

# 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.

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## [What Does The Bible Say About Salvation?](#)

Several weeks ago I got a request through email from a lady. This is what she said:

*I was wondering if you could do a blog about what the Bible says about salvation? My husband and I are in a UPC church right now...and we are looking to get out. We studied and found that salvation is NOT speaking in tongues...but we want an exhaustive reference guide, from the point of a fellow ex-UPC'er. We can refute Acts 2:38 up and down...but it's man's refutations. Can you point out exactly why speaking in tongues isn't associated with salvation as well?*

I discussed their request with my fiance Kali—also a former UPC'er—and we thought that she raised a really good point. When we leave the UPC we often know what salvation *isn't* but we're not quite sure what salvation *is*. What does it even mean to be saved? Does it just mean that we're heading for the great Gloryland in the sky when we die? Or is there more to it? And how do we get saved? Is it by faith? Baptism? Is baptism

essential for salvation? There are so many different interpretations, so many different beliefs, that it becomes overwhelming to try to sort it all out.

My prayer is that this article will answer the question that the lady and her husband asked while also helping others who are asking the same questions. ((Dealing with the entire subject of salvation throughout the Old and New Testaments would take hundreds of pages. If a person wants a good scholarly analysis of the topic then I highly recommend the International Bible Standard Encyclopedia article on it, which can be found [here](#). In this article I'm going to deal with the more common use of the word.))

## What Is Salvation?

In the UPC salvation gets a lot of attention. We toss around phrases like, "They love the Lord so much, it's a shame that they don't have the truth," or, "That song [by a Trinitarian singer] is so anointed, they've almost got it!" When we say all of these things what we are really saying is, "That person loves the Lord but isn't saved," or, "That person has the Spirit of God resting upon them and blessing their music, but it's too bad they aren't saved." (When we stop and think about it in those terms it becomes apparent that it would be very strange that a person could love God and follow Him and yet not be saved, kind of like a cosmic game of hide and seek with people looking for Christ and never finding Him—the exact opposite of what Scripture says in Luke 11:9-13.) The point is, in the UPC we're obsessed with seeing people saved, and that's how it should be! Christians of all denominations should feel the same way. But in the UPC we've associated salvation with a theological understanding (Oneness) or an experience (tongues) or an action (dressing right). But is that what salvation really is? Is that how a person is saved? What does it really mean to be saved?

The word that most applies to our discussion is found in Acts 16:30-31, when a jailer of Paul was about to commit suicide because he thought that Paul had escaped:

*When the jailer awoke and saw the prison doors opened, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!" And he called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, and after he brought them out, he said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." (NASB) ((All Scripture references are from the NASB unless otherwise noted.))*

The word that is translated as "saved" in the above verse is the Greek word *sozo*. It means "To save, deliver, make whole, preserve safe from danger, loss, destruction." ((The Complete WordStudy Dictionary, G4982, 1992, AMG International Inc)) Of the fifty-four times the word is used in the New Testament, "fourteen relate to deliverance from disease or demon possession...in twenty instances, the inference is to the rescue of physical life from some impending peril or instant death...[in] the remaining twenty times, the reference is to spiritual salvation." ((Ibid.)) The references to spiritual salvation are the ones we're interested in. Consider the following verses:

*"She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." (Matthew 1:21)*

*And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation!" (Acts 2:40)*

*Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. (Romans 5:9)*

*For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. (1 Corinthians 1:21)*

*Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you. (1 Timothy 4:16)*

*Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. (Hebrews 7:25)*

*Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. (James 1:21)*

At this point one might wonder why I stop to define the word "saved," since it's certain that any reader with a background in Christianity will know exactly what I'm talking about. The reason is because I've seen quite a few debates about salvation online, and you'd be amazed at the number of people who throw Scriptures around about "salvation" when the type of salvation that the Scripture is talking about may not even be spiritual! Additionally, it's important to remember that the method of salvation could be quite different depending on the era that a particular passage was written in. Some passages deal with salvation as a nation (Israel), others with salvation as a family unit, and others with salvation as an individual. Because of all this, I want to stress that this article is dealing with the spiritual salvation that we find in the New Testament—salvation that saves and delivers us from the wrath of God and ushers us into heaven.

# How Is A Person Saved?

It's impossible to discuss what it means to be saved without first talking about how to be saved. I know that seems backwards, but it will make sense in a moment.

The person who emailed me requesting this article made a really good point. She said, "We can refute Acts 2:38 up and down...but it's man's refutations." I think that a lot of people are in that same situation. They know what salvation isn't. They've come to realize that it's more deep than an emotional experience but more simple than what they've been taught. They've come to realize that a person doesn't have to spend night after night at an altar sweating and pleading and crying and begging for God's Spirit. They know what salvation is *not* but they don't quite know what it *is*. Fortunately for us, the Bible makes it abundantly clear. That's right. Very clear. The reason we missed it in the UPC is not because we weren't intelligent enough. It's so simple children all over the world understand it. The reason we missed it is because we put emphasis on the wrong things, twisted the verses out of context, then ran roughshod over the very clear teaching of Scripture—the very thing we accused all those Trinitarians of doing!

Consider the following passage of Scripture. Look at how plain the teaching is:

*"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 [sozo] through Him. (John 3:14-17)*

Now, we've been taught all our life that it was more

complicated than this. After all, doesn't "just believe" lead to "easy believism"? (No it doesn't, but we'll deal with that in a moment.) Isn't this Scripture just one Scripture out of many that teaches us how to be saved? (If it is, then it's really surprising that Jesus wouldn't share the "whole plan of salvation" every time He spoke, since He must have realized that it would be hundreds of years before the New Testament canon was readily available to every Christian. As a matter of fact, neither Jesus or Paul or any other writer ever mentioned the UPC plan of salvation in any way, shape, or form.) But let's not get sidetracked, because the point that I want to make is very simple: Salvation (*sozo*) stands in contrast to judgment. Let's read verse 17 again, and tack on verses 18-21 as well:

*"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. **He who believes in Him is not judged;** he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. This is the judgment, that the Light has 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 for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God."* (John 3:16-21, emphasis mine)

Think about that for a moment.

To be spiritually saved is to *not* be judged. To be lost is to be judged.

How does a person stand before a judge and not be condemned? The only way is to be declared innocent.

And that leads us to the obvious question: How do I, a sinner, stand innocent before God? Or, to put it another way, how does a person get made righteous before God?

Scripture calls it "being justified," and there's only one way, throughout all of the New Testament, that it happens, and that way is "faith."

## Justification

The Greek word for "justify" is *dikaioo* and it means "to render righteous" or to "declare...one to be just...such as he ought to be" ((Thayer's Greek Definitions, G1344)). In other words, when we are justified we are rendered righteous and declared to be just. We're made right before God. We who were once dirty and sinful are now clean. We stand innocent.

Paul liked the word "justified." He used it a lot. Consider this passage in Romans:

*But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, **even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace** through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because **in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.** Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but **by a law of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.** Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since indeed **God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the***

*uncircumcised through faith is one." (Romans 3:21-30, emphasis mine)*

That's a long passage, so let me sum it up: We're not righteous, but God is, and God passed over our sins and declared us righteous based upon HIS righteousness, not ours!

Now, call me crazy, but it sounds like Paul is saying that people are justified (made right with God) through faith. It's almost like what Jesus said back in John 3:14-17 when He said that people will be saved through belief.

But isn't this just part of the plan of salvation? Where's the speaking in tongues? If we're made righteous through faith then what about Jesus' Name baptism?

If belief is just part of a grander plan of salvation then both Jesus and Paul continually forget to mention it. Paul goes on to write this just a few chapters later:

*But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart"—that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed." (Romans 10:8-11, emphasis mine)*

As a matter of fact, Paul told the church in Corinth that he was not sent to baptize, and that he was thankful that he had hardly baptized any of them (1 Cor. 1:13-18)! Can you imagine a UPC preacher ever saying that? I've heard plenty of explanations in the UPC for that verse, but none of them did away with the simple fact that Paul esteemed preaching higher than baptizing, and he was comfortable thanking God that He

hadn't baptized a lot of people. If baptism was an essential part of the "plan of salvation" then I can't imagine Paul ever penning those words.

And what about tongues? Paul's comment on the matter was that not everyone speaks in tongues (1 Cor. 12:30). No mention of there being two types of tongues, never a mention in Paul's writings (or anyone else's) about tongues being the evidence of receiving the Holy Spirit. Instead, we find a tremendous emphasis in Scripture on belief along with an accompanying promise that it is sufficient for salvation. When we really stop and read Scripture for what it says, without trying to tie it in knots and make it say what we *think* it should say, then we find that there is little emphasis on baptism, no emphasis on tongues, but tremendous emphasis on belief.

We'll talk about belief in just a moment, but first let's look at a few more Scriptures that emphatically affirm that we are saved by the grace of God through faith in Christ:

*In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise," (Ephesians 1:13, emphasis mine) (By the way, if you're wondering when people get baptized with the Holy Spirit, then the above verse tells you. It happens upon belief.)*

*For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. (Romans 10:4)*

*for "Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved." (Romans 10:13)*

*'And it shall be that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'* (Acts 2:21)

*and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of*

Moses. (Acts 13:39)

They said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." (Acts 16:31)

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1)

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25- 26) (Sadly enough, the UPC would have to answer "no" to Jesus' question, for the UPC does not believe that believing in Christ is enough to ensure eternal life.)

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life." (John 5:24)

Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life." (1 Timothy 1:16)

Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him." (1 John 5:1)

Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God." (1 John 4:15)

and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus." (2 Timothy 3:15)

The promise of salvation by faith through grace is written all throughout the New Testament. It oozes out from between the

covers of the Bible. But we in the UPC were convinced that there just had to be more to it. So we twisted Scripture (the thing that we had accused others of doing) and prodded and poked and cajoled and tied unrelated Scriptures together until we came up with a theology of salvation that is completely and totally unrelated to anything Christ or Paul or any other apostle ever said!

Now let's talk about belief.

## **Belief**

We see now that we are made right with God (a.k.a. "saved") by belief in Christ. But what does that mean?

The typical UPC view of belief is one called "easy believism." The view says that if belief alone is sufficient for salvation then a person can live a life of sin and still be saved. Now there are so-called Christians who believe that, but the UPC might be surprised to find out that those people are not in the majority. Every Trinitarian church that I have attended since leaving has taught strongly against sin. But is the UPC belief correct? Could a person just live however they want and still be saved? Does God just blink His eyes at sin and look the other way? Interestingly enough, Paul was accused of teaching that very thing, and this was his reply:

*"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be!" (Rom. 6:1-2a)*

The Greek word that we often translate "believe" or "faith" is the Greek word *pisteuo*, and it is difficult to translate properly into English. You see, in the English language when we say "believe" we often mean "intellectual acknowledgment." For example, I believe (intellectually acknowledge) that Africa exists, but I don't put my faith in Africa for anything. If I one day found out that Africa was a myth, the result of a global conspiracy theory, then my life would go on

as before. Nothing would change (except for my belief in conspiracy theories). That's intellectual acknowledgment, but it's not biblical belief. It's not *pisteuo*.

*Pisteuo* means both intellectual acknowledgment (to be persuaded of a fact) and faith (to put confidence in that fact, or to entrust oneself to it). ((Thayer's, G4102)) Now, it's entirely correct to say that intellectual acknowledgment of Christ would by itself lead to "easy believism." Sadly, there are so-called Christians who behave that way. They say, "Oh, I believe in Christ," and they go on about their lives without being changed. They've intellectually acknowledged Christ, but they haven't put their faith in Him. Those people are often called functional atheists, and they're no more saved than the squirrel outside my window.

To believe in the New Testament sense, though, requires a person to both intellectually acknowledge Christ as Lord *and* to completely entrust themselves to Him. It is a faith that demands action. If I had New Testament faith in Africa then I would intellectually acknowledge its existence and then move there and live completely off of African products. My life would depend on Africa. If Africa didn't exist then neither would I. I would have completely entrusted myself to it for life, and if I was wrong then I would be dead. That's *pisteuo*, and it's the type of belief that we're told to have in Christ.

When we believe in the New Testament sense we throw ourselves upon Christ for our salvation. We recognize that without Him we have no hope of eternal life. We declare Him Lord and pledge our allegiance to Him. It is a faith that demands action. Without action it's not *pisteuo*.

That's why God chose faith as the method through which grace works. You see, people often say that we're saved by faith, but that's not entirely correct. We're saved by grace. Faith is just the catalyst that triggers it (Eph. 2:8). That's why

the proper phrase is "we're saved by grace through faith," not "we're saved by faith." (It's true that the Bible often says we are justified through belief, but when read in context the underlying factor is always God's grace. Apart from grace faith would be nothing.) Faith is our part, grace is God's. We throw ourselves on Him for our salvation and He responds. If we try to work our way to salvation then that just won't work. None of us can make ourselves righteous before God (Rom. 3:10). If we could work our way to salvation then we could boast (Rom. 4:2), but we can't so we don't. We throw ourselves upon God and He justifies us, He makes us right before Him. Then we have nothing to boast in except Christ crucified.

With all that in mind, this passage should make a lot more sense:

*For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ." Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one would say you were baptized in my name. Now I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any other.*

*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. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, And the cleverness of the clever I will set aside." Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message*

*preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.*

*For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may 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, so that, just as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord." (1 Corinthians 1:11-31)*

In other words, Christ did things exactly backwards—at least according to us humans (which means we're the ones who are backwards). Instead of trusting in our strength we trust in God's. To become strong we become weak. To become first we become last. Instead of trusting in our wisdom we become fools. Why? Because it's not our wisdom and strength that saves us, it's God's.

How much more foolish could you get than being saved by not working? How crazy is it to win a battle by surrendering? But for those of us who are saved by faith it's the power of God at work. Can we boast? Yes, but not in ourselves. Can we be proud? Yes, just not in us. The only One we can boast in is God.

We can't brag about how long we spent at an altar or how we

prayed through or the experience we had or how loud we spoke in tongues. We can't even *not* brag about those things, because those things are irrelevant. We could spend 24 hours a day on our knees at an altar praying to speak in tongues, and if we ever did then it wouldn't even matter. As a matter of fact we would probably be worse off because our faith would probably be in the fact that we spoke in tongues, not in Christ. We can't boast in our wisdom or works or power or might or even our faith. The only thing we can boast in is the power of the God who saved us through His grace.

## The Relationship Between Works and Faith

So we're saved by grace through faith, but now what? What about all the Scriptures about works? After all, look at what James said:

*What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. But someone may well say, "You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works."*

*You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," and he was called the friend of God. You see*

*that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead. (James 2:14-26)*

Doesn't this stand in direct contrast to Paul's teaching? Doesn't it show that all the Scriptures about justification through faith were just one part of a smaller plan of salvation? Don't faith and works go hand in hand?

Yes, faith and works do go hand in hand, but not in the way that the UPC interprets it. You see, Paul says that faith *leads* to works. We're not saved *by* works, we're saved *for* works (Eph. 2:8-10). Consider this passage:

*"But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For **by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.** For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them." (Ephesians 2:4-10, emphasis mine)*

There you see the relationship between faith and works. True faith leads to works. As a matter of fact, Christ has works prepared for us before we're even saved! Works is an integral part of Christianity, but works are a *result* of salvation, not a *cause* of salvation. Because of this, James could rightfully say that faith without works is dead. If James preached that sermon in front of Paul then Paul would have given him a

hearty amen! Paul and James presented two sides of the same coin: Paul said that faith leads to works, and James said that without works you don't have faith. There's no reason to think that there was a conflict between the two of them regarding the method of salvation, or that Paul was only preaching one part of the larger "plan of salvation."

## What About the Scriptures That Talk About Us "Being Saved"?

Paul used the phrase "being saved" a couple of times. In 1 Cor. 1:18 he wrote, "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," and in 2 Cor. 2:15 he wrote, "For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are **being saved** and among those who are perishing" (emphasis mine).

I have heard more times than I can count that these passages (and others like them) mean that salvation is a process. The people who teach this claim that we are never truly saved until we get to heaven. It may not be an official UPC doctrine, but I heard it in church after church. Are the people who teach this correct? Are we never truly saved until we die or are raptured?

In a sense the people who say that are right. In some ways salvation is a process. That's why I defined the word *sozo* at the beginning of this article. You see, the type of salvation we were discussing is most closely related to justification—the idea of being made right with God. It is accurate to say that certain aspects of salvation are a process, but it would not be accurate to say that justification is a process. You see, justification is being made right with God. You're either right or you're not, there's no middle ground. You can't be partly justified, or 3/4 justified. You're righteous or you're not righteous, and that's that.

When Paul talks about "being saved" in the above passages he is not talking about justification, he's talking about sanctification. Sanctification is the English translation of the Greek word *hagiazō*, and it means "to make holy." ("Strong's Greek Dictionary", G37) It would not be inaccurate to take every sermon that you ever heard about "holiness" and replace it with the word "sanctification." (The difference, of course, is that sanctification has nothing to do with appearance, aside from the commands to be modest and moral, and everything to do with the way that we live our lives.)

Paul wrote:

*Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For **sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace.***

*What then? **Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be!** Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in 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. I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh.*

*For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness, so **now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification.** For when you were slaves of sin, you were*

*free in regard to righteousness. Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death. But now **having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life.** For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:11-23)*

(Did you catch that? Paul was being accused of preaching "easy believism" too, and he responded with an emphatic command that grace leads to sanctification (holiness) not sin! As a matter of fact, if you read Romans you discover that Paul taught that people were *more* likely to sin when they were trying to be saved through works!)

When we speak of sanctification it is entirely proper to say that we are "being saved." None of us are entirely holy yet, and we never will be. While we walk this earth we strive for holiness while recognizing that we will never achieve it. While on this earth we must trust in God's grace to cover us. That's what faith is. Therefore it's entirely accurate to say that we're "being saved," but it's *not* accurate to claim that we are not already saved. When we talk about "being saved" we are talking about sanctification, not justification.

In theology sanctification is often broken up into three types. The types sometimes go by different names, but I like to call them "present, progressive, and perfected." "Present sanctification" is the holiness that is bestowed upon us at the moment of salvation when we are robed with Christ; "progressive sanctification" is the ongoing process of becoming more and more holy as we walk with Christ; "perfected sanctification" is the perfect holiness that will be ours when we are glorified. So we are justified (made right with God) and sanctified (made holy before God) at the moment of salvation, but we are also becoming more and more holy as we

walk with God day by day.

## **Tying It All Together**

### **A call to repentance**

"Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?"

(Rom. 2:4)

"you were dead in your trespasses and sins"

(Eph. 2:1)

The first thing that God does is call us to Him. You see, we can't even boast in our ability to seek for Him, because it doesn't exist! God calls us, we don't call Him. We're lost, He's the divine search-and-rescue party. He calls us to Him and we respond through faith.

It's worth noting here that I firmly believe that repentance is an integral part of belief. I don't think it's possible to acknowledge the holy God as Lord and Savior without being moved to fall at His feet and repent. I don't view repentance as a requirement so much as I think it's a necessary reaction to faith. It's true that we are commanded to repent, but I don't understand how a person could even have faith without being moved to repentance. The two go hand in hand. After all, a person wouldn't truly repent if they didn't think the one they were repenting to was capable of forgiving sins, so repentance in itself is a statement of faith. Conversely, I don't think a person can truly have faith without being moved to repentance. Therefore, I don't see a tension in Scripture between the commands to repent and the fact that we are saved by grace through faith. Faith naturally leads to repentance.

## **A response through faith, leading to justification**

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."

(John 3:16-17)

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

(Ephesians 2:4-7)

For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.

(Rom. 3:28)

We respond to the call by throwing ourselves upon the mercy of Christ, and trusting Him wholeheartedly for our salvation. We don't try to work our way to God because He's already worked His way to us.

## **When we are justified we are regenerated**

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.

(2 Cor. 5:17)

We didn't talk about regeneration yet in this article. It just means "being made alive." Paul summed it up when he wrote:

*For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this,*

*that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf. Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer. **Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.** (2 Corinthians 5:14-17, emphasis mine)*

## **Justification and regeneration leads to sanctification**

"For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ."

(Gal. 3:27)

"But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life."

(Rom. 6:22)

When we are justified and regenerated we put on Christ. He takes our place and we take His. When God looks at us He sees Christ. We are no longer seen as unholy but as holy.

On a side note, there's some debate over whether or not the "baptized" in Gal. 3:27 refers to water baptism or Spirit baptism. I don't think it matters, because in the New Testament baptism was something that was done immediately upon a profession of faith. It was not until later that baptism was separated. The authors of the excellent book "Pagan Christianity" have this to say about baptism in the early church:

*"[I]t is typical in most contemporary churches for baptism to be*

*separated from conversion by great lengths of time. Many Christians were saved at one age and baptized at a much later age. In the first century, this was unheard of.*

*In the early church converts were baptized immediately upon believing.*

*One scholar says of baptism and conversion, 'They belong together.*

*Those who repented and believed the Word were baptized. That was the invariable pattern, so far as we know.' Another writes, 'At the birth of the church, converts were baptized with little or no delay.'*

*In the first century water baptism was the outward confession of a*

*person's faith. But more than that, it was the way someone came to the*

*Lord. For this reason, the confession of baptism is vitally linked to*

*the exercise of saving faith. So much so that the New Testament*

*writers often use 'baptism' in place of the word 'faith' and link it*

*to being 'saved' (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16; 1 Peter 3:21).*

*This is because baptism was the early Christian's initial confession*

*of faith in Christ."*

Therefore, I do not think we need to try to decide if Gal. 3:27 is talking about water or Spirit baptism. I think it's safe to conclude that all believers in the New Testament were baptized.

# Sanctification leads to glorification

"The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him."

(Romans 8:16-17)

"For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified."

(Romans 8:29-30)

When we are called home to heaven, either through death or the rapture, we will be glorified and will spend eternity with Christ. What a beautiful concept! I don't think anything more needs to be said about glorification, because Paul says it best:

*For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.*

*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we*

know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.

For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it. In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, "For Your sake we are being put to death all day long; We were considered as sheep to be slaughtered." But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels,

*nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:14-39)*

## **What About Baptism And Tongues?**

I think that these questions have been answered throughout the article. Still, it may be good to make a couple of comments about the relationship of baptism and tongues in salvation before we close.

As I already pointed out, baptism in the early church was just assumed. If you believed then you were baptized. There wasn't any debate about whether or not it was necessary. Christ commanded it so the disciples did it, and that was that. For what it's worth, I think that's the way it should be today. Baptism was commanded by Christ, so when it's possible it should most certainly be done. (I can't imagine a scenario when it would be impossible to baptize by sprinkling, even if immersion were not feasible.) However, baptism is not directly related to justification. Baptism is a public confession of faith. Perhaps it has deeper spiritual significance, perhaps not. I honestly don't know, because arguments both ways are persuasive. (I think there's a lot to be said for baptism being a symbol of the covenant in the New Testament just like circumcision was a symbol in the Old.) What I do know, though, is that it was commanded by Christ and so it should be done, and that baptism does not lead to justification. Only faith does that.

Tongues is even easier to answer. There is no relationship between tongues and salvation. I can say that with total confidence. Tongues was mentioned three times in Acts (Chapters 2, 10, and 19) and there is every reason to believe that all three of those instances were nothing more than the gift of tongues at work. There is no reason to believe that

tongues was in any way related to salvation. The Scriptural relationship simply isn't there. The Spirit was present and in those three instances the gift of tongues appeared. It's really that simple. Tongues was never taught as anything more than a gift by any of the apostles, and it was never even mentioned by Jesus.

Additionally, logic says that the Holy Spirit has to be given upon belief. After all, Romans 8:9 says that "if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him." Yet we know that we are justified (made right with God) upon belief, regenerated (made alive in Christ) upon belief, and sanctified (made holy before God) upon belief. How could all of that happen and yet we still not belong to God? Yet if the UPC view of tongues is correct then that's precisely what happens. According to the UPC plan of salvation we can repent and be baptized and still not be saved. Are we half saved? Two-thirds saved? How does that even work? It just doesn't make sense.

If that's not enough, then consider what Paul says in Eph. 1:13-14:

*In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—**having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit** of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory. (emphasis mine)*

Did I read that correctly? Did Paul just say that we are "sealed" with the Holy Spirit at the moment of belief? Yes, he did.

So we see, then, that tongues is nothing more than a gift of the Spirit. It's not the evidence of receiving the Holy Spirit. If it were then everyone who believed would immediately speak with tongues with no delay. Common

experience says that just doesn't happen.

## **Conclusion**

What does it mean to be saved? It means that we stand righteous before God. We stand before Him pure and holy, not because of the things that we have done, but because of the grace of God. Christ has taken our sin and shame and made it His own, and He has robed us in Him. We are in Him, and when God looks at us He doesn't see our sins. He doesn't see our failures and mistakes. No, He sees a person who is perfectly righteous and holy, not because of what we have done, but because of what Christ has done. Our so-called righteousness can never bring us where we need to be. We can't pray hard enough, be baptized deep enough, or speak in tongues long enough to be saved. The only way to be made right and holy before God is through His grace, and that grace is granted through faith. That's what it means to be saved.