

# **How to Lead People to Christ: Part 1**

## **The Content of Our Message**

**By Zane C. Hodges**

The title of my two-part article may lead you to expect a discussion on how to do personal evangelism. Hopefully you will get some ideas about personal work from these articles, but this is not my major objective. Instead I want to discuss how grace theology should affect the way we present the gospel, whether to individuals or to groups.

Nevertheless, before I address my subject, let me say this. I do genuinely enjoy talking to people about their eternal salvation. I have done so with many, many individuals over the years.

A close friend works with me in my office. When I first met him, he did not understand the way of salvation. But over a period of years, after many conversations on the subject, he became a believer. He understands that salvation is absolutely free even though most of the people he knows do not. The salvation of this friend is one of the most highly valued results of my years of service to Christ. It is an immense joy to know that our friendship will continue eternally in the kingdom of God.

What I am saying is this. I am a teacher by spiritual gift. But I enjoy doing the work of an evangelist as much, or more, than I enjoy teaching. So as I talk today about putting good theology into our soul-winning, I am talking about a most important issue. And I also try hard to practice what I am preaching to you today!

The question I am raising is a simple one: Have we allowed solid grace theology to properly affect the way we proclaim and share the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ?

I propose to address this question under two headings: (1) The content of our message and (2) Our invitation to respond to it. I will consider the first of these topics in this article, and the second, in Part 2.

### **I. The Deserted Island Scenario**

Let me begin with a strange scenario. Try to imagine an unsaved person marooned on a tiny, uninhabited island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. He has never heard about Christianity in his life. One day a wave washes a fragment of paper up onto the beach. It is wet but still partly readable.

On that paper are the words of John 6:43-47. But the only readable portions are: “Jesus therefore answered and said to them” (v 43) and “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life” (v 47).

Now suppose that our unsaved man somehow becomes convinced that this person called Jesus can guarantee his eternal future, since He promises everlasting life. In other words, he believes Jesus' words in John 6:47. Is he saved?

I suspect that there are some grace people who would say that this man is not saved because he doesn't know enough. For example, he doesn't know that Jesus died for his sins on the cross and rose again the third day. Needless to say, there is a lot more he doesn't know either, such as the doctrine of the Trinity, the eternal Sonship of Jesus or the doctrine of the virgin birth.

But why is he *not* saved if he believes the promise of Jesus' words? It is precisely the ability of Jesus to guarantee eternal life that makes Him the Christ in the Johannine sense of that term. Our Lord's exchange with Martha in John 11:25-27 demonstrates this clearly.

You remember it, don't you? "Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?'" (John 11:25-26). Her reply is a declaration that she believes Him to be the Christ. Martha said, "Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world" (11:27).

Notice here that to believe that Jesus is the Christ means to believe that He guarantees resurrection and eternal life to every believer. But now let us look at John 4. In that famous passage we have the Samaritans saying to the woman who had encountered Jesus, "Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we ourselves have heard Him and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world" (John 4:42).

Observe that the common denominator to both passages is the term "Christ." On Martha's lips He is "the Christ, the Son of God," and on the lips of the Samaritans He is "the Christ, the Savior of the world." This is not an accidental or insignificant difference.

In Jewish prophecy and theology the promised Christ was also the Son of God—that is, He was to be a divine person. Recall the words of Isaiah: "For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given...and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (9:6-7). But in Samaritan theology, the Messiah was thought of as a prophet and the woman at the well is led to faith through our Lord's prophetic ability to know her life. Her words, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet" (4:19) are a first step in the direction of recognizing Him as the Christ. There is no evidence that she or the other Samaritans understood the deity of our Lord.

But they *did believe* that he was the Christ. And John tells us in his first epistle that "whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God" (5:1)! A full theology of His person is not necessary

to salvation. If we believe that Jesus is the One who guarantees our eternal destiny, we have believed all we absolutely have to believe in order to be saved.

Years ago, as a student at Dallas Theological Seminary, I washed dishes in the dining hall to pay for my meals. Often after I had finished this chore I hung around and talked theology with another student who swept up the kitchen every night. One night this student made a statement to me that I have never forgotten. He said something like this, "I know that I trusted Christ for salvation before I realized that Jesus was the Son of God." I was surprised because I had never heard anyone say this before.

But I did not quarrel with that statement then, nor would I quarrel with it now. It is the name of Jesus that brings salvation whenever anyone believes in that name as his or her sure hope of eternal well-being. We are not saved by believing a series of theological propositions, however true and important they may be. We are saved by believing in Jesus.

That's why the man on the deserted island can get saved with only the barest minimum of information. When he believes John 6:47 he is believing in Jesus as the Christ.

## **II. What about the Cross?**

But what about the cross of Christ? Is it not essential for a man to know about that in order to be saved?

This leads to a question about the eleven apostles who believed in Jesus before He died. Did they understand the cross or the significance of His death? Did they understand the necessity of His resurrection? Of course they did not, as John 20:9 makes perfectly clear.

You recall that text. In recounting how the unnamed disciple came to believe that Jesus had risen, it is said of Peter and of himself that "as yet they did not know the Scripture that He must rise again from the dead." The eleven disciples had believed in Jesus long before they understood that He must die for their sins and rise again. As Peter says so emphatically in John 6:68-69, "Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

The disciples of Jesus were saved without knowledge of the death and resurrection of their Master. However, some people today would say, "But it's different now that the cross is behind us. Now we have to believe in that as well." Do we? Where does this idea come from? Certainly not from the Gospel of John.

Let us think a moment. The events described in John's Gospel occurred before the cross. But the entire book was written afterward. In my view, it was written before 70 AD, but if we prefer a later date in the 80s, my point will be even more forceful. At the time of writing, the cross was years

ago, and if belief in the work of the cross was by then necessary for salvation, John definitely gives us the wrong impression by stressing the way the cross dumbfounded even His most intimate disciples.

Let me put it to you this way. The Gospel of John is the only book in our New Testament canon that explicitly declares its purpose to be evangelistic. Of course, I am thinking of the famous theme statement found in John 20:30-31, where we read: “And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.”

This statement does not affirm the necessity of believing in our Lord’s substitutionary atonement. If by the time of the writing of John’s Gospel, it was actually necessary to believe this, then it would have been not only simple, but essential, to say so.

Inasmuch as the key figures in John’s narrative *did* believe in Jesus before they understood His atoning death and resurrection, it would have been even more essential for John to state that the content of faith had changed. But of course he does not do this. The simple fact is that the whole Fourth Gospel is designed to show that its readers can get saved in the same way as the people who got saved in John’s narrative. To say anything other than this is to accept a fallacy. It is to mistakenly suppose that the Fourth Gospel presents the terms of salvation incompletely and inadequately. I sincerely hope no grace person would want to be stuck with a position like that.

Let me repeat. Neither explicitly nor implicitly does the Gospel of John teach that a person must understand the cross to be saved. It just does not teach this. If we say that it does, we are reading something into the text and not reading something out of it!

What is my point? That we should not preach the cross of Christ to men? Not at all. I will make it emphatically clear a little later on that I think we should. Instead, I am arguing that we need to focus on the core issue in bringing men and women to faith and eternal life. What is that core issue?

Very simply it is this: We want people to believe that Jesus guarantees their eternal destiny. Of course, we would like them to believe a lot more than this, but this at least must be believed. Our failure to clearly define our goal in evangelism can have a negative or impeding effect on our efforts to lead people to simple faith in Christ.

### **III. Adding to the Gospel**

Most of us deplore the efforts made by Lordship people to add provisos to the message of faith in Christ. According to them, true faith has not occurred if it is not accompanied by surrender or by a commitment to live for God. We rightly reject such ideas.

But in our own circles, there is a tendency to add theological information to our message of faith. Some people even regard belief in the virgin birth as essential to salvation, and in the absence of such belief they would not admit that a person is saved. They do this despite the fact that the Gospel of John makes no effort to present this doctrine. In fact, in John 1:45, Philip announces to Nathaniel that he has found the Messiah and he refers to Him as “Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” John never bothers to set the record straight, since in any case Jesus was legally Joseph’s son. But no doubt Philip thought of Jesus as the naturally born son of Joseph and Mary.

I have also just finished pointing out that the disciples who did believe in Jesus did not understand the significance or necessity of His death and resurrection, according to John 20:9. And this was true despite the fact that John the Baptist announced Him as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (1:29). If we require an understanding of these truths before faith in Christ can be valid, we are obviously requiring more than the Gospel of John does.

Let me say this: All forms of the gospel that require greater content to faith in Christ than the Gospel of John requires, are flawed. Evangelism based on such premises will also be flawed, because we will be tempted to test professions of faith in terms of the doctrines we think must be believed. Instead we should be focusing on whether an individual believes that Jesus has given him eternal life.

Evangelism, therefore, is intended to bring men and women to the place where they believe that Jesus guarantees their eternal destiny. If a person does this and we insist on more than that, we will be guilty of seeking to invalidate the simple exercise of faith that really does bring salvation.

Even in the grace movement, we are sorely tempted to make the gospel more complicated than God makes it. We can hardly bring ourselves to believe that a man who is largely ignorant of evangelical theology, yet genuinely trusts Christ for his eternal well-being, is truly saved. We have every reason to be embarrassed by this tendency on our part.

According to the apostle Paul, God is “the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom 3:26). Moreover it will be “at the name of Jesus” that “every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess” (Phil 2:10). The name of Jesus therefore is a mighty and exalted name, compared to which all other names in our age or in any other age are inferior and weak. No one has ever trusted in that name for his or her eternal well-being who has not been saved by doing so. And this is true no matter how little they might have known about the One whom that name represents.

I think we need a renewed emphasis on the power of Jesus’ name. As Peter declares in Acts 4:12, “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other *name* under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” If there is one salient fact about the proclamation of the gospel in this

present age, it is that God saves all those, but only those, who believe in this name for eternal salvation.

Another way of saying this is that the name of Jesus is the one and only way to God. “No one comes to the Father, except through” Him (John 14:6). Naturally this eliminates the idea that a pagan person who has never heard the name of Jesus can be saved by believing in something like the light of creation. Therefore, that is why we must always have missionaries and witnesses to the saving power of Jesus’ name. Without the name of Jesus there is no salvation for anyone anywhere in our world.

But the flip side of the coin is this: Everyone who believes in that name for eternal salvation is saved, regardless of the blank spots or the flaws in their theology in other respects. Another way of saying the same thing is this: No one has ever trusted that name and been disappointed.

In other words, God does not say to people, “You trusted my Son’s name, but you didn’t believe in His virgin birth, or His substitutionary atonement, or His bodily resurrection, so your faith is not valid.” *Wesay* that, but God’s Word does not.

Suppose I am in some deep financial trouble and a stranger named Sam, let us say, tells me he will get me out of my trouble if I will just trust him to do it. Perhaps Sam strikes me as a reliable and honest type person and I am convinced that he can and will do what he says. So I leave the matter in his hands and sure enough, he comes through and saves me from my financial problem with a generous infusion of cash. Did I believe in him? Sure.

But suppose after trusting him, I find out that he is a corporate CEO and a multi-millionaire. Would he later come back to me and say, well you didn’t know enough about me when you trusted me, so I’m afraid I can’t help you? Our deal is cancelled.

I hope you think this illustration would be an absurd way for this CEO to act. If he invites my faith and I give it to him, why should he deny the reality of that faith on the basis of my ignorance about his vast resources? On the other hand, is it not true that knowing these things up front would make it a whole lot easier to trust him to help me in the first place? I will say more about this in a moment.

Suffice it to say, however, that Jesus never fails anyone who trusts Him for everlasting salvation. No one on earth will ever possess more than a rudimentary understanding of our Savior’s person and work. But if I know I can believe on Him for salvation, and I do, He is too great to fail me. It is this conviction that ought to arm us for the work of sharing the gospel with people.

In the final analysis, therefore, salvation is the result of believing in Jesus to provide it. Salvation is not the result of assenting to a detailed creed. Salvation does not even require an

understanding of how it was provided for or made possible. All it requires is that the sinner understand the sufficiency of the name of Jesus to guarantee the eternal well-being of every believer. Thank God, salvation is so wonderfully simple!

#### **IV. Preaching the Cross**

In the light of what we have just said, should we preach the cross of Christ? The answer to that is emphatically yes. And the most obvious reason for doing so is that this is what Paul and the other Apostles did.

According to Paul's own statement, when he came to Corinth to preach, he was "determined not to know anything among [them] except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). Later in the epistle, Paul describes his gospel as one that declared "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures" (15:3).

I need hardly tell you, do I, that the Greek word for "gospel" (euangelion) as well as the word for "preach the gospel" (euangelizo,,) are both words found frequently in Paul. Peter also uses these words a total of 4 times in his first epistle. Luke uses the verb many times in Luke and Acts, the noun twice in Acts. Matthew and Mark have both words.

Are you ready for this? John never uses either word in his gospel. Why? Because, as I have already suggested, John makes the Person of Jesus, not a set of doctrines, the object of the faith that brings eternal life. Fundamentally he is trying to get people to believe in Jesus for their eternal salvation.

But this is precisely where preaching the cross becomes so important. Why should men trust Christ for eternal life? The gospel gives us the wonderful answer. They should do so because Jesus has bought their salvation at the cost of His own precious blood. And God has placed His seal on the work of the cross by raising Jesus from the dead. As Paul states: He "was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification" (Rom 4:25).

The preaching of the cross greatly facilitates the process of bringing men to faith in God's Son.

#### **V. Dealing with Souls**

This brings us to the bedrock issue of leading people to Christ. After all, that's the title of this article and I mean by it just what the title says. We need to lead men to *Christ!* Winning souls is a matter of leading people to a Person to whom they may safely entrust their eternal destiny. We are not leading them to a *message*, but to Jesus Christ as the object of their faith.

But more often than not, we have difficulty leading them *to* Christ, unless we lead them *through* the full gospel message. The gospel message is normally the avenue through which men and women come to understand why they can trust completely in the Savior. To be sure, trust in Christ *can occur* without a knowledge of the cross, but more often than not it doesn't. The message of the cross clarifies God's way of salvation.

On a very practical level, when I am dealing with an unsaved person, I find that if I simply tell him he only needs to believe in Christ, this usually doesn't make sense to him. Why should it be so easy? Why are not works required? To the unregenerate American mind, it doesn't sound reasonable.

So I find it not only useful, but indeed essential, to explain that the Lord Jesus Christ bought our way to heaven by paying for all our sins. In recent years I have liked to emphasize that He paid for all the sins we would ever commit from the day of our birth to the day of our death. This serves to stress the completeness of the payment He made. It is usually only in the light of so perfect a payment that people can come to see the reasonableness of a salvation that is absolutely free.

I say to people, "Jesus paid it all" and there is nothing left for you to do or to pay. All you have to do is believe in Him for the free gift of everlasting life.

One of my favorite illustrations goes like this: If a friend bought you a Rolls Royce and paid for it in full and offered it to you as a free gift, wouldn't he be hurt, or even insulted, if you insisted on paying for it yourself? In the same way, if we try to do or pay something to go to heaven, even though Jesus paid it all, aren't we insulting His great sacrifice and treating it as if it were not enough?

Most unsaved people can understand that point, even if they don't believe its true. The Savior's work on the cross thus becomes a powerful argument that He should be trusted for eternal life.

And apart from the cross, for most modern Americans, the offer of salvation by faith alone in Christ alone, just doesn't compute. Even after hearing it, it still may not compute. But by offering the truth of the gospel to people, we give the Holy Spirit something to work with in their hearts. And in the final analysis, it is only the Spirit of God who can sweep away the blindness of the human heart so that the glorious light of the gospel of Christ may shine into unsaved hearts.

Nevertheless, let it never be forgotten: If anyone has faith in Jesus as the One who secures his or her eternal destiny, that person is born of God. Jesus has never yet failed anyone who trusted in His name for eternal salvation. And He never will.

## **How To Lead People To Christ, Part 2: Our Invitation To Respond**

**Zane C. Hodges**

In my previous article I discussed getting the core of our message to men clearly in mind. Our objective is to lead them to believe in Christ to provide their eternal salvation. The gospel message about His death, burial, and resurrection is the normal context for our presentation of this core objective. But at the end of the day, anyone who trusts Christ for eternal life is born again.

In this article I will discuss the process of seeking a response of faith from those with whom we share our good news.

### **I. Believe that Jesus Died on the Cross**

In recent years I have become aware of a way of presenting the gospel invitation that troubles me. I believe I have heard it from my earliest years, and I admit it didn't really bother me for a long time. Now it does.

I have heard people say this: "In order to be saved you must believe that Jesus died on the cross." In the context of our present discussion, I mean that this is their summary of the requirement of faith. It is not just one item, among others, to be believed. Whenever I hear that nowadays, I get extremely uncomfortable.

For one thing, is there anyone anywhere in a Christian church (unless it is radically liberal) who *doesn't* believe that Jesus died on the cross? For that matter, even some really liberal theologians would consider that a true statement, although they might balk at the doctrine of the resurrection. You see why I am uncomfortable, I hope.

Now I know that the statement I am evaluating leaves a lot of things unspoken that are still implied by the speaker. Most of the time people who say you are saved by believing that Jesus died on the cross mean that He died for our sins. Indeed the phrase "for your sins" is often added. But even with that addition, there is still unspoken material that the person usually has in mind.

They usually mean to say, for example, that this belief in Christ's death is all that is necessary for salvation. Thus they are normally proclaiming salvation by faith alone. Also unspoken, but usually implied, is the idea that Christ's work on the cross

is sufficient to provide for our salvation. Thus they mean to say that we are trusting in the sufficiency of His work of atonement.

Let me be honest. I don't like this way of presenting a gospel invitation.

But before I go further, I also want to say that I believe that this kind of presentation has been used by God to the actual salvation of souls. But that doesn't make it the best way of reaching people or making the truth plain to them.

The very first disadvantage of this kind of invitation to faith is that it cannot be found in the Bible. Just think for a minute of John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47; Acts 16:31, and so on, and not a one of these verses invites us to get saved by believing that Jesus died on the cross. Why is it that we like to verbalize our message in ways that the Bible does not do? What is wrong with biblical language?

The associated question is this: what is wrong with *our language*? The simple fact of the matter is that the statement I am criticizing is technically incorrect. People are not saved by believing that Jesus died on the cross; they are saved by believing in Jesus for eternal life, or eternal salvation.

If we say it the biblical way, we will be able to support our claim by direct biblical statements. But suppose a person I am witnessing to says, "Where does the Bible say we are saved by believing that Jesus died on the cross?" What am I going to do then? In that case I would be compelled to take him to a number of Scriptures and try to combine them to prove my point. But even then, I would not really have a statement from the Word of God that exactly verified the point I was making.

I would like to see grace people abandon this form of invitation to faith. Let us always point men to Christ Himself as the object of faith, rather than to some concept that must be theologically clarified before it can really be understood.

## **II. Doing the Two-Step**

Here is another technique that bothers me. Many good grace people employ what I would call a two-step approach to faith. First they invite people to believe the basic facts of the gospel, and then they ask them to appropriate this truth for themselves. In describing this second step, they often prefer the word *trust* to the word *believe*.

I happen to think that people who take this approach to evangelism are sometimes running scared. They do not want to be accused of making faith mere intellectual assent. Thus they try hard to make clear that just believing the facts

doesn't save us. According to them appropriating those facts for ourselves—that is, trusting Christ for our own salvation—is the crucial issue.

This approach to things opens the door for the famous illustrations about the chair, or the elevator, or something similar. Here is an elevator, they would say. Do you believe it can carry you up to the top story of the building? If the answer is yes, the next question is: what do you need to do now to get to the top story? The answer is supposed to be "trust" the elevator by getting onto it.

In the distant past I used to use such illustrations myself. I confess this fact with real embarrassment. Illustrations of this type do show considerable creativity. But I am afraid that the creativity here is badly misused. What is created is another idea that is absent from the Bible.

Where in the New Testament do we find any such presentation as this? Sorry, my friends, it just isn't there. And if you read part 1 of this article, you will know one of the reasons why it is not there.

You see, as we noted previously, the facts surrounding the gospel message—such as the death and resurrection of Christ—are important facts for what they tell us about the reasons for trusting Christ. But believing these facts doesn't save anyone. People are only saved when they believe that Jesus gives them eternal life the moment they believe in Him for that.

Let's return for a moment to that deserted island in the Pacific Ocean that I invented in my previous article. My hypothetical unsaved man has just read the words of Jesus in John 6:47, "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has eternal life." All this person needs to do is to believe that statement and eternal life is his. There is no two-step process here at all.

The issues involved in eternal salvation are significantly muddled by the two-step approach I am discussing. The two-step approach seems to imply that two acts of faith are essential to one's salvation. The first of these is belief in the facts, the second in an act of personal trust. So this approach ignores the instrumental value of the facts of the gospel in bringing men to faith in Christ, and it tends to elevate them to the level of a preliminary condition which must also be followed by a second step, namely, trust.

Notice how the approaches I have objected to so far tend to blur the necessary focus on the Person of Christ as the object of faith. In the case of "believe that Jesus died on the cross" the focus is on an action He performed (admittedly an indispensable one). In the two-step scenario we approach Christ first by believing

certain facts about Him. The simple truth is that Jesus can be believed for eternal salvation apart from any detailed knowledge of what He did to provide it.

In other words, the sufficiency of Christ is the true focus of the faith that brings salvation. I am contending here that until we have that concept clearly in mind, we will be vulnerable to making appeals to faith that tend to cloud the issues rather than clarify them. If anybody in the world should be able to present a crystal clear gospel message and a clear appeal to faith, it ought to be grace people like ourselves.

But in a lot of cases we are not doing nearly as good a job as we should.

### **III. Ask Jesus Into Your Heart**

I am not going to say much about the famous invitational phrase, "Invite Jesus into your heart." I suspect that most *JOTGES* readers would not be tempted to use this phrase in leading people to Christ.

It has often been pointed out that this phrase is not biblical and this fact is reason enough to leave it alone. Of course, we could also note that a person who used it could have a Lordship message in mind. He could mean that we are to invite the Lord in to take charge of our lives.

However, we should remember also that people have gotten saved this way too. If they are being told to believe in Christ for eternal life and are told that when Jesus comes in, He gives it to us, they are being told the truth. When I believe in Christ, He does come in and He Himself *is* eternal life (1 John 5:20). Thus as 1 John 5:12 says: "He who has the Son has life."

But even after saying that, the unbiblical character of the phrase, "Invite Jesus into your heart," is too heavy a burden to bear. Our own terminology is never better than the Bible's. Never! And if we think so, we are kidding ourselves. And probably also confusing people.

### **IV. Commit Yourself to Christ**

Even less needs to be said about the phrase, "Commit yourself to Christ," and its many variant forms. Such a phrase *could mean* entrust your eternal destiny to Him. But it could mean a lot of other things too, including surrender of the life in the Lordship Salvation sense.

What's the point of employing phrases that are not only unbiblical but liable to misrepresentation and misunderstanding?

## V. What about "Trust Christ"?

I know that many grace people like to invite the unsaved to "trust Christ" for eternal life. I really don't have a strong objection to this phrase and occasionally use it myself when I want to offer a synonym for belief. But I never use it as my exclusive, or even pre-eminent, term for the faith that brings salvation.

However, I do resist the idea that is sometimes advanced that *trust* is a better term than the word *belief*. Of course, *trust* is often a synonym for faith in English usage. But often the English word *trust* has a diminished force that becomes equivalent to, "I just have to hope he will do it." In that kind of statement, the speaker is expressing a significant degree of uncertainty. This is not what we mean by faith.

I may even use the word *trust* of someone I don't really trust. I may say, "Jim asked me for twenty dollars to pay off a bill and I was afraid he might use the money on something else. But I said to myself, 'Maybe he does want to pay a bill.' So I gave him the twenty and decided that I would just have to trust him to do what he said. I hope he will."

Presumably all of us recognize that this use of trust is perfectly acceptable and fairly common. Of course, the word *believe* can be used that way, too. I may say, "I believe he will come," when I am not really certain that he will. Usually when we use the word this way, we signal our doubt by a tonal inflection: I *believe* he will come. But it does seem to me, at least, that the word *trust* more easily expresses some lack of certainty, as when I say, "I trust he will come." I think an element of doubt is indicated just by using the word *trust* in this kind of statement.

However, uncertainty is far from being the normal implication of the word *trust*. In *The American Heritage Dictionary* (2<sup>nd</sup> college edition) in the discussion of trust in relation to synonyms like "*faith, confidence, reliance, dependence*," the statement is made that all "these nouns reflect a feeling that a person or thing will not fail in performance. *Trust* implies depth and assurance of such feeling, which may not always be supported by proof" (p. 1300). So the note of complete confidence normally belongs to the word *trust*, just as it does also to *faith* or the verb *believe*.

The fact remains, however, that no English translation that I am aware of has opted to use *trust* as a replacement word for *believe* in any significant number of contexts. It just so happens that *believe* works better where the text is specifying the *content* of belief. For example, in 1 John 5:1, we get, "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God." It would sound strange in English to say, "Whoever trusts that Jesus is the Christ is born of God." The English word *believe* has the

distinct advantage of working well in almost all the salvation verses. Thus the word *trust* is only helpful if we are looking for a synonym to assist the unsaved person to understand what it means to believe.

But since our English Bibles use the word *believe* consistently and constantly, I think we are better off using the word people find in their Bibles. *To trust* may be a synonym for *to believe* but there are no real grounds for preferring it when we do evangelism. If for some reason or other we are afraid of the word *believe*, we ought to re-examine our fear and get past it.

And, as I have already said, the use of *trust* to express the second part of a two-step process of believing, has no foundation in Scripture. I would certainly urge that we firmly reject any alleged distinction between *believing* and *trusting*, which is thought to favor the word *trust* over the word *believe*. That would amount to a misuse of one or both of these words.

## **VI. Inviting People to Believe**

So now let's talk about leading a person to faith in Christ. In my discussion to this point, I have largely been clearing away brushwood. I have been trying to point out some of the mistakes that are made in inviting people to believe. Now let's consider this from the positive standpoint.

Let's suppose I have been talking to "Ralph," an unsaved young man. I have given him the gospel about the death and resurrection of Christ. I have emphasized the point that the Lord Jesus, by His death on the cross, has completely satisfied God in regard to Ralph's sins. Christ has paid for all the sins Ralph would ever commit from the day of his birth to the day of his death. Thus Jesus has purchased Ralph's way to heaven.

The one thing Ralph needs now is eternal life. People who don't have this go to hell according to Rev 20:15. Without new birth we are unable to enter the kingdom of God despite Jesus' death for our sins (John 3:3). And the alternative to eternal life is to perish (John 3:16).

However, I tell Ralph, eternal life is available on one condition alone, and that condition is faith in Jesus. I now turn to verses like John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47; and especially John 6:35-40. I spend time on each of these verses, but I particularly want to focus on John 6:35-40. Let me now give my presentation to Ralph in the first person. I speak as follows:

"Ralph, notice how Jesus stresses the fact that believing in Him has permanent results. In verse 35 He insists that the person who comes to Him for the bread of life will never get hungry for that bread again. And the person who believes in Him for the water of life will never get thirsty for it again.

"Let me put it to you this way, Ralph. If a person could lose the bread or water of life after coming to Christ for it, he would be hungry or thirsty again. But notice! Jesus says that can't happen.

"He says the same thing in a different way in verse 37. There He says that if a person comes to Him, He will never throw him out.

"Look also at verses 38-39. Here Jesus says that He came down from heaven to do His Father's will and that His Father's will is that Jesus should lose none of those that the Father has given Him and that He should raise them all up on the last day.

"And then notice how He repeats this idea in verse 40. Everyone who believes in Him gets eternal life and will be raised up at the last day.

"Notice, Ralph, that our resurrection at the last day depends on Jesus doing God's will. If I believe in Jesus for eternal life, I get it and He does the rest. He does God's will, so He will never throw me out. He will raise me up at the last day. I will never again hunger for the bread of life. And I will never thirst for the water of life. Do you think you understand this, Ralph?"

Hopefully, Ralph says that he does. If he says he doesn't, I will ask him, "What seems to still puzzle you, Ralph?"

At this point, experience suggests that I will often get a question like this: "Do you mean that if I believe in Jesus for eternal life, that I can go out and do anything I want and still go to heaven?"

I am always pleased to hear this question, because it signals to me that the person is getting the idea that this is a gift and that it is not withdrawn if we behave badly.

My usual way of responding to the question is that being born again is like being born into a family. After that, we are always members of that family, even if we are scoundrels. But if we have good parents, they are not going to let us run wild. They will discipline and correct us and do their best to get us on the right path. Then I point out that, after we get eternal life, God is our heavenly Father and He is the best Parent we could imagine. He will not let us run wild. He will spank us, if need be, and may even take our physical lives away. But Jesus will never cast us out of God's family.

So far as my own experience goes, I have never had anybody not find this an adequate answer. It seems to clear things up for people, while still maintaining the truth of a passage like John 6:35-40.

So if I have successfully answered Ralph's questions, and he tells me he understands what I have been saying to him, I can get to the bottom line. Here is one approach that I feel comfortable about:

"Okay, Ralph. You say its all clear to you. And maybe as we talked, you not only understood Jesus' promise, but you also believed it. If you have believed, then you now have eternal life. Do you remember how we went over John 5:24? Well if you have heard Jesus' word and believed it, that verse says you have eternal life and that you will never come into judgment before God to decide your eternal destiny. You have already passed from death to life."

At this point, of course, I can ask him if he *does* believe. If he says yes, I can also ask, "Then do you know for sure that you have eternal life and will be with the Lord Jesus forever?"

If he also responds affirmatively to this, and gives me no reason to doubt his veracity, I can and should regard him as saved. If, in fact, he does believe the things we have discussed from God's Word, then on the authority of God's Word he most certainly *is* saved.

Notice please! I have not asked him to pray, or to make a decision for Christ, or to do any of the many other things people often ask the unsaved to do.

All I have done is to ask if he has understood the truth we have discussed, and I have asked if he believes it. I absolutely insist that this is all the personal worker needs to do. I am encouraging the unsaved person to believe, but I can't make him do that.

If he does believe, a prayer is unnecessary. If he doesn't, a prayer will be confusing since I may direct him to say things he can't yet understand or believe, because God has not yet opened his heart.

I should know about this problem. You see, when I was a little boy, I went forward in a meeting and said a prayer before I really understood what I was doing. Actually I was saved years later. But that prayer confused me, because I spent years wondering if I got saved when I prayed it. The pastor even thought I had because he came to visit my mother and told her so. But I wasn't sure at all.

I now realize that no one is saved by praying a prayer. They are saved when they understand God's offer of eternal life through Jesus and believe it. That's when people are saved. And that's the *only* time when people are saved. All of the excess baggage that we bring into our encounter with unsaved sinners is just that, excess baggage!

In this brief make-believe encounter with Ralph, I tried to give him something to believe about Jesus Christ. I wanted him to realize that you could believe Jesus' promises about eternal life and that when you did, you were saved forever.

That's all I basically wanted. Everything I might have included in my presentation leading up to the issue of faith was designed to prepare the way for that faith. I work on the conviction that if a person understands God's provision for salvation through the cross of Christ, it will be easier for him or her to believe in Jesus for eternal life.

But the bottom line is this: I want people to know that the moment they believe in Christ for this free gift, they are saved and saved forever.

Let me add one final word. I find this a most liberating approach to evangelism. I have done my part if I have presented the message clearly. But faith in the heart is the work of God's Spirit and not a function of my technique or of my evangelistic dynamism.

The simple Word of God responded to in simple faith: that's what leading people to Christ is all about.