

Jonathan Mitchell's Writings

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Man's Will and Salvation

Some feel that a person must do his part and exercise his will in a response to Christ, in order to be saved. Let us look at a Scriptural context of some who do not believe in God and are not believers in the Word of God (which would mostly be the OT, or perhaps early letters of Paul) to see if this is so.

Paul is speaking to the Epicureans and Stoics, on Mars' hill (Acts 17:16 -34). Let's consider him in action here.

Vs. 18-21 tells us that, first of all, it was the Athenians who initiated this encounter. All they knew was that Paul preached Jesus and the resurrection, and they thought that Jesus was a strange (unknown to them) god.

Paul first speaks to their situation, as he observed it (vs. 22-23). Then he makes statements about God (vs. 24-31) and even cites some of their poets (Aratus & Cleanthes) in making his points. Now they knew that he proclaimed Jesus, but as he speaks to them, he never mentions the name of Jesus. Yet, he was speaking Truth to them.

Now in vs. 30 he says that up to that point God had condoned (overlooked; "winked at") mankind's idolatry and ignorance, but now "He is progressively (or: continuously; habitually) passing on an announcement (other MSS: reporting back an announcement), to all mankind everywhere, 'to be progressively changing [their] minds (to continuously have a change of thinking)'."

In vs. 31 he refers to Jesus, though not by name, as being the One who "is about to be repeatedly (continuously; progressively) making separations and decisions about (or: bringing justice to; judging) the inhabited areas of the earth, in fairness, equity and right relationships which correspond to the Way pointed out (= righteousness), within an adult Male in Whom He marked [this] out and defined [it], raising Him forth from out of the midst of dead ones, holding faith at His side for everyone (or: tendering and furnishing faith to all)."

(Note the good news that His "judging" the inhabited earth involves furnishing faith to all!)

Now in vs. 32 we see that some jeered and mocked about "the resurrection of the dead." Others wanted to hear more. And Paul left them. There was no altar call. Paul did not ask them for a decision, he did not ask them to invite Jesus into their hearts: he stated the facts, and left it at that.

But note vs. 34. "Yet some men, being tightly joined and glued [note: passive form of the aorist participle: an action viewed as a whole or in one point of time which is applied to the subject -- the men] to him [Paul? or, the Lord?], believe."

Now we are not told here if they "decided" to believe, or if they made any choice or use of their will. We see an action applied, and a result of belief. The verb "believe" here is also aorist. It would indicate an instantaneous action or response. But Luke mentions the joining before the belief. Even if we view the aorist here as a simple past tense, the resultant meaning is the same. Also note that there is no indication that there is an "intermediate phase" here, as some have claimed there to be, between the sovereign work of God on the individual and his being "saved," namely, his using his will to "accept Christ as his Savior."

Most of us who have been around evangelical Christianity, and especially the revivalist movements, and have heard preachers tell us over and over what we must do. Did God turn this method of presenting the gospel into good? Of course. He also used the Catholic church and their methods for centuries. My father was an evangelical, pentecostal preacher, so I was raised with this view. I was asked by my parents if I wanted to have Jesus in my heart when I was 3. To the extent that a 3-year-old could love Jesus, I did, so, of course I "invited" Jesus into my heart. Their words implanted faith in my heart and it became a reality to me, according to what they had explained, at that time. But with my present understanding, I believe that Jesus was already there, from previously hearing about Him from my parents. They told me nothing about hell, at that time. Jesus loved me, and He was God, so He could dwell in my heart & be with me always. But my response to my parents at that time was not my first experience of Jesus. I already believed in Him. But now, due to my parents' evangelical/revivalist views, I went through the proscribed ritual. Was it a good experience? Yes. Have the true births via revivalistic preaching been good? Of course. But we are desiring to know Him more, and to see more clearly the good news, so that we don't "repeat after me" something that is less than the Truth.

I have been told, repeatedly, by evangelistic pastors and preachers that according to their "statistics" (depending on how they judged such matters, e.g., seeing lasting, observable results) the great crusades where hundreds "make a decision for Christ" result in somewhere around 10% real "conversions." Maybe if we were preaching a more accurate gospel -- not one that is "works oriented" or "it is now up to me" -- we would see more success. Yet, all is of God, so I will not speak against the past. But I will not close my eyes to truth revealed to me, either.

All of the epistles by Paul, John, Peter, James, Jude, were written to believers, right? To churches, right? All of Jesus' teachings were to God's people -- "whose [are] the sonship (the placing as a son), and the glory, and the arrangements (covenants), and the placing of the Law, and the sacred service, and the promises..." (Rom. 9:4) Of these folks, something is expected. Action is demanded. Works are not an option. Passivism brings judgment. Rejecting His commands brings judgment. Now that we are children, we can expect child-training -- even things that don't seem very nice at the time. We can expect pressures (tribulations) and fiery trials. And, we are expected to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned -- else we will find ourselves in His pruning fires, to bring such fruit to bear.

Paul refers to the change within people as being "transferred" from the authority of the Darkness into the kingdom of the Son whose origin is His love. This is totally the action of God. He "drags" all men to himself, because He was "lifted up." Where is their "free will," or "enslaved will," for that matter, in this picture? He scoops them up in a net (Matt. 13:47 -48). Peter was called to be a fisher of men. Peter used nets for fishing. Men were to be "caught," entrapped in the net of the kingdom -- just as Paul was: Paul was "apprehended." He did not "decide" to follow Jesus. Thus, he regarded himself as one conquered: a slave of his heavenly Owner (Lord). I suggest that Judaism was the Darkness that Paul was transferred out of.

Now we have looked at just one example of the gospel being preached to those who did not know God.

An example of the good news being presented to those that already believe in God, but don't know about Jesus, is in Acts 10, where Peter is sent to the house of Cornelius. Note, also, that Peter presents the gospel, including that receiving a sending away of sins comes through habitually believing into Him, through His name (vs. 43). Now the message has been preached. Does Peter give an altar call? No. The next move is also God's: "... the Holy Spirit fell upon all upon all those hearing the Word." (vs. 44).

Being saved, or being brought to birth from God, is a work in which man has no part.