God through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit, not in one’s ability to choose correctly!

Two

John 1:12

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.

Another very popular evangelistic verse is John 1:12. Often pulled out of its context, this verse also is frequently used in evangelical tracts to teach that a man must choose to accept Christ so he may be saved. We must be careful not to read into this verse something that is not there.

Using this verse without its context, evangelists often tell people there is something they must do before they can be saved—they must receive or accept Jesus. As with Joshua 24:15, the implication is that man has a free will because the Bible teaches that one must believe in Jesus and accept Him. These ideas then become weak foundation stones in the new convert's faith.

Let's look not only at verse 12 but also at verse 13, which completes the sentence and gives us the context. First, you'll notice that the words "accept" and "choose" are not in these verses.

Is "Received" the Same as "Accepted"?

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name,

who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:12-13).

These two verses actually teach what Joshua 24 taught: man cannot and will not believe without a work of God in his heart. We cannot interpret “receive” to mean “accept with a free will” because verse 13 eliminates that possibility. Believing and being granted the power to become a child of God occur only by the will and power of God, not by the free will and power of man. A passage in John 6 also confirms this interpretation.

They said therefore to Him, “What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?” (John 6:28).

Jesus didn’t answer this question. The answer He gave revealed *how* they would get spiritual food—by God’s power, not their own.

Jesus answered and said to them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent” (John 6:29).

Jesus further testified that these people who came to Him were unbelieving. But how is this work of God accomplished?

Eternal Life Comes Because God Wills It

*No one can come to Me, **unless the Father who sent Me draws him**; and I will raise him up on the last day (John 6:44).*

*For He says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” **So then it does not depend on the man who wills** or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy (Romans 9:15-16).*

Notice in the following verse that those who believe are those who already have eternal life. Note the order. Which comes first, eternal life or faith?

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life (John 6:47).

Those who have been given eternal life believe because God has willed it and worked faith into their hearts. John 1:12-13 (see above) confirm the truth of Hebrews 11:1, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction [evidence] of things not seen.” Since no one can believe and obey God unless God has first chosen him and performed a work of

transformation in his heart, then the presence of an active faith indicates that God has already given eternal life to him—that is, God has given him the power to become His child. He received Christ as a gift of grace from God, which empowered him to become a child of God.

Not Everyone Can Receive

In contrast to those who receive the Son, Jesus commented about those who cannot receive the Spirit of the Son of God (not *will* not, but *cannot*).

*If you love Me, you will keep My commandments. And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the **world cannot receive**, because it does not behold Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you, and will be in you (John 14:15-17).*

Same author. Same book. Same word as John 1:12—“receive.” The beloved disciple recorded that Jesus apparently understood the distinct difference between those of the world and those who were children of God. Those of the world do not have the ability to receive the Spirit of God. But the children of God do receive Him. This point emphasizes that the Apostle John did not consider “receiving the Son” to be a matter of man’s will, but a matter of God’s will.

You Believe Because You Received

This is foundational to anchoring your faith in Jesus Christ. If you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, you do so because God has given Jesus to you and you to Him. He has become everything you need for life in God, both now and forever. Note how 1 Corinthians 1:29-31 affirms this interpretation.

*... that no man should boast before God. But **by His doing you are in Christ Jesus**, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, that, just as it is written, “Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.”*

I have heard some teach that their free will choice operates within them apart from God’s power (and it must, to call it “free”). They believe that God looked down through the corridors of all time and saw which

men would choose for Christ and which ones would not, and then gave Christ to those who would. If one thinks that the apostle understood man to have a free will, then we should consider another inconsistency. If God ordained that no man should glory in His presence, why would He establish a way of salvation (namely, free will) that unavoidably enables man to share His glory? To have done so would allow man to glory in His presence because the man chose of his own free will apart from God. However, salvation based upon the power of God alone, not the free will of man, is what anchors one in Jesus Christ.

Is Our Will Ever Free?

Perhaps we need to redefine *free will*. We are all born in bondage to spiritual darkness. It is God who works in us through the power of His Word and Spirit to release our wills from the power of spiritual blindness and bondage. After the regenerating work of God, our wills are freed from slavery to sin. But our wills still are not free! According to Romans 6:17-18, the will is committed *by God* to righteousness.

*But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching **to which you were committed**, and having been freed from sin, **you became slaves of righteousness**.*

When we chose Christ, we did so by an act of our wills; however, our decision resulted from the will and power of God first working in us by His Spirit. When we were born again by God's Spirit, God produced faith in our hearts. That same God-given faith cleansed our hearts from an evil conscience and then working through love, moved us to trust and follow Christ. To Him be the praise and the glory forevermore! This revelation causes us to glorify God in our salvation. It also forms the basis for an unshakable faith because we know that God loved us even while we were His enemies. This assures us that if God is for us, no one, not even ourselves, can be against us.

Therefore, the foundation upon which the house of faith is built is God Himself. He saved us in Christ. If we try to build God's house (our faith) on the foundation of man's power to choose (which is the basic tenet of humanism), we can expect the house to crumble in the day of trials and judgment. If we base our lives on the firm foundation of God's power and will, then our lives, both here and in eternity, will be to the praise of His glorious grace. This is the lesson taught in John 1:12-13.

Three

John 3:16

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.

What a tremendous truth! Do you think there is another verse of scripture more popular than this one? We see it on placards at professional ballgames, on billboards, and just about anywhere the gospel is presented. What can possibly be wrong with the way this verse is used in the church today?

As we look into the truths expressed by this most-favorite scripture, I hope you will conclude as I have that a significant part of the church today has misunderstood the message of John 3:16 and is using it in ways that God never intended. At the close of this chapter, we will compare the actual truths expressed by John with the modern abuse of the verse, but for the most part I want to focus on John's purpose for including the story of Nicodemus in his gospel narrative—that is, what Jesus was teaching about faith, how the Holy Spirit works in salvation, God's motivation in saving His people,, and the extent of God's redemptive plan.

The great scope of God's love, His wonderful provision in His Son, and the promise of eternal life all reside in this glorious verse of scripture. But even so, we can mislead others if we don't include with it the rest of the story. If we don't consider the intent of the gospel writer, John, when he featured Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus, we might not make the important distinction between two very different kinds

of faith: flesh-born faith and Spirit-born faith. If we are to become people of faith, we must recognize the qualities of both kinds of faith. Otherwise, we may be easily deceived and discouraged. This distinction was John's intent.

Have you ever felt you needed a shot of faith in the arm? Perhaps you've had times where you felt you just didn't believe enough. Maybe you've wondered why certain things didn't happen when you thought you did believe and trust God.

To understand what John was teaching when he wrote that "whoever believes in Him should not perish," it is helpful to begin reading in John 2:23. We see in the end of Chapter 2 people who believed in Jesus because of the signs He performed. But the kind of faith that comes by seeing signs is not the kind of faith to which Jesus gives Himself. Apparently that kind of faith is not saving faith. With this in mind, we are ready to see Jesus' meeting with Nicodemus in its proper perspective.

There Is a Kind of Faith Born of Flesh

Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, beholding His signs, which He was doing (John 2:23).

The first thing to notice from the last verses of Chapter 2 is that many believed because of the signs they saw Jesus doing. The verses following verse 23 in Chapter 2 indicate that Jesus discerned this faith to be *not* the work of His Father and the Holy Spirit. This kind of faith is a faith born of the flesh—the natural man under the dominion of sin. Notice what John records about Jesus' response to this faith:

But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to bear witness concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man (John 2:24-25).

Throughout the gospels we notice that Jesus would not entrust Himself to just anyone who said he believed. He understood there is a kind of faith that is not saving faith. There is a faith, not born of God, but generated by seeing signs. This kind of faith enables a man to follow a teacher or a philosophy, but it is not saving faith. It is the same kind of faith unconverted children of regenerate parents might possess. These children see God working in their parents and in their church, and that

work is undeniable, so they believe. By itself, however, this belief is not saving faith.

Finding examples of this kind of faith is not difficult. I believe it is the same kind of faith exemplified by Simon the magician, recorded in Acts 8:13. Simon had been baptized and was “continuing on with Philip.” But Peter apparently did not believe Simon had a saving faith, for he exclaimed, “May your silver perish with you!” (Acts 8:20). Judas Iscariot also portrayed this kind of faith. In fact, even the demons are said to believe (James 2:19), but I don’t think anyone would believe the demons are regenerated! I think this kind of faith is the kind required of the children of elders, as stated in Titus 1:6. But most important to us as we consider the context of John 3:16 is that Nicodemus exemplified this kind of faith.

In John Piper’s book *Future Grace*, we find some enlightening commentary on these verses.

There is a warning here: this “believing” may not be saving faith. It is based on “beholding his signs.” True faith can come through seeing the miracles of Jesus. But the danger is that some people were being carried away by the mere power of Jesus and its potential for overthrowing the Romans. Jesus rejected this kind of enthusiasm.

So when John says “many believed in His name” (2:23) because they saw the signs He was doing, we are alerted to the fact this “believing” may be a persuasion based on His power that does not go to the heart of who He is. This is, in fact, what seems to be the case with these believers.¹

Bible Commentator Leon Morris also wrote about these “believers”:

John is speaking of men who had made an outward profession, but in this particular case it did not go very deep.²

John continued his gospel by reporting Jesus’ response to this sign-generated faith. He gave an example in Nicodemus. Certainly you have noticed in your reading of the gospels how Jesus tested his listeners by speaking to them in parables or through analogies. This was what He did with Nicodemus, and this is why John’s recording of this encounter is significant. Jesus tested him to see if His Father was at work. The way Jesus often tested people was by making statements that could be understood only by the Spirit’s revelation. When people understood these statements, then Jesus knew they were children of God. Notice what happened in

John's account of Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus:

Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; this man came to Him by night, and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him" (John 3:1-2).

We can see from this declaration what men such as Nicodemus and the "believers" in John 2 believed. They believed God was with Jesus, but that belief is apparently not the same as saving faith.

Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3).

If Nicodemus had received revelation from God, I think Jesus would have encouraged him that he had been born again. But there had been no work of the Spirit. Nicodemus could not see the kingdom of God in Jesus or in himself.

This first kind of faith precedes the saving kind of faith created by the Holy Spirit. Once again, we notice that it is based on signs. Jesus did not recognize it as a work of God. It is a natural kind of faith, which sees but doesn't perceive the truth. It hears, but doesn't understand. John observed *many* who had this kind of faith. Many have the same kind of faith today.

Do you recognize this kind of faith in anyone? Is this the kind of faith your children have in God and in Jesus Christ? Here are the characteristics of natural faith:

- It is based on signs.
- It is born by natural means.
- It cannot see and understand the spiritual realities of the Kingdom of God.
- It is a form of faith, so a person who has it says he believes.

People who have flesh-born faith usually experience confusion and frustration when it comes to living the Christian life. It is not uncommon for children who have natural faith to become disillusioned with Christianity and the faith of their parents. They have been told they are saved because they believe; yet they don't have the power of God in their lives or the power to love and forgive others, or to obey God.

How does this happen? Could it be they were not taught the difference between natural-born faith and Spirit-born faith? If you detect this kind of faith in someone, may I suggest you not try to *convince* them of their lack. Let the Holy Spirit do the convincing! Simply show them the truth about natural-born faith and Spirit-born faith. You might use the examples I've already mentioned of the first kind of faith (the demons in James 2, Simon in Acts 8, Demas in 2 Timothy 4:10). Perhaps you can think of other examples and discuss with them how someone might feel and think about his relationship with God if he had only the natural-born faith. How might discovering the possibility of saving faith yet to come bring hope to someone who has tried to believe but has constantly experienced powerlessness?

Have you ever wondered what kind of faith is saving faith? We've all known people who profess to believe in God, but quite frankly, their lifestyles and values don't seem much different from those who don't admit to any kind of faith in God. In the third chapter of John's gospel, we learn about a kind of faith birthed by the Spirit of God. Jesus told Nicodemus, a leader of the Pharisees, that one must be "born again" to see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus revealed in his response his lack of understanding of spiritual things. Then Jesus proceeded to teach Nicodemus about...

A Kind of Faith Created by the Holy Spirit

Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?"

Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Nicodemus answered and said to Him, "How can these things be?"

Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak that which we know, and bear witness of that which we have seen; and you do not receive our witness" (John 3:4-11).

If Nicodemus had received faith through revelation by the Holy Spirit, then he would have received Jesus' witness. But it is clear Nicodemus had no clue about what Jesus was speaking. You can almost see the consternation on the face of this brilliant Jewish scholar. He couldn't deny God was with Jesus, but he was still spiritually blind and without understanding.

In a little while we will contemplate briefly the characteristics of saving faith described in this passage, in order to help us distinguish the difference between flesh-born faith and Spirit-born faith. In the meantime let's continue exploring how and why this verse is abused in the church today.

Jesus Introduced a New Redemptive Paradigm

Reading this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus from our American, middle-class, multi-cultural, internationalist mindset perhaps clouds the significance of their words. Not only did Jesus explain the necessity of the new birth to Nicodemus, but He also described *the way the Spirit works*—and it's probably not the way Nicodemus thought. The Spirit blows where *He* wishes, saving all kinds of people by His transforming power, not according to their race or heritage or religious works.

Where did *Nicodemus* think the Spirit of God worked? More specifically, which nation or people did Nicodemus think the Spirit of God rested upon? And most importantly for us, what did these things have to do with John's purpose for including this encounter in his gospel?

Remember that Jesus referred to Nicodemus as "the" teacher of Israel. This was no common man or small-fry among the leaders of Israel! This was a Pharisee of Pharisees, a teacher of teachers, and an ardent nationalist. How did Nicodemus think the Spirit of God worked?

Well, I can't say for sure, but if he had the typical, nationalist Jewish mindset, he more than likely thought the Spirit of God worked in a redemptive manner only among the Jews, and the Gentile world was on the outside when it came to God's redemptive promises. It was because of this commonly held belief that, when God began to save the Gentiles, He had to use a sign (speaking in tongues) to prove to the Jews that He *was* working among the Gentiles (Acts 10:44-47; 15:8-9).

I think John's purpose for including this story about Nicodemus in his gospel was to emphasize to his readers that *the Spirit of God was bringing redemption to non-Jews through Jesus Christ*. Who better represented the line of thinking about Jewish nationalism than "the teacher" of Israel? If *he* stood corrected by Jesus, then all Israel would benefit by hearing of this encounter! Furthermore, the story would serve the purpose of providing an impetus to the believing Jews to take the gospel to the Gentile world.

There is additional insight as we consider Nicodemus as "the teacher" of Israel. Jesus and Nicodemus probably were not strangers to one another, and it is likely much had transpired between them. Perhaps Nicodemus had known Jesus as a twelve-year-old when He came to the temple to listen and to ask penetrating questions (Luke 2:46). Certainly Nicodemus had heard Jesus teach at the temple many times. It is likely that Jesus had witnessed to him often through telling him "earthly things." And perhaps the witness Nicodemus did not receive was that the heart of God was going to extend to more than just the Jews.

If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how shall you believe if I tell you heavenly things? And no one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven, even the Son of Man (John 3:12-13).

Apparently Jesus had previously told Nicodemus He had come from heaven and so should have been able to tell him of heavenly things. But instead of doing so in this encounter, Jesus gave him another earthly analogy from their national history.

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life (John 3:14-15).

The impact of this verse is multiplied when we consider what Jesus meant by these words to this Pharisee. Just as God had provided a means of salvation for Israel in the wilderness, so God was also providing a means of salvation for *anyone* who believes.

John Explained the New Paradigm

I wonder, if we had been there in the room with Jesus and Nicodemus, what we would have seen on the face of Nicodemus when Jesus said, "whoever believes may in Him have eternal life." Maybe Jesus saw the

perplexed “cow-looking-at-a-new-gate” look in his eyes and knew He needed to explain. Or perhaps Nicodemus was so fixed in his notions about salvation that Jesus could tell he wasn’t understanding the full scope of the word, “whoever.” Although there is no way to tell from the story, the little word “for” at the beginning of verse 16 indicates that an explanatory statement is forthcoming.

So this raises some questions about verses 16 through 21: How do these verses explain Jesus’ comment in verses 14 and 15? And what is it about Jesus’ statement, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, *even so* must the Son of Man be lifted up; that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life” that required explanation to John’s readers? As we study this section of their conversation, we do well to keep in mind John’s line of reason. First, Jesus told Nicodemus the new birth was a work of the Holy Spirit (verses 5 through 8). Second, Jesus told him he lacked understanding about the work of the Spirit of God (verses 10 through 12). What was it Nicodemus didn’t understand, and what was it about Jesus’ witness that Nicodemus did not receive?

I would like to suggest, Nicodemus didn’t understand that the Spirit of God was going to blow among the Gentiles. And it is likely Nicodemus wouldn’t have received such a prophecy. The “whoever” in verse 15 needed explaining. The Jewish readers John had in mind, like Nicodemus, would need to understand that the work of the Spirit of God was not limited to the Jews. His Gentile readers also would be encouraged to know that Jesus had prophesied the work of God’s Spirit among them. They too could have eternal life and not perish.

There are two opinions about who was speaking in verses 16 through 21: Jesus, or John. We will consider both, beginning with the traditional view that Jesus was the speaker of the following words, and John was quoting Jesus when he wrote them down:

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God (John 3:16-21).

If Jesus was the one who spoke these words to Nicodemus, we can imagine how convicted Nicodemus must have felt. Numerous times Jesus exposed the Pharisees' love for the approval of men. For instance, the Lord warned in the Sermon on the Mount not to practice "righteousness before men, to be noticed by them." The Apostle John provided another example of how the Pharisees sought men's approval when he wrote that many of the rulers believed, but they would not confess Christ because "they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God" (John 12:38-43). If we keep in mind what Jesus said about the Pharisees throughout the gospels, we might have a clearer picture of what Jesus was communicating to Nicodemus on this night, if indeed He was actually the one who said all these things to him.

Men like Nicodemus were careful to maintain a squeaky-clean image. Pharisees were not the kind of men who admitted their faults and neediness. They certainly didn't think of their self-righteous, religious deeds as wicked and evil. In the minds of the Pharisees, the "Gentile dogs" were wicked and unworthy. It is not a stretch of the imagination to conclude that Jesus' remarks to Nicodemus were targeting national and spiritual pride and love for man's approval. These would also be characteristic of a fleshly kind of faith, which He had already distinguished from Spirit-born faith. If a *Gentile* could be born again without having kept all of the laws and without displaying religious zeal according to the Law, what did that say about Nicodemus' paradigm of salvation and righteousness? Jesus always went for the heart!

The second view of whose words are recorded in verses 16 through 21, however, seems more likely to me. Rather than Jesus having spoken them to Nicodemus, I think it was John who wrote them later in explanation of what Jesus had previously said. A few reasons support this idea. First, the perspective of verses 16 through 21 appears to be that of a third party. In verses 14 and 15, Jesus referred to Himself as the "Son of Man," a title He often used. If Jesus were the speaker, why didn't He continue using that title throughout the rest of the conversation? The reference to Him changes from "the Son of Man" to "the Son" in verses 16 through 18, and there is no reference from the first-person perspective in verses 16 through 21, as there had been in verses 3 through 15.

Second, if you read through the Gospel of John, in all but a couple of instances, when Jesus spoke of God, He referred to Him as "My Father." However, in these verses, the reference is to "God," which would have been natural for the author. Third, verses 16 through 21 sound more

like a commentary written after the events occurred. The words are similar to those used in John's first epistle, which was written near the same time as his gospel. (For instance, compare John 3:16 and 18 with 1 John 4:9, and John 3:17 with 1 John 4:14.)

If John was the author of these verses and was not quoting Jesus, he was providing here a very important commentary on Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus: *The wind of the Holy Spirit is going to blow into the world among the Gentiles. Most importantly, God has the same redemptive plan for the world—motivated by the same love—as He had for Israel. And His redemptive plan is not exclusively for the Jews!* This would have been unbelievable to Nicodemus since he did not have the Spirit, as it also would have been to John's Jewish readers. Let's look at John 3:14-17:

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.

Why were Nicodemus and the Jews unable to think that salvation would include the Gentiles? Because pride is blinding. Since the Pharisees boasted in their own works, they failed to notice the importance of God's Word to Israel about His love being the reason they were favored. The prophet Jeremiah wrote,

"The Lord appeared to him from afar, saying, 'I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have drawn you with lovingkindness'" (31:3).

And Malachi testified to Israel,

"I have loved you,' says the Lord. But you say, 'How have You loved us?' 'Was not Esau Jacob's brother?' declares the Lord. 'Yet I have loved Jacob'" (1:2).

In both cases God's messengers were declaring God's great love as His motivation for saving His people. If verse 16 is John's commentary, it reiterates the point Jesus made in verse 15 and thereby emphasizes it: *For just as God loved His people in the wilderness and provided a means of temporal salvation to them, even so He loved His people in the world and provided a means of eternal salvation to them.*

I don't know if it matters a great deal who spoke or wrote the words contained in verses 16 through 21; it is the truth of them that concerns us most. If we view these verses as the words of John, they emphasize more poignantly the sense of the preceding discourse, namely, that forgiveness of sins is available to the Gentile world on the basis of faith in Christ as a result of the new birth by the Spirit of God. It would have been a new paradigm of salvation for people like Nicodemus who put their confidence in their choices of religious service, discipline, and sacrifice.

The Same Is True Today

Those who take pride in their choosing to believe in God, who are yet strangers to saving faith, face the same need for humbling that was lacking in Nicodemus. They need to recognize that their only hope lies in what God has done on their behalf in Jesus Christ. How about you? If you are married, how about your spouse and children? What kind of faith do you and they have? If you have only the first kind of faith, you may rejoice in God that you have the prerequisite to saving faith, but I encourage you not to be satisfied with anything less than Spirit-born, saving faith. You may glorify God by declaring your natural-born faith to be nothing about which to boast or in which to be confident.

If you now see the vanity of the first kind of faith, you may be on the doorstep to the second kind of faith. Will you renounce your self-righteousness and instead hope in the promise of God for those who believe in Jesus Christ, trusting not in *your own choice* to believe, but in *His work* that opened your heart to believe?

Those who have saving faith recognize its presence as something the Holy Spirit has produced in them. They recognize it as the fulfilled promise of eternal life that comes through Jesus Christ alone. They no longer hope in or rely on whatever they have done to try to please God, to win His approval, or to secure their redemption. In short, those who have this second kind of faith boast in the Lord! When asked how they know they are saved, they say with the Apostle Paul,

If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted

as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ (Philippians 3:4-8).

But by His doing [I am] in Christ Jesus, who became to [me] wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, that, just as it is written, “Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:30-31).

Therefore, let us boast in the glorious work of our Father in and through His Son, Jesus Christ! Let us anchor ourselves in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Our faith in Jesus alone and His death for our sins is God’s sign to us that we are His, and this becomes a solid rock upon which to stand when the storms of life rage around us.

Six Characteristics of Saving Faith

Now that we have looked more deeply at the kind of faith created by the Holy Spirit and at the scope of God’s redemptive plan, I’d like to go on to consider the signs that show how saving faith is developing in a person. These are often not visible as they are happening in other people’s lives, but you may recognize them in yourself. These signs are evident in the Gospel of John, Chapter 3.

Saving Faith Has Eyes to See and Enter the Kingdom of God

Jesus answered and said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?” Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:3, 5).

The first sign of Spirit-born faith is that you have a new ability to act on your desire for God and His kingdom. That is, where once you were not interested or you felt hopeless, now you will come, believe, and repent. You see and enter the kingdom of God. Dallas Willard in his book *Divine Conspiracy* defines God’s kingdom as the range of His effective will where what He wants done, gets done.³

Within the context of Jesus' statements in John 3, I think He was referring to the advancement of the rule and dominion of the King of the Universe in the hearts of men. This is what it means to "enter into the kingdom of God." Whereas the first kind of faith simply allows one to *acknowledge the signs of the kingdom's presence in the world*, it doesn't enable one to *see the kingdom in the soul and spirit*. But the second kind of faith opens one's eyes to God's work in his own heart and in the hearts of others.

When people are born again, they are aware of the work of God in their hearts, enabling them to believe. They can tell the difference between the kind of faith they had previously and the kind they now possess. Surely you have heard testimonies of people who believed in God's existence and knew of the work of Jesus Christ on the cross but were proud, hostile, and rebellious toward God. Then they had an encounter with God, which changed their hearts and attitudes. They were conquered by the love and power of God!

Saving Faith Is Anchored in the Word of God

The second sign of saving faith is that you begin to hear God's Word with open ears and to think differently because of what you hear, as the Holy Spirit applies the Word of God to your mind and brings about a change of heart (John 3:5-8).

God's Word is the means by which saving faith comes to men. Jesus taught this when He told and then explained His parable about the sower:

"Listen to this! Behold, the sower went out to sow; ... And as soon as He was alone, His followers ... began asking Him about the parables. ... And He said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? And how will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. And these are the ones who are beside the road where the word is sown; and ... Satan comes and takes away the word which has been sown in them. And ... these are the ones on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, who ... immediately receive it with joy; ... but are only temporary; then, when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are the ones on whom seed was sown among the thorns; these are the ones who have heard the word, and the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires

for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. And those are the ones on whom seed was sown on the good soil; and they hear the word and accept it, and bear fruit, thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.” (Mark 4:3-20).

Later, Peter reinforced the truth that salvation comes through the Word of God when he wrote,

...for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and abiding word of God (1 Peter 1:23).

Jesus told His disciples about the experience of those who come to Him. They hear and learn from the Father because no one comes to Jesus for salvation without first being drawn by the Father’s word (John 6:44-45). We hear His word, the Spirit blows into our hearts and we embrace the truth, and we repent and believe. This is the power of the new birth. Just as no one has any power to bring about his own natural (water) birth, even so no one has power to bring about his own spiritual (new) birth. Saving faith is accomplished through the living and powerful Word of God, applied by the Spirit.

Saving Faith Is a Work of the Holy Spirit

The third sign of saving faith is that you begin to behave differently by the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, whereas before you were powerless to change yourself. The Spirit uses the Word to accomplish the new birth. In Romans 10:17 we read,

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word [rhema] of Christ.

W.E. Vine comments in his *Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*,

The significance of rhema (as distinct from logos) is exemplified in the injunction to take “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Ephesians 6:17); here the reference is not to the whole Bible as such, but to the individual scripture which the Spirit brings to our remembrance for use in time of need, a prerequisite being the regular storing of the mind with Scripture.⁴

Saving faith results when the Holy Spirit takes a scripture and reveals its specific, practical application to our lives. As Jesus said in

John 3:6, the Spirit gives birth to spirit, whereas the flesh can only produce natural fruit. Nothing is quite as powerful to change us as God's Word applied by the Spirit to our thinking and our actions.

The Spirit's work is unpredictable. We can't plan it or control it. When new birth happens to people, they are aware of the Spirit's presence and work but can't tell how it came to them. They only know they've been affected by His power, just as Jesus described to Nicodemus the way the Spirit comes:

“The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8).

Nicodemus clearly didn't understand what Jesus was talking about. John 3:9-10 reads,

“Nicodemus answered and said to Him, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not understand these things?’”

Remember the high position and reputation that Nicodemus enjoyed as a Pharisee. As a great Jew, his confidence before God lay in his works, done in the sight of men (his praying on street corners, his fasting, his public giving exercises). His hope was that the God of Israel was as impressed with his knowledge and deeds as he was.

In contrast to Nicodemus, the person who has saving faith places his confidence in the work of the Spirit of God in his heart and life. He experiences from his conversion a new relationship with God and His Son, Jesus, through the ministry and presence of the Holy Spirit.

Saving Faith Is Founded on the Work of God in Christ

The fourth sign of saving faith is that you develop a solid foundation based on the work of God in Christ. As we read John 3:14-15, we see that Jesus is speaking on behalf of His Father and is making an astonishing promise of salvation to those who believe in Him. Saving faith must be rooted in nothing less than this promise from God. The promise depends upon God's glorious work of redemption and deliverance through Jesus' substitutionary death. Because we know that God will not lie to us, His promises regarding Jesus' death and resurrection bring hope. God's promises regarding Jesus' death and resurrection bring hope. Hope is a powerful dynamic, producing faith in the heart of one who receives the

promises (see Colossians 1:3-5). Without promises, no hope exists. And without hope, there can be no faith.

With this in mind, we can understand what Jesus was revealing to Nicodemus that gives us an example of this aspect of saving faith. He gave the *foundation* for the promise of eternal life—God lifting up His own Son! The definitive sign of Spirit-born faith is that *it focuses on God and gives glory to God*. The mistake many people make today is thinking the foundation for the promise of eternal life is *a person's own choice or decision to believe in Christ*. What distinguishes saving faith from natural faith is that it doesn't rest in the work of man (choosing to believe), but in the work of God (Jesus' death and resurrection).

This is the analogy provided in the testimony about the serpent being lifted up in the wilderness. In that event, God demonstrated the way He would bring about eternal salvation for His people. First, He revealed His wrath. Then He sent forth His promise as a means by which faith could be born and the Spirit could work. In His conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus simply reiterated that truth: eternal life can't be received without faith, and saving faith can't be born without a promise.

Saving Faith Rests in God's Love

The fifth sign of Spirit-born faith is that you rest in God's love for you (John 3:16), and you stop thinking God loves you because you love him.

Many people's faith is anchored in themselves rather than in God's love. Without realizing it, they rest their faith in *their* love for God because they were told that God loves them so much, they ought to love Him in return. However, placing their faith in their own ability to love God is like building a house on shifting sand. When storm winds blow in life, if one's love for God is cold or wavering, one's faith is liable to be gone with the wind. Therefore, saving faith stands firmly on the fact of God's love *for us* revealed in Jesus Christ, not our love *for Him*.

Saving Faith Glorifies God

Sign number six stands out to me as an easy test when I am trying to discern true faith. Saving faith wants all the glory to go to God for anything done which is good. It is not self-exalting, smug, impatient, frustrated, or merciless toward others who don't "perform" so well.

And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God (John 3:19-21).

John struck at the heart of his Jewish readers—the Nicodemuses, the people who have taken pride in their having “believed” (but by the power of their flesh), who have gone to great pains not to let others see their sins and their weaknesses. But his words also strike at the heart of every subsequent reader of his gospel who has the same kind of faith as Nicodemus had. Just what would it have “cost” Nicodemus to believe in Jesus? It would have cost him his position, his coveted praise from men, and his sense of worthiness before God.

Since salvation results from a Spirit-born kind of faith and not from natural faith in signs and wonders, the fact that Nicodemus recognized Jesus’ connection with God means very little. Nor does this Pharisee’s prestigious position as “the teacher” of the Jews count for much. A lifetime of good deeds means nothing, if one has not been moved by the Spirit of God. This would have been a very hard pill for Nicodemus to swallow. And although the Bible does not tell us what the ultimate outcome was of this clandestine meeting with Jesus, we can hope that Nicodemus was eventually truly saved. If he was, then we can expect that, like the Apostle Paul, he became a humble man and confessed that all he had lived for was trash—dung, as Paul called it—compared to the faith that comes from the Holy Spirit. He would have “changed his garments” (no doubt having been required to leave his teaching position as a Pharisee), testifying that there is no glory in the works and faith of the natural man, and that the only thing that counted was the Spirit-produced faith in his heart toward Jesus Christ. If he did take such a course of action, then his soul truly became anchored in Jesus. A similar kind of Spirit-born humility and confession is what it “costs” every person who comes to saving faith in Christ.

People in every time in history and from every religion want to justify themselves before God and glorify themselves before men. The only exceptions to this self-justification and -glorification are those who have been born again by the Spirit of God. When someone wants all

the glory for his salvation to go to God, it clearly signifies the presence of saving, Spirit-born faith.

Can You See the Difference?

John 3:16 has been misused to convince people that God loves everyone and thus they should put their faith in Jesus. I hope you'll notice that this verse is not *prescriptive* (giving people something they can do to be saved) but is *descriptive* (expressing what Jesus meant when He told Nicodemus the Holy Spirit was going to blow wherever He wished). Has He blown in your life? In the lives of those you love?

The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit (John 3:8).

We have seen throughout this passage that Jesus presented a new paradigm to Nicodemus with regard to the work of the Holy Spirit: He was going to blow amongst the Gentiles, revealing God's love for them. How grateful many of us can be for this wonderful love of God, which has given the promises of God also to us who were,

“Separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world, but now in Christ Jesus... have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Ephesians 2:12-13).

The table on the following page deals with four commonly misunderstood topics arising from John 3. It compares John's message (the actual teaching of the passage) with the frequently encountered, modern-day abuses of this scripture.

Topic	Meaning of the Passage	Modern Misunderstanding
Nature and Object of God's Love	God loves the world the same way that He loved Israel. Just as He provided a means of salvation through the serpent lifted up before the Jews, He has now provided a means of salvation through His Son, Jesus. Those who believe in the Son will be saved, but they believe because of the will of God and the divine work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts.	God loves the whole world <i>so much</i> that He sent Jesus to die for the sins of the whole world. He wishes that everyone would come to Him and choose to believe in His Son so that He could save us all, but the responsibility rests on us to make the right choice.
Work of the Holy Spirit	The Spirit moves as He wills, like the wind, coming to those whom God has chosen, producing faith and repentance in them. The work of the Spirit produces genuine faith, spiritual birth, and the peace of God.	The Holy Spirit comes whenever a person chooses to believe in Jesus and prays the sinner's prayer. The Spirit responds like the genie in Aladdin's lamp—and gives the person a sense of peace, happiness, and forgiveness.
Salvation	Salvation is initiated and completed by God. He grants repentance and new life to every one He has chosen, and then they believe. All glory goes to God.	Salvation is granted to anyone who decides to believe in Jesus and recites the sinner's prayer. John 3:16 is used to encourage people that God loves them so much that all they have to do is choose to believe and they will be saved.
Source of Love	Saving faith rests in God's love—love from God toward us in Christ revealed in His death for us and His love flowing through us to others by the Holy Spirit.	Saving faith rests on our love for God, which we ought to feel in response to His kindness to us. Since He loved us so much we need never be afraid if we don't have the consistent ability to love others.

I encourage you to take time to review these six signs of saving faith revealed in John 3 and consider your experience with God.

1. Saving faith has eyes to see and enter the Kingdom of God.
2. Saving faith comes by the Word of God.
3. Saving faith is a work of the Holy Spirit.
4. Saving faith is founded on the work of God in Christ.
5. Saving faith rests in God's love.
6. Saving faith glorifies God.

Four

Acts 2:38

And Peter said to them, “Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

In this chapter and the next, we’ll look at two passages of scripture from the book of Acts that are often used to tell people how to become Christians. If these verses (2:38 and 16:31) are taken out of their context, they appear to be telling people they must *do something* in order to be saved. However, if left in their context, we see that the key to understanding what these people were told lies in understanding the particular situations they were in. The misuse of these scriptures doesn’t come so much from the *misinterpretation* of the specific verses as from the *misapplication* of them.

In both cases, the Spirit of God obviously had worked in the hearts of the hearers. There were indications that God had granted repentance and faith. These passages teach us that when the Spirit of God is at work, people repent and believe. When there is evidence that God is granting repentance and faith, that is the time to give a new believer the promises from Scripture about forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, and eternal life. Is it right to take these verses out of their contexts and consider them the rule or standard for evangelism? Many have done so. It is not right, and for a good reason.

The Book of Acts is a historical record of the days after Jesus ascended into heaven and gave His Spirit to the church. The book is perhaps best thought of as the acts of the Holy Spirit in the birth of the church. It is not a teaching book like the letters of Paul are, so it serves a different purpose. As we read it, we are observers, learning how the Spirit of God worked and led men to speak and act in various circumstances. We may discover certain principles underlying those words and actions, but wisdom forbids our concluding that things are always to be done the way we read they were done in Acts.

Let's see the significance of what Peter told his hearers as it relates to the historic Day of Pentecost. Try to put yourself into this scene from Acts 2:4-8.

God Gets Their Attention

And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance.

Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men, from every nation under heaven. And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were bewildered, because they were each one hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and marveled, saying, "Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born?" (Acts 2:4-8).

To begin with, we see God did something to get the attention of the people. When the Holy Spirit was first sent, the apostles proclaimed the gospel in Aramaic, their native language. Then a miracle took place—the people from every nation under heaven heard the gospel in their own native tongues! Peter proclaimed to this large crowd that they were witnessing the fulfillment of God's promise, made through the prophet Joel. We read of their amazement and response in verses 12 through 21:

And they all continued in amazement and great perplexity, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others were mocking and saying, "They are full of sweet wine."

But Peter, taking his stand with the eleven, raised his voice and declared to them: "Men of Judea, and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give heed to my words. For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is

only the third hour of the day; but this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel:

‘And it shall be in the last days,’ God says, ‘that I will pour forth of My Spirit upon all mankind; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even upon My bondslaves, both men and women, I will in those days pour forth of My Spirit and they shall prophesy. And I will grant wonders in the sky above, and signs on the earth beneath, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and glorious day of the Lord shall come. And it shall be, that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’”

Peter Explains God’s Sign

The typical evangelistic encounter rarely has the accompanying signs of Pentecost. We might imagine that Peter had the crowd’s rapt attention. He explained what God was doing and, by the leading of the Holy Spirit, brought Jesus Christ into their minds.

Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know—this Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. And God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power (Acts 2:22-24).

At this point, you can imagine what conviction was wrought in the hearts of those whom God was converting! Peter drove home the significance of their having crucified Jesus: the One they had put to death was going to be their Judge! Peter clearly proclaimed God’s sovereignty in Christ’s crucifixion; however, that didn’t leave the people unaccountable for their part in His death. What were they to do since God had raised Jesus from the dead and made Him Lord? The Lordship of Jesus Christ lies at the heart of the gospel. As Paul wrote to the Romans, it is faith in His resurrection and His Lordship that we confess when we are saved. That is why this part of Peter’s sermon is vital to our understanding of evangelism.

This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses. Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear. For it was not David who ascended into heaven, but he himself says: “The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at My right hand, until I make Thine enemies a footstool for Thy feet.”

Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified.

The People Respond

Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do?” And Peter said to them, “Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:32-38).

God had obviously convicted these men that they were guilty of murdering God’s appointed Messiah. The Spirit of the Lord was clearly blowing.

What was the effect of His blowing? They repented. Repentance has come to mean *a change of mind and conduct*. But it originates from two Greek words, *meta* meaning “after” and *noia* meaning “to perceive.” Vine’s *Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* indicates the word implies that a person changes his perception of something on the basis of what he observes.⁵ *After watching the display of the Spirit’s work at Pentecost, the Jews were thinking differently about who Jesus was and about their relationship to Him.* Before the day of Pentecost, they had believed Jesus was an impostor, a trouble-maker, a blasphemer, and *their enemy*. But as Peter spoke, by the grace of God, they saw differently.

That’s not possible without the work of the Spirit of God. Peter knew that. When he saw they were pierced to the heart and were asking what they should do, Peter responded according to what he saw God doing. They were thinking again about who Jesus was and about their relationship to Him. So Peter gave the very timely instruction, “Repent and... be baptized.” It is interesting that most gospel presentations

today seldom include “be baptized” at the outset. Why did Peter feel led to include this in his message?

Baptism communicated the concept of identifying with Jesus and receiving a witness from God. The significance of this is that when they were baptized, they were being identified publicly with Jesus and with those who had repented and renounced their confidence in the ceremonies of Judaism.

So what conclusion can we draw from these verses regarding evangelism? It is important to know what the Spirit of God is doing in the heart of the hearer. A faith based solely upon the words of a preacher is a shakable faith, but one built upon the Word of the Spirit spoken to the heart can withstand any storm in life.

But what if the Spirit of God isn't speaking to the heart of a listener? Consider Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler. Jesus didn't tell *him* to repent and be baptized. Instead, He commanded him to go, sell everything he had, give it to the poor, and come follow Him. Why don't we use this example in evangelistic presentations? Because it was a historical account that applied only to the rich young ruler. For the same reason, we must be careful not to think that Acts 2:38 should be universally applied in every evangelistic presentation.

If God is granting repentance, then it is timely to tell a person to repent. But we should not make sacred the particular way Peter talked with the crowd on that day. The most we should say about what happened is that the Spirit led Peter to encourage these hearers, *and them alone*, to repent and be baptized. The Spirit prepares people differently to hear the gospel message. In another situation the Spirit of God may lead His ambassadors to say something similar, yet different. We'll see an example of this truth in the next chapter, when we look at Acts 16:31.

