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**Hermeneutics: The Distinction Between the Gift of
Salvation and Future Rewards**

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The Martyrs and Eternal Reward

The first three centuries of the church were marked by intense persecution. Christians of this era routinely faced crises which tested the depth of their commitment to Christ. Yet, in large numbers, they maintained their public profession of Christ – many through threats and imprisonment, some through torture and death. The writings of the church fathers during this era provide a substantial record of the sources of courage which led these early Christians to stay the course – to be “faithful until death.” (Rev 2:10) Certainly appreciation for the Redeemer’s gift and a desire to be please to him were significant factors. But these believers were also profoundly motivated by the prospect of reward – especially the prospect of being privileged to serve with Christ in his future reign. From the pens of martyrs themselves this great hope overflows:

Ignatius, martyred c. 107 A.D.

“While you are here, be a conqueror; for here is the course, and there are the crowns.”¹ Philo, Ignatius’ brother in persecution, writes, “[Ignatius]

¹ Shaff, *Ante-Nicene Fathers:1, Letter of Ignatius to Polycarp* 3:2, The first three words of Robert’s translation read, “Whilst thou art ...” The author has taken the liberty of updating to modern English.

wished ... that, being given up to the wild beasts in the sight of the Roman people, he might attain to the crown for which he strove.”²

Polycarp, martyred 155 A.D.

“If we please him in this present world, we will receive the world to come as well, inasmuch as he promised to raise us from the dead and that if we prove to be citizens worthy of him, we will also reign with him”³

Ireneaus, martyred 202 A.D.⁴

“For it is just that ... [the faithful] should receive the reward of their suffering; and that in the creation in which they were slain because of their love to God ... they should reign.”⁵

Moyses, martyred c. 251 A.D.⁶

“[W]hat [is] more blessed ... than to confess the Lord God, in death itself? ... For to this battle our Lord, as with the trumpet of His Gospel, stimulates us when He says ... ‘To him that overcometh will I give to sit on my throne ...’”⁷

Many other early fathers who suffered for their faith, like Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, and Dionysius of Alexandria, also give voice to the thrilling hope of being commended and rewarded by the Lord.⁸ Yet the modern church, it seems, has all but lost contact with this doctrine which so inspired its spiritual progenitors. An examination of the historical erosion of this future hope is beyond our purpose, but it should suffice to observe that the end of persecution greatly diminished the Christian focus on a future age of glory. Much of the church began to see the embrace of Christianity by the Roman emperors as the messianic age of glory.⁹

² Shaff, *Ante-Nicene Fathers:1, Martyrdom of Ignatius*, 1:6. The authorship of *The Martyrdom of Ignatius* is uncertain, but is believed to have been a traveling companion, Philo, or perhaps Agathopus. Shaff, *Ante-Nicene Fathers:1, Intro to the Martyrdom of Ignatius*

³ Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, p 125

⁴ Although later tradition considers Ireneaus a martyr, some scholars question whether this was in fact the case. There is, however, little doubt that he served Christ under threat of death – accepting, as he did, the bishopric of Lyons after the execution of the previous bishop. (*Religious Facts, Christianity, St. Ireneaus of Lyons*, available: <http://www.religionfacts.com/christianity/people/irenaeus.htm>)

⁵ Shaff, *Ante-Nicene Fathers:1, Ireneaus, Against Heresies, Bk 5, 32:1*

⁶ Moyses’ martyrdom is dated on the basis of Cyprian’s reference to his martyrdom in his Letter to Antonianus. Shaff, *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 5, Epistles of Cyprian, 51:5*

⁷ Shaff, *Ante-Nicene Fathers:5, To Cyprian, 25:4*

⁸ Bercot, *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, p 436

⁹ Gonzales, *The Story of Christianity*, p 134

The Hermeneutical Problem

Whatever the historical terminus of this eschatological sensibility, there is little doubt that the modern state of underdevelopment of this truth is the result, at least in part, of assigning special theological meanings to a variety of biblical words and phrases. Such meanings, at best, constrain the semantic domain of these words more narrowly than they originally enjoyed; at worst, they fail to conform to normal usage in the original languages. A consequence of this has been the merging of the doctrines of redemption and reward. The journey *to* the cross and the journey *from* the cross have been hopelessly intertwined in a tumultuous junction of conflicting propositions.

The task at hand is to examine the most significant of those words and phrases which have come to hold special theological meaning – with an eye to disentangling reward from redemption.

The Inherent Ambiguity of Language

New students of scripture are often frustrated by the inherent ambiguity of language and frequently want teachers to identify for them the only possible meaning in a given passage. This tendency grows from a sincere desire to build a body of Christian dogma. But it cannot be supported by the realities of language. Words have ranges of meaning, and context must be used to narrow the meaning in any given setting.

In this light it should be clear that absolute dogma is nearly impossible. The objective here will be to find the most probable and usual meanings of certain key biblical words and phrases. The tools employed will be the evidence of history, the light of semantics, and the constraints implied by the divine inspiration of scripture. Such inspiration demands that scripture be wholly consistent from beginning to end.

The Kingdom of God

Perhaps the most common deviation from original meaning is found in the phrase, “kingdom of God.”¹⁰ Edersheim, in his classic

¹⁰ Or in Matthew’s circumlocution, “kingdom of heaven,” which appears only in his Gospel. In deference to his predominately Jewish audience, Matthew avoided the use of “God.”

work, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, writes, “It is difficult to conceive how the idea of the identity of the Kingdom of God with the Church could have originated.”¹¹ For its first four hundred years the church did not equate the two, but looked for the Kingdom of God as a thing yet future.¹² Grammatically, the phrase is better rendered “the King-ship of God” in the vast majority of passages. *Basileia* (“kingdom”) is, in fact, an abstract noun whose primary meaning is “the authority to rule, the exercise of rightful dominion.” This is borne out in virtually every lexical work from Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich to Vine.¹³ *Louw-Nida Greek Lexicon* goes so far as to say that, “It is generally a serious mistake to translate the phrase *hae basileia tou theou* □ ‘the kingdom of God.’”

The assignment of “*Basileia* of God” to the church was an artifact of official Rome’s embrace of Christianity in the fourth century. As the future millennial focus of the early church was being drawn away by the cessation of persecution, theologians were coming to view the fusion of church and state as the Kingdom of God established on earth.¹⁴

The practical implications of this long-standing reinterpretation are two-fold. First, it deprives the church of a palpable vision of participation in messianic destiny. *Thayer’s Greek Lexicon*, captures this potential destiny well in his assessment that *basileia* is often used in the New Testament to mean “the royal power and dignity conferred on Christians in the Messiah’s Kingdom.” It was for this royal stewardship in Christ’s benevolent reign that the early Christians strove so urgently.

A second consequence of viewing the *Basileia* and the church as synonymous is that several passages associated with entering future regal stewardship have been applied to entering the church (i.e., to salvation) instead. A serious difficulty arises from this reassignment,

¹¹ Edersheim, *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 1:140

¹² McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, p 8-9; Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, 1:643

¹³ See also Thayer, Friberg, and Louw-Nida lexicons.

¹⁴ “With the accession of the empire, under Constantine, to Christianity the main inducement to cherish such a hope of a speedily visible return of a victorious Redeemer passed away. Augustine and other teachers introduced an interpretation of the First Resurrection and the Millennial Reign which referred both to the present estate of Christianity ...” Pope, *Compendium of Theology*, 3:396

because participating in the *Basileia* of Christ is conditioned on faithful obedience in numerous passages. Eph 5:5 provides a solid example: “For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.” (NASV) (Other examples may be found in Matt 5:10, Luke 9:62, Acts 14:22, 1 Cor 6:9-10, Gal 5:19-21, 2 Thes 1:4-5). Young’s Literal Translation of Eph 5:5 begins to rinse away the haze with the rendering, “[E]very whore-monger [etc] hath no inheritance in the *reign* of the Christ...” [emphasis added]. All believers have the *potential* to participate in the reign of Christ, but such stewardship is conditioned on obedience.

Equating a share in the *basileia* with salvation has forced theologians to append obedience to faith in one way or another. Their views generally fall into one of three categories: 1) Some find in Eph 5:5 and similar verses the loss of salvation due to disobedience. 2) Others conclude that disobedience indicates an invalid faith. 3) Still others find the idea that regeneration makes holiness possible, while obedience in holiness actually secures salvation. But it is hard to reconcile these interpretations with the whole of scripture. The freeness of the gospel (Rom 3:24, 6:23; Eph 2:8-9; Rev 21:6, 22:17) and the simplicity of faith (John 6:47, 20:31; Acts 16:31, Rom 3:28, 5:1) are abundantly portrayed in scripture. So also is the possibility of living in persistent disloyalty or disobedience after faith. (1 John 2:28; Rom 6:12; Eph 5:3-10; 1 Cor 3:11-15, 9:25-27; 2 Cor 5:9-10; Heb 10:35-36; 1 Pet 1:17; 2 Pet 2:1) The synthesis of these passages reveals a salvation that flows from a simple dependence on Christ’s sacrifice¹⁵ – untouched by any other considerations – whether before or after faith, whether meritorious or evidentiary. The New Testament writers deliberately, forcefully unhinge salvation from works (Rom 3:28, Gal 3:11, Eph 2:8-9, Titus 3:5), and characterize salvation as the already finished possession of the believer (Rom 5:1; John 4:13-14, 5:24, 6:47, 11:25-26; Titus 3:5; Acts 16:31).

To round out a fully informed understanding of the meaning of *basileia*, the following entries from lexicographers and New Testament scholars are provided. (Emphases are theirs.):

¹⁵ See also Heb 9:12

basileia {bas-il-i'-ah} • 1) royal power, kingship, dominion, rule 1a) not to be confused with an actual kingdom but rather the right or authority to rule over a kingdom 1b) of the royal power of Jesus as the triumphant Messiah 1c) of the royal power and dignity conferred on Christians in the Messiah's kingdom 2) a kingdom, the territory subject to the rule of a king (Thayer, *Greek Lexicon*)

basileia is primarily an abstract noun, denoting ‘sovereignty, royal power, dominion’ (Vine, *Expository Dictionary*, p 344)

basileia 1. *kingship, royal power, royal rule, kingdom* (Bauer, Arndt, et al, *Greek Lexicon*)

basileia (1) abstr., the power exercised by a king *kingship, royal rule, reign* (AC 1.6); (2) concr., the territory ruled by a king *kingdom, realm* (Friberg, *Analytical Lexicon*)

“Kingdom (malkuth [Hebrew], basileia [Greek]) is primarily ‘sovereignty,’ kingly rule and power.” (Ellison, *International Bible Commentary*, “Matthew” (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), p 1123)

“ [T]he kingdom of heaven’ means ‘God’s reign,’ i.e. His sovereign rule ... promised from the earliest days in the prophets’ glowing descriptions of a golden age ...” (Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary, Matthew 1-13* (Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 33A: 48)

Undoubtedly, additional scholars may be found to weigh in on the issue, but these citations should be sufficient to make an overwhelming case that *Basileia of God* does not ordinarily refer to a group of people (the church), or to a state of being (redeemed), but to the God-granted authority of the Messiah (which he will share with his faithful servants, Rev 20:4, 22:3).

Salvation

The concept of *salvation* has injected nearly as much confusion into biblical interpretation as “the kingdom of God.” In theological usage, “salvation” has come exclusively to mean “deliverance from eternal damnation.” While it is certainly used by the New Testament writers in this way, it is a gross narrowing of the word’s legitimate semantic range to find this meaning in every New Testament occurrence. The Greek word for salvation is *soteria*; the verb form is *sozo* (“save”). Lexicographers and scholars offer the following semantic sphere for these words:

soteria welfare, prosperity, deliverance, preservation (Berry, *Greek Lexicon*)

sozo 1. [save] preserve or rescue from natural dangers and afflictions ... [be saved] thrive, prosper, get on well ... 2. [save] save or preserve from eternal death ... [be saved] attain salvation (Bauer, Arndt, et al, *Greek Lexicon*)

sozo a. to make well, heal, restore to health ... , **b.** to save..., to deliver from...judgment (Thayer, *Greek Lexicon*)

“Secular first century writers, like Philo and Josephus, ... commonly used salvation [*soteria*] for preservation, blessing, deliverance, and/or health. Evidence from a papyri suggests that *soteria* was used with a nuance of health and prosperity ...” (Lopez, “Old Testament Salvation – From What?,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, Autumn, 2003, pp 62-63)

“In the New Testament the verb *sozo* (‘to save’) and the nouns *soter* (‘Savior’) and *soteria* (‘salvation’) parallel the Hebrew word [*yasa*, salvation] and its derivatives. ... A number of times, however, *soteria* translates *salom* (‘peace’ or ‘wholeness’) which broadens the idea ...” (Radmacher, *Salvation*, p 4)

Understanding the full linguistic range of these words gives a very different sense to several New Testament passages – passages whose interpretations have often been strained because theologians have been forced to press them into soteriological applications (doctrines of salvation). Matt 10:22 provides a good example: "And you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved." (NRSV) The prevailing thought on this verse generally falls into one of the three categories considered earlier: 1) Salvation can be lost, 2) Salvation is made *possible* by regeneration, but is *obtained* through a life of faithfulness, 3) The *true* believer, with a valid saving faith, will live a life of faithfulness. The first two views are straight forward in reading the verse, but collide with a body of scripture which declares both the freeness and fait accompli of salvation. (See previous section.) The third view actually reverses the cause-effect stated in the passage – essentially reading, “He who is saved will endure to the end.”

If *sozo*’s authentic range of meaning is brought to Matt 10:22 and similar passages, it seems likely that Jesus is speaking of being made to flourish in his coming reign. Elsewhere in Matthew, Jesus

describes the commendation and high stewardship he will give to diligent servants when he returns: “Well done, good and faithful slave; you were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things, enter into the joy of your master.” (Matt 25:21,23, NASV) His point is that the faithful believer will “thrive” (*sozo* – Bauer-Arndt *Lexicon*) in his coming reign. A number of additional passages may be cited which reinforce this message concerning the faithful Christian’s role and fullness of inheritance under Christ’s reign (Luke 12:36-37, 12:42-44, 19:12-17; 1 Cor 3:12-14, 9:24-25, Col 3:23-24, 2 Tim 2:12, Rev 2: 26, 3:12, 3:21).

There are a several other instances of *soteria/sozo* in the New Testament for which “blessing/thrive” is undoubtedly the preferable reading. For the sake of brevity, a large sample is simply listed here. It will be left to the reader to consider the new application this brings to these passages: Rom 13:11-14; 1 Cor 5:5; 2 Cor 7:8-10; Phil 1:27-28, 2:12; 1 Tim 4:16; Heb 2:3, 5:9; Jas 1:21, 2:14; Matt 19:24-25 (where “kingdom of heaven” also appears), Matt 24:13; Mark 13:13; Luke 9:23-26, 13:23-24.

Inheritance

Inheritance is a strong biblical theme. The words “inherit” or “inheritance” occur nearly 300 times in scripture. In the majority of instances, “inheritance” refers to something received from God as a tangible possession.

Inheritance has become a source of conflicted theology because it is often viewed as a synonym for eternal life. “Inheritance” is understood to be a state which is entered on the basis of the believer’s standing as a child of God – a grant, that is not, and cannot, be earned.¹⁶ But this unconditional view of inheritance is not found in either the biblio-Judaic culture of the Old Testament or the Greco-Roman culture of the New. Old Testament inheritances were ordinarily conditional (a feature common to many modern inheritances as well). A father may reward sound character in one heir and bypass irresponsible heirs entirely. Jacob bypassed three

¹⁶ This tendency, no doubt, is traceable to the same influences (end of persecution, unity of church and state) which caused the church to lose sight of eternal reward in the mid-centuries of the first millennium. Without future reward and future participation in a future kingship, there was nothing left to “inherit” but eternal life.

sons to give the firstborn portion to Judah – a man of character, who, out of love for his father, sacrificially offered himself in Benjamin’s place. (Gen 44:18-33, 49:8-10) Simeon and Levi received no portion of land, but were scattered throughout Israel because of treachery. (Gen 49:5-7) (Nevertheless, they remained heirs of Jacob and part of the commonwealth of Israel).¹⁷ It is one thing to be counted among the heirs and secure a future of inclusion because of it; it is another to receive a meaningful inheritance.

A second issue must be considered before closing on a full-orbed understanding of biblical inheritance. In both Greek and Hebrew, the word for “inheritance” carries a strong emphasis on possession – ownership, with attendant rights and responsibilities. The Hebrew *nachalah* (“inheritance”) is defined by Brown-Driver-Briggs *Hebrew Lexicon* as “possession, property, inheritance.” Unger and White comment in *An Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* that *nachalah* “more appropriately refers to a ‘possession’ to which one has received the legal claim.”¹⁸ Such possession often did not come through the cultural mechanism of progenitor inheritance. (Israel is God’s *nachalah* – Exod 34:9, Deut 4:20, Isa 19:25 – he obviously did not inherit the nation from his ancestors.) Louw-Nida *Greek Lexicon* identifies two major strains of meaning for *kleronomia*, the Greek word most often translated “inheritance.” These are: 1) “possession,” 2) “inheritance.” *Kleronomia* corresponds well to Hebrew *nachalah*.

In addition to the emphasis on ownership rights and responsibilities, the idea of *conditionality* in inheritance carries forward into New Testament times and norms. Vine, in *An Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*, observes that *kleronomeo* (verb form of *kleronomia*) may refer to obtaining “that which is received on condition of obedience.”¹⁹ This is not to say that it must be used in this way. But it is a serious misconception to assume that the biblical use of “inheritance” in any way implies *unconditionality*. In fact, just as conditionality was imbedded in Jewish culture of the

¹⁷ The Levites were later given a new place of honor, because of their fealty to God at the golden calf incident (Exod 32:24-29). Originally the priesthood was assigned only to Aaron and his sons. The Levitical priesthood serves merely to confirm the conditionality of inheritance.

¹⁸ Vine, Unger, *Expository Dictionary*, p 121

¹⁹ Vine, Unger, *Expository Dictionary*, p 325

Old Testament, it was a strong element in the dominating Roman culture of the New Testament – so much so that many of the Caesars adopted an adult male (usually of perceived strong character) from outside the family on whom to confer the throne.²⁰

Inheritance from God conforms to the normal use of *nachalah* and *kleronomia* – it is a grant that confers legal rights of ownership and is often conditional. Perhaps this is nowhere more evident than in Ps 37:9: “For evildoers will be cut off, But those who wait for the LORD, they will inherit the land.” (NASV) Indeed, it is hard to find an instance of unconditional inheritance from God in the Old Testament. God gave Caleb a special inheritance, “because [he] wholeheartedly followed the Lord.” (Josh 14:9, NRSV) Abraham’s inheritance (which eventually became Israel’s) was granted because of his faithful obedience to God. (Gen 17:1-2, 22:15-18, Heb 11:8)²¹ God’s promise to Abraham gave the land of Canaan to Israel as an eternal inheritance. But while Israel’s ultimate eschatological possession of the land was secure, each individual generation’s possession was conditional. The Exodus generation was shut out of the land because of disobedience (although they remained the children of God and were cared for miraculously with manna and springs of water).²² Later generations were removed from the land – for idolatry and injustice – in the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities. Many generations, both before and after the captivities, lived in the land but did not possess it, because their rights to the land were subjugated to a foreign power – from Ammon in the east to Rome in the west. In every case the foreign dominion resulted from Israel’s unfaithfulness to God, a fact which cries out from the pages of the Book of Judges.

These same attributes of divinely bestowed inheritance live on in the New Testament – conditionality is often present and there is an emphasis on writ of responsibility and authority. Paul makes this correspondence between Old Testament and New quite evident in 1 Cor 10:5-6 when he observes that “with most of [the Exodus generation] God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the

²⁰ Smith, Alexa, “God As an Adoptive Parent,” *Presbyterians Today, Sidebar* (Dec 2002)

²¹ For a full discussion of the conditionality of the Abrahamic Covenant see: Lee, “A Reassessment of the Meaning of the Abrahamic Covenant for Evangelical Theology,” *Quodlibet Online Journal of Christian Theology and Philosophy* 6:4 (Oct-Dec 2004).

²² For Israel, the land and inheritance were one. (Num 34:1, Deut 4:38).

wilderness. Now these things happened as examples for us ...” (NASV) Israel’s initial failure to inherit the land because of disobedience was recorded *as an example* to church believers. While all believers (God’s spiritual children) are his heirs and will eternally benefit from that relationship, not all will receive a full inheritance.

A number of New Testament instances of inheritance are associated with the kingdom of God. (1 Cor 6:9-10, Gal 5:19-21, Eph 5:5) Inheritance, with its emphasis on the legal rights and responsibilities of possession, strongly compliments the fundamental meaning of “kingdom,” *basileia*: “authority to rule.” (Thayer) “Inheriting the kingdom” means receiving legal responsibility and authority in some aspect of Christ’s reign.

There are numerous additional instances of conditional inheritance from God in the New Testament, among them: Col 3:23-25, 1 Pet 3:9, Heb 11:8, Acts 20:28-32. In fact, it is difficult to find a clear example of unconditional inheritance in the New Testament. A handful of passages speak of spiritual birth as the basis of an inheritance for all believers – e.g. Acts 26:18, Eph 1:11, Col 1:12.²³ But in each case a different Greek word is used: *kleros* (not *kleronomia*). *Kleros* has a fundamentally distinct meaning from *kleronomia* and better corresponds to Simeon and Levi’s kind of heirship (discussed above). *Kleros*, at its core, means one’s “lot” (or “place”), although it can be used to mean one’s “share” as well.²⁴ It is translated “place” and “heritage” in some versions (albeit inconsistently) – NIV and NRSV use “place” in Acts 26:18 (The new believer “receives a *place* among those who are sanctified” [emphasis added]); ASV uses “heritage” in Eph 1:11, as does BBE in Col 1:12. In the end, however, whether some elements of inheritance are unconditional is not central to the discussion. What is more important is that there is no thoughtful linguistic/historic foundation for equating “inheritance” with salvation. As a result, conditional inheritance –

²³ There are also several passages which are at best ambiguous, but in each case conditionality is not the focus. This makes them ancillary to the discussion at hand, although the author generally understands them to be conditional. (Eph 1:14, 18; Heb 1:14, 6:12, 9:15; 1 Pet 1:4; Rev 21:7)

²⁴ Bauer, Arndt, et al, *Greek Lexicon*; Louw-Nida, *Greek Lexicon*.

based on fealty and obedience – finds its place in the sphere of rewards, not of salvation.

Eternal Life

Among the most difficult concepts to come to terms with in the New Testament is *eternal life*. The expression is used in a number of places to refer to unending and joyful existence in the presence of God. These passages give great comfort to the believer with regard to the sanctuary of his eternal state. John 3:16, 4:14, 5:24 and Rom 6:23 are a few of the many well-known examples. The simplicity of faith and the absolute freeness of salvation resound from these passages.

And yet there are a number of passages which seem bluntly to contradict these by making eternal life dependent on the costly demands of discipleship. Matt 19:29 is one such passage: “And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, shall receive many times as much, and shall inherit eternal life.” (NASV) The three common interpretive approaches to conditional promises (previously discussed) weigh in on this verse and related passages such as Mark 10:29-30, John 12:25-26, and Gal 6:8-9: 1) One approach takes these verses to mean that the believer must secure his own salvation through sacrificial servanthood. 2) Others see the possibility of loss of salvation for failing to be a committed disciple. 3) Still others find the idea that the one who does not leave everything for Christ has a false faith. It should be observed that, if any of these views were to be adopted, the first is most concordant with the passage – Matt 19:29 plainly conditions *receiving* eternal life on leaving everything for Christ.²⁵ But this view (salvation by self-sacrifice) is profoundly discordant with other New Testament passages which speak of “the water of life without cost” (Rev 21:6), and the “free gift of eternal life” (Rom 6:23).

²⁵ The loss-of-salvation view finds marginal support since the passage does not indicate that one *retains* eternal life by self-sacrifice after first *obtaining* it by faith-regeneration; rather Matt 19:29 says one *obtains* eternal life by sacrificial living. This may be viewed as hair-splitting, but if the loss-of-salvation view is to be distinguished from the salvation-by-regeneration-enabled-works view, it can only be on the basis of the role of faith and regeneration in salvation. The third view (that the true believer will sacrifice all) reverses the cause-effect explicitly stated in the passage. Thus it reads: “the one who has eternal life will leave everything for Christ.” This reversal is a common interpretive element of the third view; the logic of the reversal is difficult to follow or embrace.

A solution compatible with the whole of scripture is close at hand. A first observation should be that (for the vast majority of theologians, at least) the *unbeliever* also has eternal life in the common English use of “life” – that is, the unbeliever has conscious existence for eternity. “Life,” then, in “eternal life,” clearly means more than mere existence. The Greek word is *zoe*, and while *zoe* can simply mean biological “life,” it may also be used with strong qualitative and comparative emphasis. *Thayer’s Greek Lexicon* observes that *zoe* can carry the meaning of “the absolute fullness of life.”²⁶ It is unfortunate that English does not possess a clear counterpart for *zoe*, but perhaps a term that inherently carries comparative force, such as “greater life,” comes close (if a bit awkward). Paul instructed Timothy to “take hold of eternal life,” and to encourage his parishioners to “store up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed.” (1 Tim 6:12-19, NASV). There is, then, the possibility something more than simple eternal life for the believer. There is an offer of *eternal life indeed!* Eternity holds both greater life and *definitively* greater life. The first is already the possession of the believer (John 3:36, 5:24, 6:47, 1 John 5:11); the second is an inheritance reserved for the faithful believer (Matt 19:29, John 12:25-26, Gal 6:8, 1 Tim 6:12-19).

Confessing and Denying

“Confess” and “deny” are often juxtaposed in the New Testament, and appear together in problematic passages like Luke 12:8-9: “And I say to you, everyone who confesses Me before men, the Son of Man shall confess him also before the angels of God; but he who denies Me before men shall be denied before the angels of God.” (NASV)

Before tackling this passage and similar ones, some semantic investigation is in order. John 1:20 provides an unusually succinct example of these two words in juxtaposition. It reads: “And he [John the Baptist] confessed, and did not deny, and he confessed, ‘I am not the Christ.’” (NASV) An initial observation is that this makes for awkward English, because it employs “confess” and “deny” in ways

²⁶ Thayer, *Greek Lexicon*, p 273

that are not common in modern English. What John the Apostle is communicating about the Baptist is, first, that he readily and publicly acknowledged that he was not the Messiah. (“He confessed.”) Then, in a strongly reinforcing negative statement, John adds that the Baptist was not at all reticent to publicly acknowledge his *lack* of messiahship. (He “did not deny.”)

While “confess” (*homologeō*, or *exomologeō*, a strengthened form) and “deny” (*arneomai*, or *aparneomi*, strengthened form) have a range a meaning, they are predominantly public forum words. “To confess,” is to publicly acknowledge; to deny is to refuse to publicly acknowledge. Louw & Nida divide “confess” (*homologeō*) into three primary strains of meaning: “profess,” “declare,” “admit.” *Vine’s Expository Dictionary* makes a similar breakdown.²⁷ Each of these nuances include *open* or *public* assertions of some kind.

“Deny” (*arneomai*), the counterpart of “confess,” seems to operate in a somewhat broader sphere, and can in some contexts mean “to exercise self-control” (deny oneself) or “to reject” someone or something. But when used as an antonym to “confess,” its meaning is primarily “to be unwilling to openly profess, admit, or declare.” Perhaps the most famous (or infamous) use of “deny” is Peter’s threefold denial of Christ (for which both *arneomai* and *aparneomai* are employed by the Gospel writers). It should be observed that Peter did not refuse to associate with Christ. Rather, he refused to *publicly acknowledge* that association. This is not to say that *arneomai* cannot be used to mean “deny” or “disown” in a non-verbal sense – as “to disinherit” or “to break the bonds of familial rights.” But there is no linguistic basis for making this the primary meaning in scripture.

When Jesus says, “[E]veryone who confesses Me before men, the Son of Man shall confess him also before the angels of God; but he who denies Me before men shall be denied before the angels of God” (Luke 12:8-9), it is most natural to take these words in their public forum meaning. Indeed, in this and similar passages, such as Matt 10:32, the text reinforces this meaning; the text goes beyond “whoever confesses” to read “whoever confesses *before men/angels/Father.*” Similarly, it is not simply “deny,” but “deny *before men/angels/Father.*” The chief semantic problem in these

²⁷ Vine, Unger, *Expository Dictionary*, “Confess,” item 1.a., p 120

verses is that the English word “deny” tends not to carry the nuance of “refusal to be publicly associated with.” But it is a meaning that is fairly compelling in these passages. The message is that those who fail to publicly acknowledge their eternal bond to Christ (in word and deed)²⁸ will not receive recognition or award before the angels and the Father.²⁹ Jesus also expresses this sentiment in a passage which is normally translated more palatably for modern English speakers, Luke 9:26. “For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when He comes in His glory ...” (NASV) Jesus will express his profound disappointment in those Christians who have shielded themselves in the face of disfavor or hostility by denying their association with him. But for those who have served him openly during these times, there will be honor from his lips before the hosts of heaven.

Justification

Rom 3:28-4:3 For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works ... For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.”

Gal 2:16 [M]an is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, ... because by works of the law shall no one be justified. (RSV)

Jas 2:21-23 Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by works, and the scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness” ... (RSV)

It is hard to imagine two more contradictory statements. Yet, if scripture is inspired by God and is the foundation for systematic theology, it must be internally consistent. Assuming for the moment, as is ordinarily done, that “justification” is a synonym for “salvation from eternal damnation,” these verses come down to this: 1) Paul

²⁸ For the use of “deny” (*arneomai*) as “failing to honor in deed” see Titus 1:13-16.

²⁹ While the purpose here is not the full development of a doctrine of rewards, it should be noted that Peter’s denial was not considered a bar to reward. This is evident in the hopes he expresses in the two epistles bearing his name. The author understands the refusal of association which Jesus considers a bar to public honor before God, the angels, and men to be a lifetime characteristic, not a single failure.

says, “Salvation *excludes* works;” 2) James says, “Salvation *demand*s works.” The statements are irreconcilable.³⁰

It is important, once again, to probe the distinction between lexical meaning and theological meaning. The word “justified,” *dikio’o* in Greek, means, “1) to render [one] righteous or such as he ought to be 2) to show, exhibit, evince, one to be righteous ... 3) to declare, pronounce, one to be just, righteous, or such as he ought to be.” (Thayer, *Greek Lexicon*) *Dikio’o* was often used in the sense of “to be acquitted.” (Bauer-Arndt, *Greek Lexicon*)

The profound wonder of redemption is that God looks to Christ, instead of to the believer, to “declare” the believer “such as he ought to be” (following Thayer). But this kind of acquittal-by-substitution is not inherent to the verb *dikio’o*. In the Greco-Roman forensic setting, one was ordinarily judged to be aright because one was “evinced to be as he ought to be.” (Thayer)

Constraining *dikio’o* to “imputed righteousness,” is a wholly unwarranted restriction of meaning. God found Abraham “to be as he ought to be,” because Abraham was willing to surrender Isaac, his most precious possession, for the sake of obedience to God. (Jas 2:21) This was not an imputed integrity, but the integrity of Abraham’s own heart and actions. He was justified by his works because they “showed him to be as he ought to be.” ... And God immediately responded with the promise of a compound blessing (“blessing I will bless thee,” Gen 22:15-18 – in Hebrew, doubling the verb is a superlative). Abraham’s justification by works was not a justification leading to redemptive *acceptance* by God, but to fraternal *esteem* by God – “and he was called the friend of God.” (Jas 2:23) Works made his faith full by bringing imputed righteousness and spiritual regeneration to their desired end: a heart full of love, service and obedience toward God. For men, redemption is an end in itself – but for God it is merely a beginning. God desires far more than ordinary children. He longs for mature sons and daughters whose hearts are so tightly bound to his that they can be entrusted with the rule of all creation (under his Son). (Rom 8:18-21; Rev 2:26, 3:21; Heb 2:5-9)

³⁰ There has been a recent trend to try to resolve this contradiction by defining “faith” to include a *recognition of the necessity of works*. This recognition then necessarily results in the *reality* of works. But there is no lexical evidence for this. And in the end it does not answer Paul’s assertion that justification by faith excludes works. (Rom 3:28, Gal 2:16, Eph 2:8-9).

Being justified (“being found as one ought to be”) requires a hearing or judgment of some kind. The justification which comes by faith and brings new life pertains to the Great White Throne Judgment described in Rev 20:11-15, John 5:24, and Heb 9:27. But Paul also details another judgment, a judgment limited to the household of God. “[W]e make it our ambition,” he writes, “whether at home or in exile, to please Him perfectly. For we must all of us appear before Christ’s judgement-seat in our true characters, in order that each may then receive an award for his actions in this life, in accordance with what he has done, whether it be good or whether it be worthless.” (2 Cor 5:10, WNT)³¹

Surely it was this judgment – this examination of servants – that Paul anticipated in his caution to the Philippians: “And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ ...” (Phil 1:9-10, RSV) Surely it was this inquiry Peter foresaw in his second epistle, “Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless.” (2 Pet 3:14, NKJV) Surely it was this “justification” that James had in mind when he penned those insistent words, “faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. ... You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.” (Jas 2:17, 24 NKJV) Faith is the basis of salvation, but works are the basis of reward: “[E]ach one will receive his own reward according to his own labor,” Paul writes. (1 Cor 3:8, NKJV) Without works, the child fails to mature into a trustworthy son. Without works, the adolescent never becomes a faithful heir, never meets his destiny as Christ’s representative and sub-regent.

Future Reward

God announced Abraham’s reward immediately after his compelling display of loyalty. But for those who live in the space between Christ’s two appearances, such pronouncement lies yet future. Christ’s body – his voice and hands and feet in a fallen and

³¹ It is unfortunate the Weymouth New Testament does not enjoy wide use. Professor Weymouth was the preeminent Greek scholar of his day (1822-1902), and his work is among the most well respected individual translations to this day. (Parkinson, James, “How to Choose a Bible Translation,” *The Herald Magazine* (Pastoral Bible Institute) (Sept-Oct 1996) (available: http://www.heraldmag.org/96so_6.htm)

hostile world – must “suffer with him,” if they wish to be “glorified with him.” (Rom 8:17)³² Elsewhere they are told that they must be “faithful until death,” if they wish to receive a “crown.” (Rev 2:10) Of this delayed reward the early martyrs were acutely aware. “[H]ere is the course, and there are the crowns.” (Ignatius) “If we please him in this present world, we will receive the world to come ... [and] reign with him ...” (Polycarp)³³ “We believe that the merits of the martyrs and the works of the righteous are of great avail with the Judge. However, this will be when the Day of Judgment comes. It will be after the conclusion of this life and the end of this world – when His people will stand before the judgment seat of Christ.” (Cyprian, martyred 258 A.D.)³⁴

These martyrs understood that reward lay beyond the resurrection. And so did the Apostles. “Therefore we do not lose heart ...,” Paul writes, “for ... affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.” (2 Cor 4:16-17) To this, Jesus, through the pen of John, adds his own voice: “And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work.” (Rev 22:12)

What powerful truths stand side by side in scripture – first, an eternal welcome in the dwelling of God – extended freely to any who will receive it, and which puts the tortured soul to rest. Alongside it, an offer of eternal service and high destiny which puts the redeemed soul to work in the labor of God.

Bibliography

ASV American Standard Version
BBE Bible in Basic English
NASV New American Standard Version
NET New English Translation

³² The chiasmic structure of Rom 8:17 should be noted. “(A) if children (B) then heirs of God – but also (contrastive particle, *de*) – (B) co-heirs with Christ, (A) if we suffer with him.” Heirship is unconditional; co-heirship with Christ is conditional.

³³ Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, p 125

³⁴ Bercot, *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, p 436

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- NKJV New King James Version
NLT New Living Translation
NRSV New Revised Standard Version
RSV Revised Standard Version
YLT Young's Literal Translation
WNT Weymouth New Testament
- Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 2nd ed (Chicago/London: University of Chicago, 1979)
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