

A Critique of “Easy Believism”



March 4, 2008

Faith Pulpit

Faith Baptist Theological Seminary

Ankeny, Iowa

March—April 2008

A Critique of “Easy Believism”

Myron J. Houghton, Ph.D., Th.D.

What constitutes saving faith? Is it intellectual assent or something more? These questions go right to the core of the gospel message. In this issue of the Faith Pulpit, Dr. Myron Houghton of Faith Baptist Theological Seminary speaks to this important matter with careful Biblical thinking.

“Easy believism,” as I am using this term, refers to a position held by those who define saving faith purely as intellectual agreement with the statement, “Jesus is the Son of God, and He promises eternal life to all who believe in Him.” This point of view is associated with the Grace Evangelical Society and particularly the writings of Robert Wilkin, Zane Hodges, Joseph Dillow, and J. D. Faust. In order to evaluate this point of view, we need to consider the following issues.

The Role of the Law in Evangelism

In Romans 1:16 and 17 we notice the following truths:

1. The gospel is not salvation. It is the power of God unto salvation. The gospel concerns God’s Son, Jesus Christ our Lord (v. 3) Who died and was raised from death (v. 4). The gospel, the good news, describes what God did by sending His Son as a sacrifice for our sins and raising Him from the dead.

2. Salvation focuses attention on the benefits of the gospel and includes, among other things, justification (Rom. 3:21–26; 4:1–8; 5:9), reconciliation (Rom. 5:1, 10), regeneration (being dead to sin and alive to God; Rom. 6:1–11; 8:2), victory over known sin through the Holy Spirit’s power (Rom. 8:12, 13), and guaranteed glorification to all who are truly justified (Rom. 8:30).

3. Salvation is given to all who believe.

4. In the gospel God’s righteousness is revealed not only in the initial act of faith but also in faith from start to finish (Rom. 1:17).

As the theme of God’s righteousness unfolds in Romans, we see both positive and negative concepts. We first find the positive concepts of God declaring us righteous, which is justification (3:21–5:21), and God making us righteous, which is sanctification (6:1–8:39; 12:1–16:27). However, before these statements we find the negative concept of God’s righteousness as law in 1:18–3:20. So Romans 1:18 goes straight for the jugular vein with the declaration: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.” People cannot be saved until they recognize they are lost!

This recognition comes from the preaching of law before the gospel. Edward Fisher says it well in the following statement: “Now, the nature and office of the law is to show unto us our sin (Rom. 3:10), our condemnation, [and] our death (Rom. 2:1, 7:10). But the nature and office of the gospel is to show unto us that Christ has taken away our sin (John 1:29) and that he also is our redemption and life (Col. 1:14, 3:4). So that the LAW is a word of wrath (Rom. 4:14); but the GOSPEL is a word of peace (Eph. 2:17).”¹

The Role of Repentance in Evangelism

Once the law has been preached and the gospel has been proclaimed, the Holy Spirit convicts of sin. Then, if salvation is to occur, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20:21) must be produced. This turning to God necessitates a turning from idols (1 Thess. 1:9).

That great dispensational Bible teacher, H. A. Ironside, said:

Shallow preaching that does not grapple with the terrible fact of man’s sinfulness and guilt, calling on ‘all men everywhere to repent,’ results in shallow conversions; and so we have myriads of glib-tongued professors today who give no evidence of regeneration whatever. Prating of salvation by grace, they manifest no grace in their lives. Loudly declaring they are justified by faith alone, they fail to remember that ‘faith without works is dead’; and that justification by works before men is not to be ignored as though it were in contradiction to justification by faith before God.²

The Nature of Saving Faith

At the time of the Reformation, the Catholic Church seemed to define saving faith as knowledge and assent. Hence credo means “I believe.” One pre-Vatican II Catholic theology text states, “As far as the content of justifying faith is concerned, the so-called fiducial faith does not suffice. What is demanded is theological or dogmatic faith (confessional faith) which consists in the firm acceptance of the Divine truths of Revelation, on the authority of God Revealing.”³ In contrast, the Reformation churches described saving faith as not only knowledge and assent but also as personal trust.

Intellectual Assent versus Personal Trust

Wilkin states:

But how can we be sure that we have really believed? Therein lies a problem created by traditions, not by the Word of God. That question is foreign to the biblical gospel. There is no such thing as true faith as opposed to false faith. All faith is faith. If we believe in Christ for eternal life, then we have eternal life and we know we have it, because He guarantees it. 'He who believes in Me has everlasting life' (John 6:47). To doubt that we really believe is to disbelieve Jesus' promise.⁴

George Zeller responds:

The Lord Jesus spoke of people who believe only 'for a while' (Luke 8:13), describing the very temporary faith of those who have 'no root.' James spoke of those who had a 'dead faith' in contrast to those whose faith was living (James 2). The faith of the men described in John 2:23-25 certainly fell short of saving faith, because one of these men who believed when he saw the miracles of Jesus was Nicodemus (compare John 2:23 with 3:2) who needed to be born again! John 8:30 speaks of people who believed on Jesus, but as you read the verses following you discover that Satan, not God, was the father of these people (vv. 41-44). So to say 'all faith is faith' does not stand up to the measuring stick of the Bible.⁵

Intellectual Assent and the Possibility of Apostasy

Here is a situation described by Hodges and his evaluation of the situation:

Oh how disgraceful for a man to have known the truth and proclaimed the truth and then to deny the truth! He has put the Son of God to an open shame! Well you say, 'I guess he's headed for hell, right? I guess he's headed for eternal damnation. He's renounced his Christian faith.' Wait a minute. I didn't say that, and neither does the writer of Hebrews. Let me remind you that Jesus said, 'I am the bread of life. He that cometh to Me shall never hunger and he that believeth on Me shall never thirst,' and He also said, 'He that cometh to Me I shall in no wise cast out.' God's will is that He lose no one (John 6:35-40). He has never lost anyone and HE NEVER WILL! And I grieve because my friend AND BROTHER has lost his faith, BUT CHRIST HAS NOT LOST HIM. HE HAS LOST HIS FAITH BUT CHRIST HAS NOT LOST HIM! Do you believe in the grace of God?⁶

Hodges' illustration was given in a tape series which he delivered while speaking at the Church of the Open Door, which at the time was pastored by G. Michael Cocoris. The series of tapes is entitled, "Great Themes in the Book of Hebrews" (available through Redencion Viva Publishers).

Zeller responds:

We would agree with Hodges that God keeps His children and that we are eternally secure. We differ on HOW God keeps His children. The Bible says, '[we] are kept by the power of God through faith.' God keeps us through faith. Hodges teaches that, in the case of many believers, God keeps them apart from faith, that is, He keeps them whether they keep on believing or not. But the Bible teaches that God not only keeps us saved, but He keeps us faithful. Hodges, Dillow and Wilkin need to take God at His Word and believe that they are kept by the power of God THROUGH FAITH.⁷

A little later in the same article, Zeller comments:

The writer of Hebrews speaks for every true believer when he says, 'We are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul.' Notice that there are only two groups mentioned here: 1)

Those who draw back unto perdition (the lost apostates); and 2) those who believe to the saving of the soul (God's believers who are kept faithful). Hodges and Faust want us to believe there is a third group: Those true Christians who depart from the faith and who stop believing with the result that they are excluded from the kingdom (Faust) or excluded from the blessings and joys of the kingdom (Hodges/Dillow/Wilkin). In order for his theory to work, Hodges must redefine the term 'perdition' so that it merely means some kind of temporal loss rather than eternal ruin (see *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* under this passage). But Hodges' argument is nullified by the fact that this word is obviously used of eternal ruin in its New Testament usages: Matthew 7:13 (destruction), John 17:12; Romans 9:22; Philippians 1:28; 3:19; 2 Thessalonians 2:3; 1 Timothy 6:9; 2 Peter 2:1; 3:7; Rev. 17:8, 11.8

Again Zeller says:

Now it's true that as believers we have times when our faith is not strong and our Lord can rebuke us: 'Oh ye of little faith.' But we are not speaking of weak faith, but we are speaking of a person who has abandoned the faith entirely and who rejects the gospel and has completely turned his back on Jesus Christ (like the friend of Hodges in the illustration given above).⁹

Thus, the basic problem in the views of Wilkin, Hodges, Dillow, and Faust is that they compensate for a deficient view of saving faith by teaching severe punishment for the "believer" at the Judgment Seat of Christ and beyond.

There are many fundamental Bible teachers who believe the Judgment Seat will be a time of both rewards and some kind of punishment but not millennial exclusion. My understanding of this event is different. I believe the Judgment Seat of Christ is like an athletic awards ceremony in which gold medals are given.

I agree with Pentecost when he says:

In Revelation 4:10, where the elders are seen to be casting their crowns before the throne in an act of worship and adoration, it is made clear that the crowns will not be for the eternal glory of the recipient, but for the glory of the Giver. Since these crowns are not viewed as a permanent possession, the question of the nature of the rewards themselves arises. From the Scriptures it is learned that the believer was redeemed in order that he might bring glory to God (1 Cor. 6:20). This becomes his eternal destiny. The act of placing the material sign of a reward at the feet of the One who sits on the throne (Rev. 4:10) is one act in that glorification. But the believer will not then have completed his destiny to glorify God. This will continue throughout eternity. Inasmuch as reward is associated with brightness and shining in many passages of Scripture (Dan. 12:3; Matt. 13:43; 1 Cor. 15:40, 41, 49), it may be that the reward given to the believer is a capacity to manifest the glory of Christ throughout eternity. The greater the reward, the greater the bestowed capacity to bring glory to God. Thus in the exercise of the reward of the believer, it will be Christ and not the believer that is glorified by the reward. Capacities to radiate the glory will differ, but there will be no personal sense of lack in that each believer will be filled to the limit of his capacity to 'show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light' (1 Pet. 2:9).¹⁰

End Notes

1. Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, 1645. Reprinted in 1726 with notes by Thomas Boston, 338, cf. <http://www.mountzion.org/text/marrow/diff.html> (accessed April 10, 2008).
2. H. A. Ironside, *Unless You Repent* (West Port Colborne, Ontario, Canada: Gospel Folio Press, 1994 reprint), 16.
3. Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Company, 1955), 253.
4. Robert N. Wilkin, *Confident in Christ* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 55.
5. George Zeller, "Hodges, Dillow, Wilkin, Faust: Understanding Their Doctrine Especially as It Relates to the Bible's Teaching on Assurance," <http://www.middletonbiblechurch.org/doctrine/hodgeas.htm> (accessed April 10, 2008).

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 225, 226.