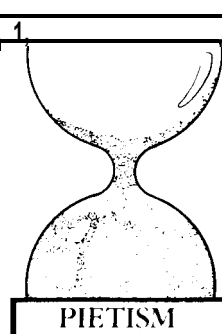


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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LORDSHIP SALVATION An Eschatological Vacation

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Last year a Korean "prophet" created an uproar when he called for the Rapture in October, 1992. More recently David Koresh warned of the imminent beginning of Armageddon (which for him became a personal, self-fulfilling prophecy). **Since** Koresh's book on the Seven Seals of Revelation has quite literally gone up in smoke, we will have to wait a few weeks for another dooms-day, imminency-oriented advocate to gain a following. Consequently, I thought it might be a refreshing aside to turn to the field of soteriology.

The focus of our newsletter is on the errors of dispensationalism. Generally this requires our concentrating on eschatological issues. But dispensationalism is not just heavy-laden in the field of eschatology. The famous Minus Touch of dispensationalism has a tendency to reduce all areas of doctrine, not just eschatology.

A Soteriological Inquiry

One of the root faults in dispensationalism is its promulgation of the supposed doctrine of the unconditional covenant. This doctrine insists that the land promise to Abraham must find glorious fulfillment in the millennium. This doctrine is necessary to promote a redemptive-historical retrogression to an era of racial dominance by Israel.

This also distorts the very nature of the gospel and salvation. The whole Lordship Controversy is a classic case in point. We turn to consider this aberration because of its practical *significance* and *influence*: as **dispensationalist** Robert P. Lightner puts it: "At the present time 'Lordship Salvation' is probably the most disputed concept about the Savior and His salvation among evangelicals."¹

The Lordship Controversy swirls around the question as to whether a person must receive Christ as *Lord* in order for Him to become one's *Savior*. Non-Lordship advocates insist that all that is necessary for salvation is that the person accept Christ as Savior. Lordship advocates counter that one does not truly accept Christ as Savior unless he also bows before Him as Lord. As Lightner correctly observes: The two views are "mutually exclusive."² Non-Lordship proponents deny that true, saving faith involves an element of commitment.

Dispensationalism is largely committed to the Non-Lordship view, as dispensationalist MacArthur admits.³ This viewpoint is often lamented by reformed Christians to be "Easy Believism." Of course, not all dispensationalists are adherents to the Non-Lordship position: John MacArthur is a case in point. But he has had to weather a storm of dispensational criticism, dis-fellowshipping, and canceling of his radio program on many dispensational stations for his theological affront to the dispensational powers that be.

I have written a small book on the subject and will not engage the fundamental Lordship argument in this **newsletter**.⁴ But I do hope to take an issue or two of our newsletter to consider some matters which I did not treat in my book. The first one I would like to deal with is the case of Simon Magus in Acts 8. Here is a beautiful example of how an erroneous system (dispensationalism) can go through physics-defying contortions in the attempt to maintain internal, systemic consistency.

Simon Peter vs. Simon Magus

The record of Simon Magus is found in Acts 8:9-24. It is a familiar enough story: The Lord blessed the ministry of Philip in Samaria with mass conversions. One sorcerer, Simon Magus, saw that miracles were performed by Philip, so he thought he had better get in on the action. The Lordship Controversy problem arises in that the text relates the following response to Philip's preaching: "But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and 'the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized. Then *Simon himself also believed*; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done" (Acts 8:12-13).

Because of the Non-Lordship view's simplistic understanding of "faith," some Easy-believers (not all) hold that Simon became a **true**, eternally-saved, born-again believer in Christ. This apparently is the view of the Grace Evangelical Society, a dispensational society which has been founded to counter Lordship advocacy.

In their Spring, 1989, issue of the *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* we find a reprint of a nineteenth century article which promotes the view that Simon was saved by the grace of God.⁵ "This special mention of his conversion is apparently a testimony to the grace which abounded toward this great leader of iniquity, and to the power which brought an arrogant pretender to the place of a lowly disciple, waiting upon the teaching of the missionary of the cross."⁶ And further: "If the facts prove that Simon was not a believer, then the record yields no great practical lessons to believers, and it would be difficult to see any important use to be served by preserving it in the volume of Scripture" (p. 53).⁷

What makes Inglis's view so difficult to maintain is the context itself. Acts 8:18-23 reads:

"Now when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money, saying, 'Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy

Spirit.' But Peter said to him, 'Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God, Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity.'

By all appearance, Simon Magus was a false convert – despite his exercise of “faith.” But let us see how this interchange between Peter and Simon Magus is re-interpreted by Inglis, who holds that the statement regarding Simon’s belief must hold sway over other considerations.

The Tangles of Inglis

First, Inglis notes that Simon’s faith is linked with the belief exercised by the others, who are true converts (p. 52). Acts 8:12-13a reads: “But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized, Then Simon himself also believed,”

Response: It should be noted that Simon’s *belief* is at least somewhat textually differentiated from the others. After all, his “conversion” (v. 13) is set apart from theirs (v. 12). But more significantly, is it not the case that the same preaching of the Word can produce genuine faith in one, while in another only a superficial, non-saving faith arises? Do we really believe that every person that goes forward and expresses belief in Christ at a crusade is certainly saved? Did not Christ speak of the Sower sowing the Word in the world, only to have *four* types of response (Matt. 13:3ff)?

Did not Christ experience such during His own ministry? Simon Magus’s “conversion” virtually parallels that of Christ’s “converts” in John 8:31-44. There we read that: “As He spoke these words, many *believed* in Him” (John 8:30). But then the Lord, speaking *to* those “which *believed* on Him” (John 8:31), warned that they were of their father, the devil (John 8:37-44)! Surely some did truly believe; just as clearly some did not truly believe. Such is the situation in Acts 8.

Second, Inglis doubts whether the offer of forgiveness by Peter has to do with Simon’s need of salvation: “Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you” (Acts 8:22). Writes Inglis: “IS there only a ‘perhaps’ to be held out to the sinner as the alternative of everlasting condemnation?” (p. 49). He holds that Peter urged this new convert to turn from his old *life patterns, since he was now a Christian*.

Response: The Bible has strong warnings of the difficulty of coming to true faith by those who have initially responded with a superficial faith and have become a part of the Christian community. Virtually the entire letter to the Hebrews is on this matter (see especially Heb. 6:4-6).

Peter’s warning to Simon is that he is in grievous sin – and who knows if he will come to true repentance? God saves whom He wills (Rom. 9:11-18). Furthermore, it would seem even more incongruous to tell a true child of God (as in Inglis’s supposition regarding Simon) that there may only be the possibility of forgiveness, when he prays for it!

Third, Inglis makes reference to Peter’s charge against

Simon Magus that he has “neither part nor portion in this matter.” Inglis insists that the reference is not to Simon’s enjoyment of salvation’s blessings, but to his attempt to presume “power that on whomsoever I lay my hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost” (Acts 8:19) (pp. 48-49).

Response: In the original wording of Peter’s charge “thou hast neither part nor portion in this *matter*,” the word translated *matter* is *logos* (“word”). This makes reference to the Christian *doctrine* that was preached: “the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 8:12). The “word” was preached to the Samaritans: “Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the *word* of God, they sent Peter and John to them” (Acts 8:14). Converts in Acts are often spoken of as having received “the word,” i.e., the truth of the Christian gospel (Acts 2:41; 4:4; 6:7; 10:37; 11:1; 17:11). This Simon needed to do.

Fourth, Inglis notes that the term “perish” involves both Simon’s money as well as himself. And surely money is not destroyed in hell (p. 48). He also parallels the usage of this word with its employment in 1 Corinthians 8:11. There a weaker brother is threatened with “perishing” by the conduct of a stronger Christian, who eats meat offered to idols.

Response: It is not uncommon for Scripture to contrast the destruction of money or earthly wealth with the eternal treasures of heaven (Matt. 6:19-21; Luke 12:33-34; James 5:3). This being the case, the “destruction” of money is a type of the destruction of the soul in hell. Obviously, money does not literally “go to hell.” Peter’s idea here is that earthly money can be corrupted; likewise may your eternal soul.

The matter of the weaker brother being “destroyed” is misunderstood by Inglis. Often biblical warnings are set in the strongest possible light. This is one of the *means* by which God *sovereignly* secures the perseverance of the saved. The strong brother is urged not to lead the weaker brother to sin against his conscience by warning of the most tragic outcome of rebellion against God: destruction. Though it is true that the truly born-again will *not* be destroyed, this strong warning of *destruction* is one of the means God uses to insure the end of eternal salvation.⁸

¹ Robert L. Lightner, *Sin, the Savior, and Salvation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 200.

² *Ibid.*

³ John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), xv, 25, 26, 89.

⁴ *Lord of the Saved: Getting to the Heart of the Lordship Debate* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1992). Copies maybe ordered from me for \$7.50 (postage included) at 46 Main St., Conestee, SC 29636.

⁵ James Inglis, “Simon Magus,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, 2 (Spring, 1969) 45-54.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁷ Why could not the story be employed to warn against false converts, who pass themselves off as Christians? Was not this a serious problem in the apostolic era? See: Matt. 24:10-11; Acts 20:29-30; 1 John 2:19.

⁸ For an extended presentation of this view, see my: *The Christian and Alcoholic Beverages*, chapter 3. Available from me for \$5.50 (includes shipping). See address in footnote 5 above.