

# Is Faith in Christ Optional or an Operating Premise for Salvation?

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Many people cite as an example of how orthodox the PCUSA has become in its Christology and soteriology<sup>1</sup> the document “Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ,” produced in 2002 by the Office of Theology and Worship and affirmed by the 214<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2002) by a vote of 497-11-5.<sup>2</sup> Most recently, Charles Wiley (himself the Coordinator of the Office of Theology and Worship) in a recent article in the *Presbyterian Outlook* cites the affirmation of this document as “the clearest example of course correction” in the PCUSA toward a more orthodox Christology.<sup>3</sup>

I am not as enthusiastic about what the overwhelming approval of the “Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ” document (hereafter “Hope”) allegedly says about the PCUSA’s greater orthodoxy. Partly this is because many persons lately have become quite skilled in using orthodox language to mean something very different from what orthodoxy means. But partly this is because of a major flaw in “Hope” itself. I know many renewal leaders in the PCUSA who supported “Hope” simply because they thought it was “the best we can get,” not because they were enthusiastic about it. It was a preferable alternative to the comment by Dirk Ficca in Fall 2000 that sparked the production of “Hope.” Ficca, a PCUSA pastor and Executive Director of the Council for a Parliament of the World’s Religions, uttered at a PCUSA conference the now infamous rhetorical question, “What’s the big deal about Jesus?”<sup>4</sup>

I know many of the authors of “Hope” and have great respect for them.<sup>5</sup> I also believe that “Hope” contains many wonderful statements. Unfortunately, the document contains a key paragraph that functionally diminishes most of what is nicely affirmed about

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<sup>1</sup> That is, its view of the person and role of Jesus Christ and its view of how people are saved.

<sup>2</sup> An online copy can be obtained at <http://www.pcusa.org/theologyandworship/christology/hopeinthelord.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Wiley, “So Why Are ‘They’ Leaving?” *Presbyterian Outlook* (Dec. 24, 2007), online: <http://www.pres-outlook.com/tabid/2043/Article/6591/Default.aspx>.

<sup>4</sup> Whether because of, in spite of, or in disregard of “Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ,” a many-ways-to-heaven book was made recommended reading for the General Assembly Council in Aug. 2005 by the Committee on the Office of the General Assembly. The book was authored by W. Eugene March, professor emeritus of Old Testament at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary and a defender of Dirk Ficca’s statement. Entitled *The Wide, Wide Circle of Divine Love: A Biblical Case for Religious Diversity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), the book has many problems in its exegesis of New Testament texts. March was also invited to do a presentation before the GAC in Sept. 2005. See the write-ups in the Presbyterian Layman Online: <http://www.layman.org/layman/news/2005-news/general-assembly-council-member.htm>, <http://www.layman.org/layman/news/2005-news/retired-prof-says-christians.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> The authors were: Joseph D. Small (Coordinator), Theodore A. Gill, Jr., Eunice McGarrahan, Martha Moore-Keish, Sheldon Sorge, and Charles A. Wiley.

Christology and soteriology elsewhere. The paragraph in question is as follows (pp. 11-12, ll. 155-76):

Jesus Christ is the only Savior and Lord, and all people everywhere are called to place their faith, hope, and love in him. No one is saved by virtue of inherent goodness or admirable living, for “by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” [Ephesians 2:8]. No one is saved apart from God’s gracious redemption in Jesus Christ. **Yet we do not presume to limit the sovereign freedom of “God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” [1 Timothy 2:4]. Thus, we neither restrict the grace of God to those who profess explicit faith in Christ nor assume that all people are saved regardless of faith. Grace, love, and communion belong to God, and are not ours to determine.**

Paul, after a beautiful development of his thought, in Rom. 10:17 at length comes to the conclusion, “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing from the Word of God by the preaching of Christ.” At the same time we recognize that God can illuminate whom and when he will, even without the external ministry, for that is in his power [The Second Helvetic Confession, 5.006, 007].

I highlighted above the problematic portion. Below I address the problems with it primarily from the vantage point of the New Testament and the theology that arises therein.<sup>6</sup>

Parenthetically, it is worth noting that the issue of whether faith in Christ is merely an optional or even preferred means of being saved or whether it is the only certain means of salvation transcends the specificity of addressing any given PCUSA document or indeed any given denomination. This is a concern that is limited neither to “Hope” nor to Presbyterians. I use the text of “Hope” partly as a foil to get at a perennial concern in the church of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>6</sup> The same problems arise in the *Final Report* of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church. When discussing the question of “religious pluralism,” the authors helpfully cite John 14:6 (“I am the way, and the truth, and the life . . .”) and Acts 4:12 (“ . . . no other name . . . by which we must be saved”). However, they then add a troubling caveat: “*At the same time*, as Reformed Christians, we must remind ourselves and others that salvation rests not in any merit of our own but in the sovereign love of God that has been made known to us in Jesus Christ” (*A Season of Discernment*, p. 3, ll. 80-85; emphasis added). Why the waffling expression “at the same time”? It suggests that the intent of the statement is to provide a contrast with the earlier references to Scripture, as if to say: Although we acknowledge Jesus as the sole source of salvation and access to God, requiring belief in the gospel would be tantamount to making faith a meritorious work, whereas God’s grace is manifested without any strings attached. If this is the implication of their remark, then it is a clear misreading of Scripture. The two cited texts, John 14:6 and Acts 4:12, operate within larger works (John, Acts) that everywhere stress the necessity of believing in the Lord Jesus Christ (see below). Moreover, the New Testament makes explicit that faith is not a *meritorious* work, so the requirement of faith in Christ ushers in no element of merit (cf. Rom 4:5; John 6:28-29). Faith is the reception of *God’s* work on one’s behalf. Meritorious work of one’s own is introduced into the equation of human salvation only when one ceases to exercise faith in what God has done and is doing through Christ. Cf. also ll. 76-80: “In responding to . . . questions [about religious pluralism], we must remember that the truth of the gospel rests on the power of God, not on the power of the church. Therefore, in addressing questions of pluralism, truth, and salvation, we must emphasize both the necessity and sufficiency of the grace by which God is for and with the world in Jesus Christ.” What do these statements mean? They appear to imply that God’s grace in Christ embraces religions other than Christianity.

## I. The Problems with the Paragraph in Question

**1. “Hope” doesn’t make clear, and indeed appears to reject, an important operating premise of the apostolic witness to Christ in the New Testament; namely, that apart from faith in Jesus Christ people will perish.** This is the chief problem with problematic paragraph. It is this premise that drives, and has always driven, Christian mission to the world. A pivotal reason why the apostle Paul, for example, got up each morning and faced great personal hardship, including the tremendous abuse that he received at the hands of opponents of the gospel, was that he believed that Gentiles—like himself before he, a Jew, became a believer in Christ—would perish apart from receiving in faith the good news about Christ. Can anyone imagine Paul or some other Jewish apostolic authority going out to the Gentiles and proclaiming: “We believe that Jesus Christ is the world’s redeemer but we wouldn’t want to presume on God’s sovereign freedom by claiming that explicit faith in Christ is required to be saved”? Such a thing wouldn’t have been said even to fellow Jews, let alone Gentiles. One might as well stay home than proclaim such a message.

So far as God has informed us in Scripture, *we are to assume in all our dealings with unbelievers that, apart from exercising genuine faith in Christ, they will die in their sins and not inherit the eternal kingdom of God.* The concern that this generates for the lost is a primary motivation for sharing the gospel. The church has no authoritative (i.e. scriptural) foundation for raising the possibility to outsiders that they do not necessarily have to believe in Christ. I will shortly come back to the scriptural basis for this *operating premise*. Rather than stress this operating premise the authors go out of their way to chastise those who hold it. For all intents and purposes the authors make faith in Christ optional—preferable but still ultimately optional. In so doing, they unintentionally devalue Christ.

**2. This statement misplaces where the presumption and the limitation of God’s freedom lie: not with those who proclaim faith in Christ as mandatory but with those who proclaim faith in Christ as optional.** In their rationale the authors simply assume, without demonstration, that to have as one’s operating premise the view that people will not inherit eternal life *sans* faith in Christ is to “limit,” in presumptuous manner, “the sovereign freedom of ‘God our Savior,’” wrongly “restrict the grace of God,”<sup>7</sup> and take on God’s role of “determin[ing]” who is saved. However, for this argument to have any validity—and one wonders why they confine their remarks to faith in Christ and do not expand them to faith in God—one must first establish that God in Scripture both does not

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<sup>7</sup> The statement “we neither restrict the grace of God to those who profess explicit faith in Christ . . .” is enough to allow anyone who believes that a good Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Confucianist will be saved to embrace this document. Yes, the authors of “Hope” then add: “nor assume that all people are saved regardless of faith.” But that addition doesn’t do much to rectify the problem. Few people believe anyway that “all” people (including Hitler, Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot) will be saved. And the addition says “nor assume,” not “nor affirm.” “Nor assume” permits the belief that “all people” *may* be saved “regardless of faith.” So the problem with the statement of not “restrict[ing] the grace of God to those who profess explicit faith in Christ” remains. In effect, this statement makes faith in Jesus Christ functionally superfluous. That, in turn, functionally devastates the document’s Christology and Soteriology. A Presbyterian can give lip service to the view that Jesus is Lord and Jesus saves while criticizing those who call unbelievers to have faith in Jesus Christ in order to be saved.

repeatedly declare that salvation is through faith in Christ and clearly provides some alternative means by which one might be saved. This the authors of “Hope” do not, and cannot, do.

The situation is actually the reverse of what they indicate. If the apostolic witness to Christ in the New Testament has declared repeatedly that salvation is appropriated for any given individual through faith in Christ and, moreover, repeatedly assumes that without such faith people will perish in their sins, then the “presumption” and the “limitation of God’s sovereign freedom” must lie with those who insist that God be able and willing to save people apart from faith in Christ. What is presumptuous, limiting, and restrictive in relation to God is claiming that God cannot do what the apostolic witness in Scripture declares that God is in fact doing.

**3. In the process *the authors distort the very texts from the Pauline corpus that they cite to substantiate their view.***

**a. Ephesians 2:8.** While citing Eph 2:8 to show that no one is saved by “inherent goodness,” they go on to ignore the line “*saved through faith*,” which in context clearly refers to faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup> Ephesians 2:8 thus explicitly affirms not only that “Jesus Christ is the only Savior and Lord,” not only that “No one is saved apart from God’s gracious redemption in Jesus Christ,” and not even only that “all people everywhere are *called* to place their faith, hope, and love in him”—all of which are good and true statements—but *also that salvation itself is indeed through faith in Jesus Christ.*<sup>9</sup> Rather than affirm this critical element of Eph 2:8 the authors place the emphasis on refusing to “restrict the grace of God to those who profess explicit faith in Christ”—the very thing that Eph 2:8 does not do.

**b. 1 Timothy 2:4.** The authors cite 1 Tim 2:4, “God our Savior . . . desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth,” to establish, allegedly, that Christians who insist on faith in Christ for salvation would be wrongly “presum[ing] to limit [God’s] sovereign freedom.” First Timothy 2:4 in no way makes this point, nor is there any evidence in the Pastoral Epistles as a whole that the author would agree with that point.<sup>10</sup> In fact, the second of the two clauses clearly explains the means by which “everyone would be saved,” namely, by “com[ing] to the knowledge of the truth” about Jesus Christ as sole “mediator between God and humans” and the one who alone was a “ransom for all” (so the very next verse).<sup>11</sup> In other words, the two clauses joined by

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<sup>8</sup> That “faith” here is to be understood as faith in Christ and not just generic faith in God is evident from the repeated mention of Christ in the context (2:5-22). We could also compare 1:13, which refers to believing the gospel about Christ as the basis for being saved and receiving the Holy Spirit; 1:15, which refers to “faith in the Lord Jesus”; 3:12, which affirms that “we have . . . access [to salvation] through faith in him”; and 4:17, which glosses “the unity of the faith” with “of the knowledge of the Son of God.”

<sup>9</sup> Note that the sentence “all people everywhere are called to place their faith, hope, and love in him” omits “in order to be saved.”

<sup>10</sup> The consensus of most scholars, contested only by some evangelical scholars, is that the Pastoral Epistles are authored by a representative of a Pauline “school” in existence after Paul’s death. Whether or not the Pastoral Epistles are written directly by Paul is immaterial to the point that I am making here.

<sup>11</sup> The phrase “ransom for all” (similarly 1 Tim 4:10; Tit 2:11-14) does not mean in context that all people have already been saved by Christ’s death and so do not need to believe in Christ. Rather it means that Christ’s death is sufficient for making amends for everyone’s sins and/or that the amends made takes effect for any given individual only when received in faith. The “all” may also refer (as often in Paul) to all people without distinction (Gentile as well as Jew) rather than all people without exception. Precisely

“and” form a hendiadys (conveying one basic idea through two words or clauses) in which one of the clauses is subordinate, here the second (the sense of the “saved and coming . . .” being “saved *by* coming . . .”). So rather than asserting that it would be presumptuous for Christians to restrict salvation to those who have faith in Christ, 1 Tim 2:4 states that God’s desire to save everyone is inseparable from the necessity of everyone believing in (i.e. coming to the knowledge of) Christ as Lord (i.e. sole mediator) and Savior (i.e. the sole ransom for all).

Rather than assume that salvation comes about through some other means than faith in Christ, the text’s stated author, Paul, cites his own salvation, that of one who was formerly “the foremost” of sinners, as an “example” of Jesus Christ’s patience to “those who were going to *believe in him for eternal life*” (1:16). Here he refers to a subset of the world’s population who would come to faith in Christ and thereby inherit eternal life. Here faith is faith in Christ (so also 3:13: “faith that is in Christ Jesus”; 2 Tim 3:15: “salvation through faith in Christ Jesus”). The result of (*eis*) such faith, and not of anything else, is the inheritance of eternal life. Paul’s example is not that of a person who, as a Jew prior to knowing Christ, was somehow an “anonymous Christian” (to use Rahner’s famous phrase) but rather that of a person who comes to conscious faith in Christ and so becomes an heir of salvation. Later he refers to “the mystery of our religion,” entailing the incarnation and the proclamation about Christ “among Gentiles” who were saved by “believ[ing] on” or “hav[ing] faith in” him (3:16), not by some other means that allegedly would “not presume to limit the sovereign freedom” of God.

**4. *The authors also misunderstand the meaning of the Second Helvetic Confession, 5.006-007.*** Contrary to the way the authors use it, *Second Helvetic Confession* 5.006-007 does not say that God has some means of saving people other than through faith in Christ and in his atoning work. It says in context that God is capable of using some other *agency* than a human agency for proclaiming the gospel about Christ, not that God has some other *medium* to save than the gospel received in faith.

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because Christ is the sole source of salvation for the world, people should come to faith in him in order to receive for themselves the benefits of his ransoming death.

The context is that of praying for people in high positions and generally living a life that does not cause unnecessary offense (“quiet and peaceable”). The premise behind this exhortation is not that unbelievers are already saved but rather that, since unbelievers are not yet destined for salvation, believers should avoid doing anything that would unnecessarily alienate them from coming to faith in Christ. Believers should thus live lives that will attract unbelievers to faith in Christ, without which the latter will not be saved. A similar thought occurs in 2 Tim 2:24-26: “The Lord’s slave must be . . . kindly to everyone . . . , correcting opponents with gentleness *with a view to the possibility* that God may give to them repentance *leading to a knowledge of the truth* and they might escape from the snare of the devil.” Note the premise here: (1) those who dispute that the gospel about Christ is true are trapped in the snare of the devil; (2) escaping that snare and so becoming saved necessitates repentance from past behavior and coming to a knowledge of the truth about Christ.

Similar too is Tit 3:1-8: “Be subject to rulers . . . and show courtesy to everyone. For we ourselves were once foolish. . . . But when the goodness . . . of God our Savior appeared, he saved us” and “justified [us] by his grace,” we who “have come to believe in God.” Again the operating premise is: (1) Be nice to others because they are not yet saved, just like you once were not saved; for (2) by such good behavior you may win over others to faith in Christ and so bring them to the same salvation that you now have (note: “faith in God” in Tit 3:8 refers to God who “appeared” in the person of Christ [3:4] so in context is equivalent to faith in Christ).

**a. *The example of Cornelius.*** What the authors of “Hope” do not do is cite the context of the immediately preceding paragraph, which states:

God could indeed, by his Holy Spirit, or by the ministry of an angel, without the ministry of St. Peter, have taught Cornelius in the Acts; but, nevertheless, he refers him to Peter, of whom the angel speaking says, “He shall tell you what you ought to do.” (5.005)

In other words God could have more directly taught Cornelius about Jesus Christ “by his Holy Spirit, or by the ministry of an angel.” But what the Holy Spirit or an angel would “have taught Cornelius” is nothing other than the message that Peter taught Cornelius, namely, “words to you by which you and all your household will be saved” (Acts 11:14). That message is the very message of salvation through faith in Christ that the “Hope” document unwittingly undermines: “To this one [Jesus] all the prophets bear witness that everyone who *believes in him* receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43). Note carefully the operating premise of Acts 10-11: Cornelius, though already a Gentile who was “devout and fearing God . . . , making many charitable contributions to the [Jewish] people and praying to God constantly” (10:2), was not saved and had not yet received forgiveness of sins—things that would only come about when he came to faith in Christ. According to the authors of “Hope,” it would be presumptuous to assume that a devout man like Cornelius had to hear and believe the gospel about Christ to be saved. And yet that is exactly what Luke presumes in telling the story of Cornelius.

Surely if any Gentile could have received forgiveness of sins and be saved apart from hearing the gospel message, it would have been Cornelius. And yet the requirement placed on him differed in no way from the requirement placed on the probably less devout Philippian jailer, who asked, “What *must*<sup>12</sup> I do to be saved?” Paul’s response to the jailor is the same as Peter’s response to Cornelius: “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved” (16:30-31).<sup>13</sup> Paul and Silas did not say to the jailor, “Well, normally, believe in Christ, but we wouldn’t want to claim to be the determiners of who belongs to God or in any way restrict the grace of God to those who profess explicit faith.”<sup>14</sup> The *Second Helvetic Confession* agrees with Paul: “sinful man is justified by faith alone in Christ” (5.109).

**b. *The citation of Rom 10:17.*** The portion of the *Second Helvetic Confession* that the authors of “Hope” cite refers to Rom 10:17: “So faith [comes] from hearing [or: what is heard, a message, report] and hearing [comes] through the [or: a] word of Christ.” Paul at this juncture is in the process of explaining why it is that Israel, not God, is at fault for its own current exclusion from the salvation of God in Christ (Rom 9:30-10:21).<sup>15</sup> The reason he gives is simple: All but a remnant of Israel has not believed in Jesus Christ

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<sup>12</sup> The Greek word is the same as in Acts 4:12: *dei* (cited below); here, literally, “what is it necessary for me to do to be saved?”

<sup>13</sup> The rest of the statement is: “and you and your household will be saved.” Some assume that this may include uncomprehending infants. However, the text continues: “they spoke to him the word of the Lord together with all those in his household,” presuming that the latter were capable of understanding and of exercising personal faith in Christ.

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<sup>15</sup> Note esp. 9:1-3 and 10:1 where Paul bares his anguished heart over Israel’s current self-exclusion, wishes that he could be accursed instead of his kin, and prays “on their behalf for salvation.”

(9:32; 10:9-18). The *Second Helvetic Confession* does not question this point but only the point whether the message about Christ always requires a human messenger.

As Paul stressed, “If you acknowledge ‘with your mouth’ [Deut 30:14a] ‘Jesus is Lord’ and believe ‘in your heart’ [Deut 30:14b] that God raised him from the dead you will be saved” (10:9-10). But most of Israel has “not obeyed the gospel” (10:16). As long as they continue in their “unbelief” they are like “branches” cut off from the “olive tree” of God’s redeemed people; but if they do not so continue, they will be “grafted [back] in” (11:17-24).<sup>16</sup> If the people of Israel could be cut off for unbelief, Gentile Christians could more easily be subject to the same since they were not natural members of the tree (i.e. biological descendants of the patriarchs of old). They too only “stand by faith” and will be recipients of “God’s kindness” only “if you continue in his kindness; otherwise, you too will be cut off” (11:20-22). So it is not enough to have once believed in the gospel, let alone to have lived a good life apart from believing in the gospel. One must also “continue” in faith and in the faithful conduct that issues inevitably from true faith.

**5. The authors of “Hope” ignore the wide array of New Testament texts that work with the operating premise that people will perish apart from believing in Christ.** We have already discussed a number of texts in Pauline literature and in Luke’s Acts that present faith in Christ as necessary for salvation, at least as an operating premise or assumption for mission. Yet we have only scratched the surface of texts that could be cited. Here we cannot be exhaustive but simply lift up some additional texts, focusing primarily on the undisputed letters of Paul, the Book of Acts, and the Gospel of John.

**a. Paul.** That Paul worked with an operating premise that all unbelievers would perish is clear, and not only from the discussion of Israel in Romans 9-11 broached above. Paul comforted his converts at Thessalonica with the assurance that they had a resurrection hope, unlike the rest of the world that had “no hope” (1 Thess 4:13). To the Corinthians he declared that divine chastening for their abuse of the celebration of the Lord’s Supper was intended to have a reforming effect, “in order that you might not be condemned with the world” (1 Cor 11:32). Paul could make such remarks almost as asides because they were not controversial views of the early church.

Paul saw a strong dichotomy between those who received the gospel in faith and were being saved, on the one hand, and those who did not believe and were perishing, on the other hand. “The message of the cross,” he noted to the Corinthians, “is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor 1:18). Paul, noting that he and his coworkers “make apparent the smell of the knowledge of [Christ] in every place,” added: “We are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing: to the latter a smell of death leading to death, but to the former a smell of life leading to life” (2 Cor 2:14-16). Even for his Galatian converts to take on circumcision would have meant being “discharged from Christ” and “falling out of grace” (Gal 5:4). When Paul laid out again the core gospel in 1

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<sup>16</sup> In fact, Paul believed that this would one day happen. Once the “full number” of Gentiles appointed by God to be saved had been reached, then God would lift the “hardening” from unbelieving Israel and bring in the “full number” of Israel such that “all Israel will be saved” (11:7-15, 25-31, where “all,” like “fulness” or “full number” refers to some much larger number than is currently the case, not every single individual). However, he did not believe that this would happen apart from coming to faith in Christ.

Cor 15:3-4, he prefaced it by asserting that this is “the gospel that I proclaimed to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, through which you are also being saved . . . if you are *holding firmly* to it—otherwise you *believed* for no reason” (15:1-2). Once again, it is not even enough to have believed the gospel at one time, to say nothing of never having believed it. One must also continue to “hold firmly” to it if one is to be saved.

Some might argue in the face of such texts that condemnation awaits only those who hear the gospel and reject it. However, if that were so, then bringing the gospel to unreached people-groups would be more bad news than good, for it would put large numbers of people at risk for not accepting the gospel—people who otherwise would not be at risk. Paul started with the assumption that the entire world was enslaved to sin, justly deserving of God’s sentence of death (Rom 1:18-3:20). Only believing in the gospel of what Christ had done for us, with an accompanying transformation of life, could bring a deliverance leading to eternal life. “The gospel,” Paul stated in his opening theme statement to his magisterial letter to the Romans (1:16-17), “is God’s capacity (or: power) to effect salvation.” Yet it is so only “for everyone who *believes*” the gospel. This is “first” and foremost true “for the Jew” but also “for the Greek” or Gentile. “God’s righteousness,” that is, God’s faithfulness and truthfulness to his promises of old to bring salvation to the redeemed of Israel and of the world, “is revealed *from faith to faith*” (i.e. on the basis of faith, from first to last). God’s righteousness is disclosed to, and takes effect for, only those who put their trust in the good news about God’s long-awaited salvation. The same point is made by Paul all over again in Rom 3:21-26 when he defines for the first time in the letter what the content of the gospel is. “The righteousness of God has been manifested . . . *through faith in Jesus Christ for all who are believing* (the gospel),” without any distinction being made between Jew and Gentile (3:21-23; cf. 10:12). God’s redemption in Christ is “*through faith*” such that God “justifies the person whose existence is *based on faith in Jesus*” (3:24-26).

Paul nowhere implies in Romans or anywhere else that God has some other option for the world—an extraordinary omission, if omission there is, for someone who viewed himself as apostle to the entire Gentile world.<sup>17</sup> Surely he thought about the fate of Gentiles that he did not reach. The operating premise of Paul and of the rest of the New Testament witness is not: If people do not hear the gospel but seek God in the only way they know how, they too will be saved. That is the life that Paul lived before coming to faith in Christ. It was a life full of personal religious attainments and full of “zeal for God” (Phil 3:4-6; Gal 1:13-14; cf. Rom 10:2). Given too parallels in Qumran literature it was also a life that fully recognized his own personal shortcomings in relation to God and daily sought forgiveness for such shortcomings—not a stereotypical life of legalism.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The texts cited to prove otherwise do not mean what their universalist interpreters think they mean. The discussion in Romans 2 about eternal life granted to those who do good (2:6-11) comes in a context where Paul insists that Israel falls under the same state of sin and judgment as Gentiles despite their possession of the law and circumcision (Rom 3:3-20). The texts where Paul allegedly speaks about salvation for “all” (Rom 5:15-19; 11:32; 1 Cor 15:22; 2 Cor 5:14-15; cf. Col 1:20; 1 Tim 2:6; Tit 2:11) in context probably mean “all without distinction” (i.e. for both Jew and Gentile people groups), not “all without exception.” All these remarks occur in contexts where Paul warns that some will not inherit the kingdom of God or experience eternal life.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. 1QS 11:9-22; 1QH 9:21-27; 12:29-37. For antecedents in the Old Testament, see: Ps 38:1-5, 17-18, 21-22; 51:1-5, 11; 143:1-2, 11; Job 4:17-19 (some of these texts are cited by Paul in his letters).

Yet it was a life that Paul, as a believer, could only characterize as a “loss,” as “excrement,” in comparison with “knowing Christ.” Even his new life in Christ consisted of an earnest quest to “gain Christ” and to be “conformed to his death, if *somehow* I might attain to the resurrection from the dead” (Phil 3:7-11)—how much more precarious the former life?<sup>19</sup>

**b. *The Book of Acts.*** Luke presumes everywhere in Acts that believing in Jesus Christ is a necessary precondition for salvation (a precondition, of course, that is in no way personally meritorious). In addition to the passages about Cornelius and the Philippian jailor, cited above, we note the following texts.

When Peter (as depicted by Luke) spoke to fellow ordinary Jews at Pentecost he assumed that they would *all* perish unless they heeded the command to “repent and be baptized, *every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ* so that your sins may be forgiven” (2:38), which Peter later connects with “faith in his name” (3:16, 19). Likewise, when Peter proclaimed to the Jewish “rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem” he declared that “there is not in any other person [than Jesus Christ] salvation, for neither is there another name [than the name of Jesus, 4:10], which has been given under heaven among humans, by which we *must (dei)* be saved” (4:12). His hearers did not understand him as saying that it was not necessary to “profess explicit faith in Christ” to be saved (so “Hope”). They understood him as saying that the only certain way that even they, Israel’s high-priestly family (4:6), could be saved was by believing in this Jesus of Nazareth as God’s sole redemptive agent.

We see the same thing going on throughout Luke’s depiction of Paul’s missionary journeys. When Paul entered the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, he likewise assumed that forgiveness of sins for all his Jewish and God-fearing hearers was contingent upon believing in Christ: “Let it be known to you, men, brothers, that through this one [Jesus] forgiveness of sins is being proclaimed to you, and from all the things you could not be justified [or: made right, acquitted] in the law of Moses, by this one *everyone who believes* [i.e. in him] is being justified [or: made right, acquitted]” (13:38-39). The implication is clear: those who do not believe in Christ are not absolved from the law’s condemnation. Those who reject the message show themselves “to be unworthy of eternal life” (13:46).

Similarly in a Gentile context, when Paul and Barnabas arrived back in Syrian Antioch after proclaiming the gospel of salvation in Christ to the Gentiles in southern Turkey, “they related . . . how [God] had opened for the Gentiles *a door of faith*” that made it possible for the Gentiles to be saved (14:27). Shortly after the incident in Europe

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<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Paul adds: “Not that I have already obtained (this goal) . . . but I press on. . . toward the goal for the prize” of eternal life (Phil 3:12-14). Similarly in 1 Cor 9:24-27 Paul could speak of himself as an athlete competing for the prize of the imperishable wreath (i.e. eternal life, inheriting the kingdom of God): “I bruise my body and bring it into slavery [to Christ], lest somehow, after proclaiming [the gospel] to others, I myself might come to be disqualified.” If Paul’s sincere and exemplary life within Judaism did not secure him a place with God and even his Christian life required constant vigilance against the flesh, what hope would anyone else outside of Christ have? In fact, one of Paul’s arguments in Galatians to those Jewish believers who attempted to reinstate the law of Moses was: If you were so well off as a Jew who kept the commandments, and had nothing to fear from God’s judgment, what was the point of coming to faith in Jesus Christ? Was it not because you “recognized that a person is not declared righteous on the basis of doing what the law requires but only through faith in Jesus Christ”? (Gal 2:16-17).

with the Philippian jailor (cited above), they arrived in Athens. Even when Paul spoke before a philosophical crowd he told them that *though God formerly “overlooked the times of ignorance,” he was “now,”* since the coming and resurrection of the judge of all humanity, “*command[ing] all people everywhere to repent*” and (this is implied) receive Christ (17:30-31). This statement about God no longer overlooking human ignorance stands in tension with “Hope”’s implicit chastisement of any who “restrict to those who profess explicit faith in Christ.” It sounds like Paul himself would come under the “Hope”’s censure since he adopted the operating premise that “all people everywhere” would have to repent and come to faith in Christ since God was no longer allowing ignorance as an excuse.

To the Ephesian elders gathered at Miletus Paul declared that he was innocent of the blood of every person inasmuch as he had “testified to both Jews and Greeks about repentance toward God and *faith toward our Lord Jesus*” (20:21). Paul recounted before Agrippa the revelation of Christ to him on the road to Damascus, in which Jesus told him: “I am sending you [to the Gentiles] to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by *faith in me*” (26:19). Again, the assumption here is that the entire Gentile world is in darkness, under the power of Satan, and bereft of both forgiveness and a place in God’s kingdom—all of which can only be rectified by the proclamation of the gospel and a response of faith in Christ. Finally, when Paul arrived in Rome and proclaimed the gospel to “the local leaders of the Jews,” with some convinced but “others refus[ing] to *believe*,” he declared that “this salvation of God” would be “sent to the Gentiles; they will listen” (28:24, 28). Once more we see the clear operating premise: apart from believing in Christ your situation is a desperate one of ‘un-salvation.’

Everywhere in Acts and to all whom the two great pillars of the church, Peter and Paul, encounter, whether ordinary Jews or the highest Jewish religious officials, whether pious Gentiles or immoral pagans, whether philosophers or idolaters, the operating premise is: If you don’t *believe in Christ* you will not be saved. Would that this point came across clearly in “Hope.”

**c. *The Gospel of John.*** Every assurance of eternal life in the Gospel of John falls only to those who believe in Jesus, including the famous John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, in order that everyone who *believes in him* might have eternal life.”<sup>20</sup> The text doesn’t say: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, in order that believing in Christ might be merely the preferred means by which someone is saved, lest anyone restrict the wide grace of God and presume to determine for God who will belong to his people.” In fact, John’s Jesus goes on to say to Nicodemus quite the opposite:

The one who believes in [the Son] is not being judged, but the one who does not believe has *already* been judged because he has not *believed in the name of the only Son of God*. . . *The one who believes in the Son* has eternal life but the one who disobeys the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God *remains* on him. (3:18, 36)

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<sup>20</sup> Compare, for example, 3:15, 36; 5:24; 6:40, 47, 54, 68; 11:25-27. Note too the definition of eternal life in 17:3: “And this is eternal life: that they may come to *know you*, the only true God, and the one whom you sent, Jesus Christ.”

Not coming to faith in Jesus means *remaining* in the condition of darkness and judgment in which one *already* existed before Christ came (1:5). Thus: “I have come as light into the world, in order that everyone who believes in me may not *remain* in darkness” (12:46). “I told you that you would die in your sins; for if you do not believe that ‘I am’ [or: I am he; i.e. the Son of God sent from heaven] you will die in your sins” (8:24). John’s Gospel even singles out faith in Christ and in his redemptive work, not just the redemptive work itself, as “the” one and only essential response to God that remedies the universal condition of being without eternal life:

*This is the work of God [i.e. the work that God requires to have eternal life]: that you believe in the one whom [God] sent. . . . I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats from this bread he will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. . . . Amen, amen, I say to you: Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood (i.e. believe in him and him alone), you have no life in yourselves. (6:29, 51, 53)*

Similarly, in the discourse following his healing of a lame man, Jesus says:

The one who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. Amen, amen I say to you that the one who hears my word and *believes the one who sent me* has eternal life and does not come into judgment but has *passed from death to life*. . . . And [my Father’s] word you do not have remaining in you because the one whom That One sent, this one you do not believe. . . . And you do not want to come to me in order to have life. . . . *If you believed Moses you would believe me*, for that one wrote about me. (5:23-24, 38, 40, 46; cf. 8:42-44, 47)

Transitioning from death to life is thus marked by, and only by, believing in Jesus. Before belief, one’s condition is one of “death,” not “life.” Coming to Jesus alone brings life. Even a Jew who follows Moses, but not Jesus the Messiah, is separated from God—how much more a Gentile who follows anyone or anything else. To the formerly blind man Jesus asks one simple question, the answer to which will determine whether he truly “sees” or belongs with those who remain spiritually blind: “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” (9:35-41).<sup>21</sup>

The Gospel at an earlier stage of its history<sup>22</sup> closed with the words: “Now I have written these things in order that you may *believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God*, and in order that, *by believing*, you may have eternal life in his name” (20:31). This note forms an *inclusio* with the prologue of the Gospel: “As many as received him, he gave to them authority to become children of God, to those who *believe in his name*” (1:12). As with the New Testament generally, this faith in Christ is neither a one-time act nor a merely intellectual assent to propositional truths about Christ. It is rather a genuine, lifelong trust that results in transformation. If it does not result in a transformed life lived for God, then the one who is joined to Christ becomes like “a branch in me that does not

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<sup>21</sup> The title Son of Man in John’s Gospel alludes to the one that looks like a human being in Daniel 7, a divine figure who descends from heaven, becomes incarnate to make amends for the sins of the world, and ascends back to heaven.

<sup>22</sup> Most scholars view John 21 as a slightly later appendix to the original work.

bear fruit,” which is “removed” from the vine and “thrown into the fire and burns” (15:1-6).

More could be said about the Gospel of John, to say nothing of the Johannine Epistles, but this is enough to establish a consistent presumption on the part of the Fourth Evangelist: Faith in Christ is necessary for inheriting eternal life and entering into the Light. Not even the exercise of faith in God within the context of early Judaism was enough to avert judgment, to say nothing of faith in the context of “pagan” religions. How then could the “anonymous Christian” model work for John’s Christology and soteriology? If such thoughts presumptuously limit God’s sovereign freedom, restrict God’s grace, and substitute God’s determination of the redeemed for a human determination, then the Fourth Evangelist, along with Paul and Luke, is profoundly guilty on all counts. This is not such bad company for the church to keep, is it?

**d. *What ought to be the real issue for debate in the PCUSA.*** The post-resurrection witness to Christ in the New Testament thus gives no assurance that believing in Christ is not necessary for salvation. As already suggested above from some texts in Paul and John, a more plausible topic for debate in the PCUSA would be whether the Reformed doctrine of “once saved, always saved” conforms to New Testament teaching. Not only does the New Testament provide little support for the idea that God saves apart from faith in Christ, but it also appears at many points to call into question the Reformed assumption that a true believer can never fall away from Christ. From the vantage point of Scripture, the debate in the church should not be over how many unbelievers can be saved apart from faith in Christ but rather over whether even believers can simply presume that salvation can never be lost. The Letter to the Hebrews takes it one step further. The besetting issue there is whether believers who have once fallen away from the faith can even be allowed a second repentance.

***Jesus on judgment.*** Sometimes those in the church who are theologically left of center appeal to Jesus as a counterweight against the apostolic witness. Jesus, they contend, would never have condemned anyone. His ministry was one of widening God’s grace to accept people irrespective of their differences or even of their behavior. Such thinking betrays an astonishing ignorance of the portrait of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels.<sup>23</sup> Instead of making it easier to enter the kingdom of God, Jesus demanded that his followers deny themselves, take up their cross, and lose their life (Mark 8:34-37);<sup>24</sup> cut off any body part that threatens their downfall lest their whole body be sent to hell (Matt 5:29-30; Mark 9:43-48); and fear not humans but God who can send both body and soul to hell (Matt 10:28 // Luke 12:4-5 [Q]).<sup>25</sup> Jesus compared those who did not manifest transformed lives to salt that, when it loses its taste, is good for nothing and gets thrown out (Luke 14:34-35 // Matt 5:13 [Q]; cf. Mark 9:49-50). Only those “who endure to the end,” he insisted, “will be saved” (Mark 13:13).

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<sup>23</sup> The Gospels that “see together” because they bear some sort of connected literary relationship: Matthew, Mark, Luke.

<sup>24</sup> Parts of the tradition appear also in: Matt 10:39 // Luke 17:33; John 12:25; Luke 14:27 // Matt 10:38; cf. Gosp. Thom. 55.2;

<sup>25</sup> The symbol “//” denotes a parallel tradition, here an independent parallel tradition from the literary source that Matthew and Luke used independently of each other, which scholars have labeled “Q” (from German *Quelle* meaning “source”).

Far from proclaiming a broad entrance into the path of salvation, Jesus proclaimed the exact opposite: “Enter through the narrow door [or: gate], for many will seek to enter and few are those who enter through it” (Matt 7:13-14 // Luke 13:23-34 [Q]). Not only will those who make no pretense to following Jesus be in dire straits, but so also will be many who claim to know Jesus: “When the master of the house gets up and shuts the door and you . . . [say], ‘Lord, open for us,’ . . . he will say . . . : ‘I do not know you; stand away from me, you who work lawlessness’” (Luke 13:25-27 // Matt 7:13-14, 22; 25:10-12 [Q]). Jesus condemned in the strongest possible terms several towns near the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee (Capernaum, Chorazin, and Bethsaida) for refusing to accept his message: “As far as Hades you shall come down” (Luke 10:13-15 // Matt 11:22-24 [Q]). Indeed, he referred to his contemporaries as an “evil generation” and an “adulterous and sinful generation” that will face great judgment because of their refusal to repent in response to his proclamation (Luke 11:29-32 // Matt 12:39-41 [Q]; Mark 8:38). Moreover, Jesus told his own followers to make similar assessments about the destruction to befall places that reject the gospel.<sup>26</sup> He considered the reception of his messengers to be determinative for reception of himself and ultimately of God.<sup>27</sup> Although Jesus emphasized reclaiming and restoring the lost in his message and ministry he still set this leitmotif against the backdrop of warnings about, and images of, coming judgment.<sup>28</sup> Do such pronouncements on Jesus’ part “restrict the grace of God” or “limit the sovereign freedom of ‘God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved’” or deprive God of the right to “determine” “grace, love, and communion”?

These kind of remarks in “Hope” would frankly have struck Jesus and the earliest leaders of the church as misplaced at best, appalling at worst. If the united witness of the New Testament makes salvation contingent upon reception of the gospel and constantly warns even believers not to do things that will lead to their own exclusion from God’s kingdom, then it would be presumption on our part to insist on openness to other ways of being saved apart from faith in Christ.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> This consignment to destruction is conveyed by the symbolic gesture of shaking the dust from one’s feet. “Whatever place does not welcome you, and does not hear you, go out from there and shake off the dust that is under your feet to serve as a testimony against them” (Mark 6:11; also in Q: Luke 9:5; 10:10-11 // Matt 10:14). “I tell you: For Sodom it shall be more bearable on that Day [the final judgment] than for that town” (Luke 10:12 // Matt 10:15 [Q]). The peace from God that the messengers brought is to return back to them (Luke 10:6 // Matt 10:13 [Q]). In Acts Luke interprets the shaking off of dust as a sign to the inhabitants that they are responsible for shutting themselves out from an opportunity to receive eternal life; their blood is on their own heads (13:48-51; 18:5-6). All association is ended; the place is consigned to destruction.

<sup>27</sup> “The one who receives (or: welcomes) you receives me, and the one who receives me receives the one who sent me” (Matt 10:40 // Luke 10:16 [Q]; also John 13:20; cf. Mark 9:37). The obverse follows, as Luke’s interpretation of the Q saying shows: “The one who listens to you listens to me, and the one who rejects you rejects me; and the one who rejects me rejects the one who sent me” (Luke 10:16).

<sup>28</sup> In addition to the imagery cited above, Jesus referred to the destruction of the house built on sand; being denied before the angels of God; being tormented in the flames of Hades; being “cut to pieces” and given “an inheritance with the faithless”; not being allowed in the master’s house; withdrawing the invitation to the supper; not entering the kingdom; throwing weeds into the fire; cutting down the non-fruitbearing tree; perishing; and being thrown into the darkness where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth. For more extensive discussion of the theme of Jesus and judgment, see: Robert Gagnon, “No Universally Valid Sex Standards? A Rejoinder to Walter Wink” (Sept. 2002), 5-14 (<http://robgagnon.net/Reviews/homoWinkRejoinder.pdf>).

<sup>29</sup> Although it is claimed that concern for God’s sovereignty and the integrity of God’s grace demands a certain openness to salvation outside of explicit faith in Christ, the concern more likely arises out of a

## II. How Then to Handle the Question of Those Who Haven't, or Can't, Hear the Gospel?

If fidelity to Scripture cannot be the motivating force behind making faith in Christ optional for salvation, where then does the motivation lie? It most likely stems from personal repugnance at the thought that God could withhold eternal life from people who never had the chance, the capacity, or the right circumstances to respond to the gospel. Among these are young children, the mentally impaired, people-groups and individuals who never had exposure to the gospel, and even people who through no fault of their own have had a bad experience with falsified Christianities. How do we deal with this theological and often very personal problem without diminishing the redemptive significance of faith in Christ that appears repeatedly in the New Testament?

**1. *Saved only by faith in Christ as the church's operating premise.*** First, it may be helpful to learn the lesson from the New Testament that God wants the church to have at least an *operating* or *working premise* that apart from faith in Christ people will perish. This leaves room for some limited speculation without the pretense that such speculation has any authoritative or canonical status. It is not the kind of speculation that gives someone the right to assure any who do not believe in Christ that their salvation is not at stake or the right to criticize as presumptuous the view that profession of explicit faith in Christ is necessary.

God has told the church what it needs to know to carry out its mission in the world; namely, that it should operate on the assumption that people will perish unless they come to faith in Christ. Armed with this operating premise, the church should do everything that it can to help bring others to a knowledge of the truth (so the Great Commission in Matt 28:18-20 but also many other NT texts). Speculations that there may be some other alternatives to faith in Christ are just that—personal speculations that carry no ecclesiastical weight and no basis for lessening missionary and evangelistic efforts. Ultimate resolution of matters about which we can do nothing is in the hands of God.

If it were otherwise, if we became convinced that the salvation of unbelievers was not at stake—then our incentive for carrying out that mission would lag. Worse still, our conception of the saving significance of Christ's death and of being in Christ would wane. If knowing Christ is not essential for the forgiveness of sins, for being in communion with God, and for receiving eternal life, then Christ's place in God's overall redemptive purpose must invariably be diminished in the collective mind of the church. Thus there is probably a utilitarian purpose in God restricting information to us.

**2. *Humbly acknowledging that the premise may be very close to reality.*** It may well be that this operating premise is very close to the actual reality of what will be. In other words, it may well be that God really does save only those who come to conscious faith in Christ. It would be hard to work under such an operating premise if in the back of our mind we were convinced that God will save some or all of those who do not believe in Christ. We have to be honest here about our personal, self-interested biases. As human beings we most tend toward presumption when it comes to the certainty of our own

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desire to conform God's view to one's own. Otherwise the witness of Scripture would be more carefully heeded.

salvation and toward conflict-avoidance and laziness when it comes to aiding the salvation of others.<sup>30</sup> The normal reaction to the idea that God could refuse eternal life to people who have not heard the gospel adequately is: That's not fair. But our sense of fairness is skewed by our self-interest. We really don't understand the depth of moral distance between God and ourselves, the extent of God's agony over our sins, or the degree to which God has suffered through the death of Jesus on our behalf.

We have to be humble enough to accept, in spite of our own desires, the very real possibility that God does not owe humanity anything. We have to be humble enough to accept whatever provision God makes for the world through the costly death of his Son. And we have to be humble enough to see whatever happens as part of the larger mystery of God's willingness to entrust the church, in all its failings, with the all-important task of bringing the gospel of salvation to the world. If we are upset that God doesn't do more to save people, perhaps we could find expression for that frustration in being more obedient to the God who works through us to proclaim the gospel to others.

Even within this view of things, there is still some limited room for modifying some traditional doctrines. For example, a possible case could be made that the New Testament does not have a clear and consistent picture of eternal conscious existence in "hell." All humanity deserves God's wrath for the conscious suppression of the truth that is accessible to them (Rom 1:18-32). However, it may be that there are graded levels of judgment such that those who have had inadequate opportunity to respond to the gospel experience a different fate—perhaps simple cessation of life with no eternal pain—than those who have had ample opportunity but have chosen a different route of self-indulgence. This is one way of mitigating what we humanly perceive as inequity. We cannot insist on it, however. It is simply speculation.

**3. *Positing faith in Christ as the only certain way to be saved.*** As regards the salvation of specific groups of people who have not believed in Christ, we may *speculate* that God has something up the divine sleeve that God hasn't clearly communicated in Scripture. One possibility has to do with the issue of *certainty* of salvation. Two texts of Acts cited above use the Greek verb *dei*, "it is necessary for" someone to do something, someone "must" do something, in connection with the question of how people are saved.

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, ". . . There is not in any other person [than Jesus Christ] salvation, for neither is there another name [than the name of Jesus, 4:10], which has been given under heaven among humans, by which we *must (dei)* be saved." (4:8, 12)

[The Philippian jailor] brought [Paul and Silas] out [of the inner prison after the earthquake] and said, "Sirs, what *must (dei)*"<sup>31</sup> I do in order to be saved?" And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, and your household."<sup>32</sup> (16:30-31)

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<sup>30</sup> In other words, declaring that belief in Jesus is nonessential for salvation both subjects us to less criticism from the world and gives us an excuse for not sharing our faith with others.

<sup>31</sup> This second use of *dei* is, unlike the first, connected with human doing rather than divine doing. But the overall sentence may convey a similar point.

<sup>32</sup> As noted earlier, the fact that the text continues, "they spoke to him the word of the Lord together with all those in his household," presumes that the members of the jailor's household were capable of understanding and of exercising personal faith in Christ.

One could argue from these verses, though a bit speculatively, that believing in Jesus Christ is the only *certain* means of being saved without precluding the possibility of allowances in other cases. The church, however, cannot *assure* anyone that any other means will avail. The church can only say: As far as God has told us, believing in Christ is what people *must* do if they are to be saved *necessarily*. There are no other ironclad guarantees of God saving any who do not believe in Christ. Indeed, there is much in Scripture to suggest that there are no other options. Since everything is at stake—nothing less than one’s eternal destiny with God—it would be folly to bank on any other possibility.

Nevertheless, this speculation may give parents some comfort with respect to their young children. We may tell ourselves that surely God will make provision for our young children to inherit God’s kingdom and thereby to live forever. But this speculation doesn’t affect anything in the parents’ interaction with their children. Parents are still obligated to share with their children, to the degree that they are capable of understanding, the message of God’s work in the world through Christ. They are still obligated to do what they can to make that message both comprehensible and attractive to their children (to the extent that this is possible), knowing that the only certain way by which they will be saved is through a life of personal faith in Christ. We simply do not have the right as mere human beings to extend assurances where God has given in the pages of Scripture no clear assurances.

### III. Conclusion

As a way of summing up, I offer here an alternative to the problematic text in “Hope.” Where the authors of “Hope” write:

No one is saved apart from God’s gracious redemption in Jesus Christ. Yet we do not presume to limit the sovereign freedom of “God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” [1 Timothy 2:4]. Thus, we neither restrict the grace of God to those who profess explicit faith in Christ nor assume that all people are saved regardless of faith. Grace, love, and communion belong to God, and are not ours to determine.

I would say:

No one is saved apart from God’s gracious redemption in Jesus Christ. Moreover, as Eph 2:8 indicates, salvation is through faith in Christ (compare 1:13, 15; 3:12; 4:17). The New Testament consistently indicates that people must respond to the proclamation of the gospel with faith in Christ in order to be saved (compare, for example, Rom 1:16-17; 3:21-26). According to Luke, the centurion Cornelius, a deeply pious Gentile, was told by an angel to send for Simon Peter who would “speak to you words by which you ... will be saved.” When Peter arrived he declared to Cornelius: “Everyone who believes in him [Christ] receives forgiveness of

sins through his name” (Acts 10:43; 11:14). Similarly, when the Philippian jailor asked Paul, “What must I do in order to be saved?” Paul responded, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved” (16:30-31). Faith is neither a work of merit nor a merely intellectual assent to the truth. It is a holistic “yes” to God’s doing through Christ that leads to a reorientation of life, motivated by gratitude for Christ’s death for one’s self and empowered by Christ’s life lived in one’s self (Gal 2:19b-20).

Scripture does not allow the church to extend assurances of salvation by any other means than faith in Christ. Indeed, there are many texts in the New Testament that appear to presume that all who lack this explicit faith remain in a condition of darkness and death, destined for destruction (for example, John 3:18, 36; 6:53; 8:24; 12:46; 1 Thess 4:13; 1 Cor 11:32). In the face of this apostolic witness we do not presume to limit God’s sovereignty or to define for God what grace must look like. We do not insist that God provide additional means of appropriating Christ’s work of salvation beyond faith in Christ. We entrust to God all those who, through circumstances beyond their control, appear unable to receive the gospel in faith, knowing that whatever God does will be consistent with God’s holiness, justice, love, and grace. And we recognize that God in Scripture wants the church to carry out its mission to the world under the operative premise that without faith in Christ people will perish. To do otherwise, to operate under the premise that faith in Christ is not necessary for salvation, would encourage the church to diminish its commitment to proclaim the gospel, compromise the significance of Christ, and play the role of God in granting acquittal where God in Scripture has not clearly done so. This is a case where God dispenses revelation on a need-to-know basis. It is enough at the present time for the church to know that salvation comes through faith in Christ and in his redemptive work for us.