

Muddy Water
("What must I do to be saved?")
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The scriptures make it very clear that a person becomes a Christian by believing in Jesus Christ. In fact, in John's Gospel – a book that explicitly states that its purpose is evangelism (see 20:31), the formula of "believing in Christ" to receive salvation is stated no less than forty times. And the balance of the New Testament testifies to this formula with the same clarity. That being the case, why are we hearing about so many other "ways" for a person to be saved?

I get the impression that many must think that believing is either too easy or too abstract. Too easy in that such an outcome – the total forgiveness of one's sins and the gift of eternal life – certainly must require more. Too abstract in that people must be able to objectify their belief in order for it to be real. This later concept usually involves belief plus something else – pray the sinner's prayer, raise your hand at an evangelistic meeting, walk down an aisle at church in response to an invitation to "come to Christ", be baptized, live under Christ's lordship, etc. The list can go on and on, but the point should be obvious.

It doesn't take a great deal of theological or academic acumen to discover that the verb believe has the same basic meaning in both English and Greek. And there is no essential difference in meaning between the verb and its noun, faith. For example the Greek verb *pisteuō* is defined this way: (1) as primarily an intellectual evaluation *believe*; (a) with what one is convinced of added as an object *believe (in), be convinced of* (JN 11.26b); (b) as an evaluative orienter, using *hoti* or the accusative and an infinitive *believe that* (AC 9.26; 15.11); (c) as having confidence in what is spoken or written, using the dative *believe, give credence to, think to be true* (JN 2.22); (d) as having confidence in a person, using the dative *believe, give credence to someone* (MK 16.14); (2) as primarily a religious commitment, especially with God or Christ as the object of faith *believe (in), trust*; (a) with the object in the dative *have faith in, believe* (AC 16.34); (b) especially denoting the exercise of saving faith, with the object expressed by using *eis* or *epi* and the accusative, *believe in or on* (JN 3.16; AC 9.42); (c) as denoting relying on God for help *have confidence, believe* (MT 21.22); (3) as committing something to someone *entrust, trust* (LU 16.11); passive, as having something committed to someone *be entrusted with* (RO 3.2).¹

An English dictionary gives essentially the same definition to believe: *accept as true; to accept that something is true or real; trust: to be confident that somebody or something is good, or will be effective*²

¹Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg and Neva F. Miller, vol. 4, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, Baker's Greek New Testament library (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2000), 314.

² Microsoft® Encarta® Reference Library 2003. © 1993-2002 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.

In sum, to believe in someone means to place one's confidence or trust in that person. But that confidence and trust must be informed, and the content that informs one's confidence and trust in Christ (in order to be saved) is what the Bible refers to as the Gospel. The Bible states that *"The Gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes"* (Romans 1:16). Being a Christian involves an *informed confidence* in Jesus Christ (the God-Man Savior). A person is *informed* about His death as a satisfactory payment for their sin (the Gospel), and that person places their *confidence* or *trust* in that payment. That informed confidence and trust is what the Bible means by the term *believe*. Anyone who places their confidence or trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sin and eternal life is a Christian.

Now, isn't that rather simple – not complicated at all. It is a basic legal transaction. A person is informed that they are a sinner – the Bible makes that very clear – and that a condemned sinner will spend eternity in torment in the Lake of Fire (see Revelation 20:11-15). But God has received a satisfactory payment for sin through the death of His Son, Jesus Christ. All who put their trust in Him receive the forgiveness of their sin (a full pardon!) and the gift of eternal life. They are saved from the penalty of their sin!

If that is the message, then why is there so much confusion? Let's take a look at some of the statements people – well meaning people, and in some cases theologically trained people, use to explain what a person must do to be saved. A person can become a Christian by . . .

Receiving Christ

There are only two places in the New Testament where a form of this phrase is found. The first is in John 1:11-12, *"He came to His own and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name"* (emphasis mine).

Blum correctly identifies the primary referent in these verses as the Nation of Israel when he writes, "In some ways this is one of the saddest verses in the Bible. The *Logos* went to His own home but He had no welcome. Jesus went to His own people, the nation Israel, but they as a whole rejected Him. In rejecting Him, they refused to accept Him as the Revelation sent by the Father and refused to obey His commands. Isaiah long before had prophesied of this Jewish national unbelief: *'Who has believed our message?'* (Isa. 53:1). That unbelief, however, was not universal. Some received Jesus' universal invitation. To all who accepted Jesus as the Revealer of the Father's will and as the Sacrifice for sin, He gave the right to become children of God."³

The second place where a form of this phrase is found is in Colossians 2:6: *"Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him."*

The writer uses an "indicative-imperative" form (cf. 2:20; 3:1–4; Rom 15:7; Gal 5:25; Phil 2:5) to introduce the subject of tradition, for when Paul says that his readers

³ John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985), 2:272.

have “received” (παρελάβετε) Christ Jesus as their Lord he is not simply reflecting on their personal commitment to Christ (though this is no doubt included), but he uses the semi technical term specifically employed to denote the receiving of something delivered by tradition. . . Paul regularly reminded his congregations in the Gentile mission of the traditions he handed over to them, the content of which appear to have comprised three main elements: (a) a summary of the gospel, particularly the death and resurrection of Christ, expressed as a confession of faith (1 Cor 15:1–5; 1 Thess 2:13); (b) various deeds and words of Christ (1 Cor 11:23–26; 7:10, 11; 9:14); and (c) ethical and procedural rules (1 Cor 11:2; 1 Thess 4:1; 2 Thess 3:6).⁴

In neither of these cases is the idea of "receiving Christ" used as a formula for becoming a Christian.

Inviting Christ into their life/heart

When used in evangelism, this phrase seems to flow out of a citation of Revelation 3:20: "*Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.*"

Many say that the door referred to here is the "door of your life/heart." Since Jesus is a gentleman, He will not force His way into your life/heart. You must invite Him. This is what is meant by the phrase "*if anyone . . . opens the door.*" And if a person does that, Jesus promised that He would come in!

Without arguing the point that our Lord is addressing a lukewarm church (believers), or the fact that the phrase, "*those whom I love (phileō)*" is a reference to a relationship He has only with believers, or the fact that the phrase "*I reprove and discipline*" utilizes terms commonly related to the raising of children, let's consider the structure of the verse itself.

Let's begin with what happens when the door is opened. Jesus said, "I will come in." The phrase in English translates but one word in the original text, εἰσελεύσομαι (*eiseleusomai*). This is important because of what it does not say: Jesus does not say that he will come **into** him; He says He will come in **to** him. The English **to** is the Greek πρὸς (*pros*). And *pros* never means **into**! Used with the accusative noun or pronoun (as it is here, it means *to; toward; with, in company with; at, about, near, beside, before, in the presence of*⁵

The point is this: the verse in no sense states that Jesus will come into a person – his heart/life. What it does indicate is that it is possible for a local church to become so self-sufficient as to shut out the Lord of the church! He knocks at the door of the church. If anyone hears His voice (being confronted with the Scriptures in some manner), and opens the door (to facilitate fellowship with the Lord), the Lord will come in the door to establish face-to-face fellowship with that person.

⁴Peter T. O'Brien, vol. 44, *Word Biblical Commentary : Colossians-Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 105.

⁵Barclay Moon Newman, *Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament*. (Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft; United Bible Societies, 1993), 152.

This verse is not setting forth a formula for salvation!

Confessing with your mouth Jesus as Lord and Calling upon the name of the Lord

Both of these phrases need to be taken together because they both appear in the extended passage of Romans 10:1-21. In this pericope, chapters 9-11, Paul is dealing with the subject of national Israel. What happened to them? In chapter 9 he developed the fact that just being a physical descendant of Abraham does not put a person in right relation with God. It is only the seed of promise that are regarded as the seed of Abraham (9:8). The seed of promise are those selected by God to become heirs of salvation (9:11), and are being prepared by God to be recipients of his mercy and glory (9:23).

Now, in chapter ten, his subject continues to be that of national Israel. He desires and prays for their national deliverance (v.1). He states that they have relied upon their own self-righteousness (based on keeping the Law) to give them right standing before God (v.3). They have rejected the truth that the righteousness demanded by the Law can only be achieved through faith in Jesus Christ – the goal of the Law! That message has been proclaimed to them!

In verse nine he states that a person (Jew in this context) must “*confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved*” (v. 9). Is this a two-step formula for salvation? Or, is the apostle talking about something beyond justification before God? Yes, something beyond justification before God!

Paul clarifies his terms in verse ten: justification before God comes through faith alone – “*for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness.*” Such a person has experienced what he described in chapter three, verses twenty-one through twenty-six: “*But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets,²² even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction;²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;²⁵ 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;²⁶ 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.*”

The salvation (or better yet, *deliverance*) that results from “*with the mouth he confesses*” is not referring to being saved from the penalty of sin; rather, it refers to the national deliverance of Israel! That is why the context of Joel 2:32 is so important to our understanding here. In the context of Joel the subject is the national deliverance of Israel. Joel 2:32 states in its entirety, “*And it will come about that whoever calls on the name of the LORD will be delivered; For on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem There will be those who escape, As the LORD has said, even among the survivors whom the LORD calls.*” Paul quotes for Joel 2:32 because he is talking about the same subject.

Notice that “*confessing with the mouth*” and “*calling upon the name of the Lord*” are referring to the same thing. And Paul makes it very clear that it is only believers who

can do this: “*How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed?*” (v.14a). National Israel is currently in a state of unbelief. The good news about Christ is being proclaimed to them, yet they persist in their unbelief. In chapter eleven he will explain that God is about the task of saving “*a remnant according to God's gracious choice*” (v.5b). Ultimately, all Israel [the “*children of promise*” 9:8), the “*vessels of mercy*” (9:23)], will be saved/delivered: “*And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The Deliverer will come out of Zion; he will remove ungodliness from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them, when I take away their sins"* (11:26-27).

My point is this: Romans 10:9-10 do not present a different formula for personal salvation. A person is saved from the penalty of sin through faith in Christ alone. Paul affirms this in 10:10. The salvation referred to in these verses has to do with the national salvation of Israel at the coming of the Deliverer, Jesus Christ.

My intent in this brief paper has not been to be judgmental of the heart motivation of those who do not present the Gospel clearly – I have no doubt that most love our Lord and have a passion to see people come to faith in Jesus Christ. But what I do have a right to be judgmental about is any distortion of the Gospel – including what must one do to be saved.

It is true that God can hit a home run with a crooked stick anytime he wants to, but that does not excuse us from not being correct in our use of the scriptures. Paul's example is clear: “*We have rejected shameful hidden deeds, not behaving with deceptiveness or distorting the word of God, but by open proclamation of the truth we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience before God*” (2 Cor. 4:2 NET). And his admonition to Timothy applies to us as well: “*Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth*” (2 Tim. 2:15).

May God give us boldness and clarity as we present the good news about his Son to a lost world!