

Response to Questions

Regarding “The Distinguishing Characteristic of a Christian”

QUESTION #1:

Jack, you seem to teach two contradictory things.

On the one hand, you suggest that

[A] *if I am attracted to and embrace a teaching that deviates from the truth of God, then I stand condemned; I will receive the wrath of God.*

On the other hand, you suggest that

[B] *I am not saved because I have my theology right; I am saved because, in my inward being, I have entrusted my life and existence into the hands of Jesus, as my Advocate, and am counting on him to obtain mercy and Life for me. That is, you suggest that trusting Jesus in this way, and that trust alone, is what marks me as one who will be given mercy and Life from God.*

So how are you not contradicting yourself?

On the one hand, you say that if I do not embrace an understanding of the the Bible that is true and accurate and reject any understanding of the Bible that is false, then I will not be saved.

On the other hand, you say that being saved has nothing to do with whether my understanding of the Bible is exactly right; my being saved is entirely a matter of whether I trust Jesus in my deep inward commitments.

So which is it?

Do I have to get my understanding of the Bible right, or don't I?

MY ANSWER TO QUESTION #1:

Which is it? It is both, sort of. So long as we rightly understand the issues, we will see that these claims are not in contradiction to one another. To understand how they are not contradictory, we need to understand a number of points:

- It is simply a function of our humanity itself that we have a moral obligation to affirm and embrace what is true and to ignore and reject what is false.
- It is a function of our natural-born sinfulness and opposition to God that we are all too ready to ignore and reject what is true. Rejecting the truth is one of the manifestations of human evil.
- It is a function of our human finiteness that we error and make mistakes of various kinds. One of the ways we make mistakes as errant human beings is in what we come to believe and affirm. Sometimes we affirm things that are false and reject things that are true.

In light of the above points, there are two different reasons why a human being might embrace a wrong understanding of the gospel and the Bible:

- (1) Due to my human finiteness, I might make some intellectual mistakes that lead me to embrace a false understanding.

(2) Due to my human sinfulness, I might prefer to embrace an understanding that is contrary to the truth but is more attractive than the truth is to my sinful desires and inclinations.

The latter reason for failing to believe what is true is damnable. The former is not. In other words, there are two different kinds of theological errors:

(1) There is false belief that stems from human sinfulness and hostility toward God. This kind of false belief is damnable and could be an indication that I am not a *bona fide* child of God.

(2) There is false belief that stems from human finiteness. This kind of false belief is not damnable. It can never serve as evidence that one is not a child of God.

Every *bona fide* child of God who will inherit eternal life—because of his finiteness as a human being—will have faulty and imperfect beliefs, doctrines, and theology. His failure to have a perfect grasp of the truth does not disqualify him from being a *bona fide* child of God who will inherit eternal Life. Such an individual is qualified by his implicit trust in Jesus, his Advocate, to secure mercy for him. Any false beliefs he holds as a consequence of his intellectual imperfection do not disqualify him from eternal life.

On the other hand, any alleged Christian is not a *bona fide* child of God and stands condemned if—due to his evil and human sinfulness—he chooses to embrace an aberrant set of beliefs and doctrines over the truth. Such an individual is not a *bona fide* follower of Jesus. (This is what is intended in my assertion [A] in Question #1 above.)

The alleged Christian who implicitly trusts Jesus, his Advocate, to secure mercy for him is a *bona fide* child of God who will inherit eternal life; and this is so, even if—due to human finiteness—he has chosen to embrace an aberrant set of beliefs and doctrines over true beliefs and doctrines. (This is what is intended in my assertion [B] in Question #1 above.)

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Therefore, Assertion [A] and Assertion [B] do not contradict each other. These assertions speak of very different sorts of false beliefs. False beliefs *that are the result of evil* are damnable. False beliefs *that are merely the result of human finitude* are **not** damnable.

If I embrace a false understanding of the Bible over a true understanding of the Bible, and if I do so *precisely because I choose to gratify my sinful inclinations*, then my false understanding will condemn me.

- If I have “sown to my ‘flesh’” in what I have chosen to believe, then I will be condemned for the false beliefs that I have chosen to embrace.

But, if I embrace a false understanding of the Bible over a true understanding of the Bible, and if I do so *precisely because, given my finiteness and limitations as a fallible human being, I have made significant intellectual mistakes in my effort to understand the Bible*, then my false understanding will NOT condemn me.

- If I have NOT “sown to my ‘flesh’” in what I have chosen to believe, then I will NOT be condemned for the false beliefs that I have chosen to embrace (due to intellectual mistakes I have made).

MORE IN RESPONSE TO QUESTION #1:

*I am not suggesting that one needs to be **theologically pure** (absolutely right in all that he believes) in order to be saved. I am suggesting that one needs to be **pure in heart**.*

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There are many different manifestations of human sinfulness. And all of them are forgivable, *except for one*—the unforgivable sin.

What is the unforgivable sin? It could be aptly described in a number of different ways, but, fundamentally, *the unforgivable sin is the refusal to respond to God and to the things of God in the manner that one should. It is to display an underlying opposition to God.*

The unforgivable sin can take a lot of different forms with respect to how it manifests itself outwardly. It can take the form of theft, embezzlement, betrayal, adultery, murder, hate, or virtually any other act of unrighteousness or immorality. However, each one of these acts of unrighteousness may or may not be unforgivable. Whether a sin is unforgivable or not depends upon what underlies it. If what underlies an immoral act is a final and definitive rejection of God, then that immoral act is not merely an immoral act, it is an expression of the unforgivable sin. But if what underlies that same immoral act is universal human sin—and it is not a final and definitive rejection of God—then it is merely an immoral act, it is NOT an expression of the unforgivable sin—hence, it is forgivable.

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In parallel to the above, there are many doctrinal or theological mistakes that people make that are forgivable and do not result in their condemnation. However, there are other doctrinal or theological mistakes that people make that do result in condemnation, because they are expressions of the unforgivable sin.

The unforgivable sin is to finally and ultimately decide that I will not submit to the will of God because I want what I want. The unforgivable sin is to reject God, his purposes, his promises, and his values. It is to manifest the fact that I am fundamentally not interested in God’s will. Rather, it involves the fact that one wants what he wants instead of what God wants.

This unwillingness to submit to the will of God can and does manifest itself in refusing to embrace the truth about God, Jesus, the gospel, and what the Bible teaches in general. It manifests itself in one’s embracing false beliefs about God, Jesus, the gospel, and what the Bible teaches instead. When this occurs, when I embrace false beliefs instead of true beliefs because I am ultimately and definitively rejecting God, then my embrace of false beliefs is damnable. Not because holding false theological beliefs *per se* is damnable. Holding false theological beliefs is damnable if and when my doing so is an act of hostility to God. If I hold false theological beliefs due to intellectual imperfection—even though I am a person who genuinely wants to know and embrace the truth—then my theological error is utterly forgivable. It is not damnable. It will not disqualify me from eternal Life.

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We can put it this way: I do not have to be 100% *pure* in my doctrinal beliefs or theology in order to be saved. But I do have to be *pure in my heart* to be saved (100% pure?—perhaps not; but I must, at least, not be double-minded). One very important way that an impure heart manifests itself is by being attracted to false beliefs, to a false gospel, and to faulty theology. *When my embracing a false set of beliefs is due to an impure heart, then my embracing that false set of beliefs is damnable. When it is not due to an impure heart, then it is not damnable.*

Question #2:

Jack, you seem to suggest that one has to be interested in Bible Study to be a *bona fide*, authentic follower of Jesus. Is that right? *Are you suggesting that only those who have a vital interest in studying the Bible will be saved?*

MY ANSWER TO QUESTION #2:

No, that is NOT what I am suggesting.

Only those whom God has assigned to such a role will have a driving interest in studying the Bible and will devote themselves to studying it in the way that I am committed to practicing it and in the way that is presupposed by the question. Such a commitment to studying the Bible is *not a distinctive of every Jesus-follower*. It is the distinctive of only a certain subset of believers who have been appointed to that task by God.

But what **is** a distinctive of every *bona fide* Jesus-follower is this: *a vital and keen interest in what the Bible teaches.*

Any given individual may not have the passion, nor the skills, to be a diligent interpreter and student of the Bible. But *every* normal adult Jesus-follower will be eager to learn and know what the Truth is. And to the extent that he knows that the Truth is contained in the Bible (and it is), he will be eager to learn and know what the Bible teaches. His pursuit of biblical Truth may be through others teaching him the Bible—rather than through his own personal study of the Bible—but one way or the other, the genuine follower of Jesus will be intent on understanding what the Bible actually teaches.