

What Does the Bible Say About “Better Safe Than Sorry”?

If you read the comments on this Web site then you'll see something like this written a lot:

I don't know if it's really wrong to cut my hair or wear make-up or jewelry, but isn't it better to be safe than sorry? I would rather get to Heaven and find out that I didn't have to do those things then get there and find out that I did, and then spend eternity in hell. Can you imagine “missing it” just because I wanted to cut my hair or wear a pair of pants?

When I was growing up I heard that argument more times than I can count. After I left I've read it repeatedly in the comments on this Web site. It's the fall back position of many apostolics when every other argument fails. If you can't back up your doctrine with Scripture then pull out the “better safe than sorry” argument! And I have to admit, it sounds pretty good.

Another variant goes like this (I've heard it used a lot by pastors):

I know that some of the rules might not be necessary, but sin is like a cliff. You don't build the fence right up against the cliff, you build it a little ways back. That way if people step over it then they still won't fall over the cliff. ((If you think about it, this doesn't make a lot of sense. Sin is a matter of intent as much as it is an action. The idea is that a person can decide to sin and still not sin because they're accidentally not breaking enough rules. It just doesn't add up. That's like saying you can force a person to be saved by baptizing them. It's not biblical. If a person is making a choice to do something that they perceive

as sin then it is sin, even if the action itself is not wrong. By the same token, an action like baptism or giving to the poor is spiritually meaningless unless done freely for the right reasons.))

Yet another variant goes like this:

After everything Christ has done for you, you can't even give up pants, make-up, or jewelry? He gave His life for you and you won't even give up pants, make-up, or jewelry for Him.

Once again, this one sounds good too.

But there are two fundamental problems with all of these arguments. First, the underlying factor with all of them is that our works can get us into Heaven. I believe with all my heart that there's nothing wrong with having facial hair, but if I get to Heaven and find out that I'm wrong then I know God's grace covers me. The same goes for my wife cutting her hair or wearing jewelry and make-up. I don't believe there's a thing in the world wrong with it, but if I'm wrong then she's covered by grace. That doesn't give me an excuse to sin, it just means that after much study I firmly believe that I'm not sinning in the first place. ((This point cannot be stressed enough. A common apostolic counter-argument is that "easy believism" leads to sin. I deal with this briefly farther down in this article and in much more detail in the ["What Does the Bible Say About Salvation?"](#) article, Still, it's worth mentioning briefly here. Paul was accused of teaching the same thing—that grace leads to free sin. He strongly condemned that doctrine in Romans 6. The doctrine has been refuted repeatedly throughout the New Testament and church history. The word that is used to describe it is "antinomianism", which means "lawlessness." The Bible stresses that grace does not lead to lawlessness. Instead, grace leads to a changed nature through the regeneration of the Holy Spirit. The idea here is that we do need to study and make every effort to align ourselves with

the commands of God, but when we “miss it” we can still be assured that God’s grace covers us. For more on antinomianism I recommend [this excellent article](#).) I’m doing my best to obey the commands of Christ, but I’m doing that *because* I’m saved, not *in order to get* saved. If I “miss it” then God’s grace covers me.

That’s one problem with the arguments. The idea that we can work our way into Heaven is just plain wrong. It stands in opposition to dozens of Scriptures. My article “[What does the Bible say about salvation?](#)” explains this in detail.

But there’s another problem with the “better safe than sorry” arguments, and it’s one that’s very counter intuitive. As a matter of fact, it’s like a bomb shell to a lot of people. It rocks their world. I know that it rocked mine. And that goes for non-apostolics too, by the way. Lots of people don’t know about this, but it’s central to the Biblical understanding of grace. Are you ready for it? Here goes:

*Works, for the sake of works, don't draw us closer to God; they **separate us from Him.***

Don’t believe me? Sound too radical? Well, before you shut me down, read this quote from a famous non-denominational theologian.

I suspect you would never intend this, but this is what happens. When you attempt to live by your own religious plans and projects, you are cut off from Christ, you fall out of grace. Meanwhile we expectantly wait for a satisfying relationship with the Spirit. For in Christ, neither our most conscientious religion nor disregard of religion amounts to anything. What matters is something far more interior: faith expressed in love.

I have to admit, that sounds pretty lovey dovey. As a matter of fact, when I was in the UPC I would have rolled my eyes at

that and said something like, "So you're just saying we should throw doctrine out the window and love everybody?"

If I said that then I would be wrong, though. Why? Because the famous theologian who wrote those words was the Apostle Paul. ((The quote above is Gal. 5:4-6 MSG)).

Here is how the NASB puts it:

*It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. Behold I, Paul, say to you that **if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you.** And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. **You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.** For we through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love. **You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion did not come from Him who calls you.** A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough. I have confidence in you in the Lord that you will adopt no other view; but the one who is disturbing you will bear his judgment, whoever he is. **But I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? Then the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished.** I wish that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves. For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."
(Gal 5:1-14 NASB, emphasis mine)*

One word: Wow.

As a man I can't think of anything that would require more

dedication than adult circumcision. Surely God must be pleased with it, right? I can imagine the Galatians saying, "After everything that Christ did for you, you can't even be circumcised? He's done so much for you and yet you won't do that little thing for Him?" Or perhaps, "Circumcision might not be necessary, but isn't it better to be safe than sorry? Do you want to get to heaven and find out that the one thing God wanted you to do was circumcision and you missed Heaven because of it?"

It sounds good, doesn't it? God did a lot for us so we must do a lot for Him. The problem is that when we think like that we're thinking like humans and not like God. You see, circumcision was part of the Old Covenant. It was the Acts 2:38 of the Mosaic law. If you weren't circumcised then it didn't matter what else you did, you weren't under the Covenant. Some of the Jews in Galatia began to focus on the doctrine of circumcision because it had been so important under the Old Covenant. Somewhere along the way they began to believe that Christians under the New Covenant needed to be circumcised. They began to think that circumcision would draw them closer to God. They began to persuade themselves that they could work their way to Him. It's a very human way of thinking and it seems awfully right. "God did stuff for me so now I need to do stuff for Him," is what we think. The problem is, God doesn't see it that way. He doesn't see it as us doing stuff for Him, He sees it as us trying to work our way to Him and in the process making His grace meaningless.

Paul said something similar when people put the focus on baptism instead of the gospel—something that the apostolic churches are also guilty of. When that happened, Paul wrote:

For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void. For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1Cor. 1:17-18 NASB)

In this case baptism isn't wrong. As a matter of fact, Christ commanded it! By the same token, circumcision isn't wrong. Neither is wearing skirts or not cutting your hair. There's nothing inherently wrong about those things. Unless, that is, we persuade ourselves that doing or not doing those things somehow draws us closer to God. ((Baptism is indeed commanded by God so do not take this statement to mean that we should not get baptized. The key point here is that *anything* can become wrong, even baptism, if we do it in an attempt to work our way to salvation.)) When we allow ourselves to think that our works save us then we have made the cross ineffective—we've rendered it void. Why? Because we've told Christ that His work wasn't good enough. We've told Him that grace isn't enough, that we need to supplement it with a dress code. We've told Him that His death is meaningless.

You know what's ironic? That the apostolic churches put so much emphasis on not *falling* away from Christ that they actually *sever* themselves from Christ. They take a God who would never reject them and they use the knife of legalism to reject Him from themselves

Heavy stuff? Controversial? Counter intuitive? Don't blame me. I didn't write it. Blame Paul.

Another thing that's ironic is that the apostolic churches claim to have "the Truth." They like to go to Galatians 1:8-9 and say that they are teaching the *true* gospel and that everyone who disagrees is deceived and cursed. The sad thing is that the "other gospel" Paul was talking about was the doctrine that says we can work our way to God. That was the "other gospel," and the UPC teaches it.

And Paul said that anyone who taught it was cursed.

I realized these things when I was still in the UPC and it rocked my world. I realized that I was the one who believed the "other gospel," that I was the one with "little faith"

(Romans 14), that my works didn't indicate closeness to God, that instead they indicated I had little faith and wasn't close to Him at all.

So do I believe in the "better safe than sorry" philosophy? Nope. I don't. Paul wrote in 2 Cor. 5:17 that "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come" (NASB). Jesus said in John 15:1-17 that when we are in Him we grow spiritual fruit, and in Mat. 7:15-20 He said that the spiritual fruit is the evidence that we're saved. (Paul defined what that fruit is in Gal. 5:19-23, and it has nothing to do with the holiness standards; Jesus also gave examples of the good works we're called to do in Mat. 25:31-46).

In other words, when we are saved we are transformed—regenerated, as the Bible calls it. We become a new person. The Spirit of God begins to work in us to shape and mold us into His image. We begin to bear spiritual fruit. We don't grow closer to God by working for Him, we draw closer to Him by letting Him work in us. ((One thing worth mentioning is that there is a place in the Bible for good works. As a matter of fact, that concept is very important Scripturally. What we need to understand, though, is that we're saved **for** good works, not **because of** good works. Paul makes that abundantly clear in Eph. 2:1-10. Good works are, well, good! That is, until we begin to believe that they save us. It's also worth noting that a dress code isn't the kind of good works that Paul was talking about. We shouldn't use good works as an excuse for legalism. The good works that Paul was writing about are the same ones emphasized by Christ in Mat. 25:31-46. You'll see a lot of good works in that passage and none of them have anything to do with whether or not we wear make-up or cut our hair.))

You see, it's not my job to setup a system of rules to try to get into Heaven, it's the Holy Spirit's job to work in me and guide me down the proper paths. It's not my job to build a

fence of works and hope others don't cross it, it's God's job to work in those individuals and show them where the fence is. That doesn't negate the need for elders and ministers to teach the Word of God, it just means that it's not the job of those elders and ministers to create extra rules that aren't in Scripture in order to try to make our souls safe. When they do those things they place themselves under a curse from God, and when we follow them we pull out the knife of works and begin to slowly sever ourselves from Christ.

John 3:5-6 (Misinterpreted Scriptures)

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. (John 3:5-6 NASB)

Misinterpretation: This passage is used by the UPC as evidence that a person must be baptized (born of water) and be filled with the Holy Spirit (born of the Spirit) in order to enter the kingdom of God. In other words, to be saved, according to the UPC's interpretation of this passage, a person must be baptized of water and receive the Holy Spirit.

Facts: It's indisputably clear that a person must receive the Holy Spirit to be saved (cf. Rom. 8:9). Therefore, the UPC's interpretation of the "born of the Spirit" portion of this passage is correct. (The problem with their view of receiving the Holy Spirit is that it is something that happens after faith—a view that Paul clearly disagrees with in Eph 1:13 when he writes that we are "sealed" with the Holy Spirit upon

belief).

The greater question, then, is about baptism. What does Jesus mean when He says that a person must be born of water to enter the kingdom of Heaven? Is He referring to water baptism or something else?

In order to answer that question I'd like to quote from Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary. Their explanation of this passage is the best that I've read anywhere. I could just paraphrase it but in my mind that would be plagiarism. They sum it up better than I ever could.

Before I give the citation, though, I'd like to stress that baptism is indeed commanded by Christ (cf. Mat. 28:19). Because of that, if a person claims to have believed and yet refuses to obey Christ then I doubt the sincerity of their belief. Nevertheless, baptism is a *response* to grace, it is not the *cause* of grace. We get baptized *because* we are saved, not *order to get* saved.

Without further ado, here is the quote from Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary ((I apologize for the long paragraph; that is how it was written))

Of water has been interpreted as: (1) water baptism. But the NT teaches that one is born again at the point of faith, not baptism (Acts 10:43–47); (2) a synonym for the Holy Spirit. The phrase could be translated “born of water, even the spirit”; (3) a symbol of the Word of God (Eph. 5:26; 1 Pet. 1:23); (4) physical birth; (5) John's baptism; or (6) a symbol, along with wind, in OT imagery for the work of God from above. The first three views are questionable since they must rely on future teaching in the Scripture which would not have been accessible to Jesus' listeners For interpretation 4, the idea is that Nicodemus brought up physical birth (3:4) and Jesus went on to say, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh” (3:6). If one could enter a second time into his

mother's womb and be born, he would still be flesh. This position is not likely since Jesus' words would be trivial and do not advance the argument. Options 5 and 6 are the better choices for the meaning of the statement. Option 5 is a viable one since Nicodemus would probably be familiar with John's baptism. Jesus would be saying that one must identify with and accept John's message (baptism) and then one would receive Messiah's baptism in the Spirit as John promised (1:31–33). This view has both historical and theological support. Christ emphasizes by v. 6 that there are two realms, that of the flesh and the Spirit. Humans cannot save themselves but must rely on God's Spirit to regenerate them. Option 6 relies on the translation of pneuma, wind or spirit. Under this view the Greek term should be understood as wind rather than spirit and thus serve alongside of water as symbols for spiritual truths similar to how these terms are used in the OT (for example, Is. 44:3–5 and Ezek. 37:9, 10). Jesus, then, is contrasting the things from below (earthly womb) from the elements of water and wind from above (the divine work of the Spirit of God). A teacher of Israel should understand such OT imagery. Nicodemus may have been challenged by Christ, since he was a teacher of Israel, to understand the questions of Prov. 30:3–5: (1) Who has ascended into heaven, or descended? (2) Who has gathered the wind in His fist? (3) Who has bound the waters in a garment? (4) Who has established all the ends of the earth? (5) What is His name, and what is His Son's name? "Every word of God is pure; He is a shield to those who put their trust in Him" (compare John 3:15, 16). ((Earl D. Radmacher, Ronald Barclay Allen and H. Wayne House, Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary (Nashville: T. Nelson Publishers, 1999), Jn 3:5.))

I agree with their opinion that views 5 and 6 are the most likely. I used to believe that being born of water referred to baptism, but I changed my mind even before I left the UPC. I decided that it was more likely that it referred to physical

birth while being born of the Spirit referred to spiritual birth. I still think that is a plausible view; it does make sense textually. However, I now think that it was referring to OT imagery. I'm not dogmatic about my view because there are other explanations that make sense. This is one of those passages that has several potential interpretations. The one thing that they all agree on, though, is that Jesus is clearly saying that the Holy Spirit is necessary for salvation. That's what we need to focus on. The method of receiving the Holy Spirit—belief—is given several verses later, in John 3:16.