

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #148: THE “ABCs” OF SALVATION

By John Temples

You know, in one sense Christianity is really a simple religion to comprehend, embrace, and follow. Yes, the doctrines are profound, the themes are lofty; but the “how” and the “what” are clear and easy to follow. Going to heaven is not rocket science. The Psalmist said, “The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple” (Psalms 19:7).

Paul said in 2 Corinthians 11:3, “But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.” The word “simplicity” here means pure, unadulterated, single-minded devotion to Christ and His doctrine, as opposed to the burdens, rigors, and complexities of the teachings of the Judaizers who were troubling Corinth. The instructions on how to worship God under the New Testament are clear and easy to follow. No elaborate rituals, buildings, and fixtures are needed (not even a piano or organ¹).

And one concept that is especially easy to discern and follow is the Biblical plan of salvation--what people must do to become Christians and go to heaven. There are some eight examples in the book of Acts of people becoming Christians. They all heard the gospel, believed it, repented of their sinful lifestyles, confessed Christ, and were baptized (immersed) in water for remission of sins.

Many of those people we read about in God’s word were able to comprehend and obey the plan of salvation after hearing only one sermon: the Ethiopian eunuch, the centurion Cornelius, the 3,000 on Pentecost, the Philippian jailor. Our 19th century ancestors, using only the King James Bible, were able to rediscover the correct plan of salvation and the structure of the true church, things that had been corrupted by centuries of denominationalism.

¹ I preached in Utah for 16 years. Once I read in the local paper an article about a denominational church’s “grand opening.” The gist of the article was that the church had just acquired an organ after a long wait, and the preacher was happily proclaiming, “Now at last we can worship!”

But for some reason, many modern people find it hard to discern the Biblical plan of salvation. One reason, as we said, is the multiplicity of denominations, with their many creeds, differing doctrines, and elaborate, ritualistic worship forms. Another reason is that, instead of reading the Bible for themselves, many go by their own feelings or by what somebody told them.

You will find three main types of religious people today:

- Those whose religion is based primarily on *emotion*--the “Me-and-Jesus-we’ve-got-our-own-thing-going” or “I-know-I’m-saved-because-I-feel-it” people.
- Those who say, “*Doctrine* is all that matters; as long as I believe and teach correct doctrine, I’m saved.”
- Those who base their salvation on *right living*--doctrine is not important; as long as I don’t harm anyone and am a good moral person, my ticket to heaven is punched.

In other words, to these people the basic elements of Christianity--the ABCs, the rudiments of their religion--are (A)ttitude, (B)elief, and (C)onduct. Now to a great extent, this is true. Surely I need to have the correct attitude, belief, and conduct to be saved and go to heaven. But there are two dangers here:

- I could have the wrong “ABCs.”
- I could be lacking in any of them or depending on just one of them while neglecting the others.

Let us look at the true, Biblical “ABCs” of salvation:

A: ATTITUDE

Certainly we must have the correct attitude toward God, Christ, the Bible, and our fellow men to go to heaven. Observe:

- “God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit [attitude of mind] and truth” (John 4:24).
- Psalms 66:18--“If I regard iniquity in my heart [take pleasure in sin], the Lord will not hear me.”

- Ephesians 5:19-21 lists the works of the flesh: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like. There are 17 items in this list, and seven of them--almost half--are sins of the mind or attitude!

Jesus spoke of two men in Luke 18:10-14: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’ And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast saying, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be abased, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” What made the difference in outcome? Attitude.

And who can forget Paul’s proclamation in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3? “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become as sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.”

Attitude is also important for those of us who preach and teach. Two preachers delivered sermons in a gospel meeting. They both used the same text, one that said that unrepentant sinners would be lost in hell. They both taught the truth on the subject. They both possessed equal speaking ability. Yet, when the first preacher issued an invitation, no one responded. When the second preacher spoke, 20 souls came forward. What made the difference? They both preached that sinners would go to hell. But the first preacher sounded like he was glad they were going; the second preacher cried over them.

I knew a man in Georgia who was a “walking Bible encyclopedia.” He knew more answers to false doctrine than anybody. He could instantly demolish any unbiblical argument. But he hated sinners. He despised those who weren’t at his level of understanding of Biblical truth. He was also in some ways an immoral man. But he had the correct belief (doctrine)! Make no mistake--we MUST believe and teach

the truth to go to heaven. But we must also speak the truth in LOVE. This man did not do that. You will not go to heaven with a wrong attitude or state of heart/mind.

B: BELIEF

Contrary to widespread opinion, it does make a difference what you believe. If you think that doctrine does not matter as long as one is sincere, note these passages:

- 2 John 9—"Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son."
- 1 Timothy 1:3—"As I urged you when I went into Macedonia—remain in Ephesus that you may charge some that they teach no other doctrine...."
- 1 John 4:1—"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world."
- 2 Thessalonians 2:10 speaks of those who "...perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved."
- Galatians 1:8—"But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed."

We noted John 4:24 before, which says that we must worship God in spirit. It also says we must worship Him in truth; that is, according to the truth. And John 17:17 tells us exactly what that truth is: "Sanctify them by your truth; your word is truth."

Not only must you have the proper attitude of heart to please God, but also you must accept and proclaim true Biblical doctrine in order to go to heaven.

C: CONDUCT

There were some interesting people in the first century called the Gnostics. They believed that salvation was a matter of enlightenment and understanding of mysteries. Their very name, Gnostic, came from the Greek word for knowledge. To them, matter--such as human flesh--was evil. Since matter was evil, they said, God would never inhabit human flesh. So Christ was not a real man; He only appeared as a man. The apostle John recoiled in horror at this, and wrote in 1

John 4:3, "Every spirit [teacher] that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. This is the spirit of the Antichrist."

The Gnostics also, at least some of them, taught that since matter or flesh was evil, I might as well go ahead and enjoy the pleasures of the flesh; my spirit is safe behind a "firewall." There were evidently some Gnostics in the churches of Pergamos and Thyatira, because in Revelation 2 Christ accused those churches of harboring people who openly advocated sexual immorality.

The Gnostics also had a field day in the church at Corinth. Reading 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, it seems some members were visiting prostitutes and frequenting idols' temples on Saturday night, then showing up at church on Sunday morning!

How much does conduct matter? Paul told the Corinthians in no uncertain terms, "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). And Peter wrote, "For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles, when we walked in licentiousness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries. In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you. They will give an account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead" (1 Peter 4:3-5).

Our bodies are temples of God's Spirit, and surely we must keep the Spirit's dwelling as pure, as holy, and as clean as we can (1 Corinthians 3:16-17).

CONCLUSION

These, then, are the "ABCs" of salvation: the correct (A)ttitude or state of heart; (B)elief; and (C)onduct. It takes all three to please God and go to heaven. We close with a simple passage that ties all this together, Galatians 5:6: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith [right belief] working [right conduct] through love [right attitude]." --John Temples

