

# MYTH 6

Faith Is a Decision



## HOLD FAST

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*No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day.*

John 6:44

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*When the disciples heard this, they were very astonished and said, "Then who can be saved?" And looking at them Jesus said to them, "With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."*

Matthew 19:25-26

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*For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.*

Ephesians 2:8-9

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The nursery rhyme, *Humpty Dumpty* (HD), provides insight to our spiritual condition prior to salvation. Paul described it best in Ephesians 2:1-3, where we were completely and utterly destitute because of sin. When HD fell off the wall, he had a great fall, splattering on the ground, shattering his shell, splashing yoke about, and sending clear-icky stuff all over the place. HD was broken and without a doubt could not fix himself. Like HD, we too find ourselves spiritually broken and we cannot repair, patch up, or renovate ourselves. However, the King graciously comes and remakes us. Like HD, we are totally dependent on Him to put us back into true working order. And what part do we play? We simply believe the ability of the King. Nothing more is required!

However, they're many voices telling us that more is required than simple faith in Christ for eternal life. In fact we are told that persuasion of the truth in the trustworthiness of Jesus' Word to impart eternal life is not enough. Rather than mere conviction, there must be a willful decision for Christ.

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### Choose or Receive

Must someone make a decision for Christ in order to be saved? Answering in the affirmative, the voices primarily come from two theological positions.

#### *Decide to Be Saved*

First, consider the typical appeal at an evangelistic service. You have probably heard the following, “If this gospel message has spoken to your heart, come forward and make a decision for

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Christ today!” In addition, every gospel tract includes, in some form or another, the following: (1) God’s purpose, (2) man’s problem, (3) God’s solution, and (4) man’s response. A responsive decision to the presentation is the ultimate purpose of each tract. Whether following an altar call or using a gospel pamphlet, individuals are usually asked “to make a decision for Christ.” Many evangelists using this approach consider salvation to

be the result of the sinner’s willful response. The implication is that the decision is a cause of salvation, along with the work of God’s regeneration.<sup>1</sup>

During an interview with a representative of the Billy Graham organization, the spokesman provided the following explanation regarding a decision of faith by those who come forward. “It is like inviting a guest into your house; you invite Jesus Christ to come into your life by faith. In Revelation 3:20 we have the picture of Jesus Christ standing at the door of the heart...He cannot force His way in but will come in where He is invited, and where He is invited He

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says, ‘I will come in.’”<sup>2</sup> Using the identical verse, Campus Crusade’s fourth principle of *How to Know God Personally* states, “You receive Jesus Christ by faith, as an act of the will.”<sup>3</sup> Even though there is an obvious misuse of this fellowship passage for evangelistic purposes,<sup>4</sup> the intended use of the text is to solicit a choice of placing one’s faith in Christ.

### *Saved to Decide*

*Second*, those in the Reformed tradition believe that regeneration precedes faith, not vice versa.<sup>5</sup> This means that a sinner is spiritually renewed even before he believes! Nevertheless belief is again pictured as a decision for Christ that the newly reborn person must make. In other words, the Reformed view teaches that a person is saved and then believes.

As an advocate of Reformed theology’s stance on the complex nature of faith, R.C. Sproul writes,

The first two elements of saving faith, *notitia* and *assensus*, are matters of the mind. That is, they are cognitive, involving awareness of information and intellectual assent to the truth of that information....The element of *fiducia* probes the depth dimension that involves not only the cognitive but the affective and volitional response...the act of choosing...may be distinguished actively from the act of thinking and can therefore be attributed to something we call “will.”<sup>6</sup>

Addressing that volitional decision at conversion, Sproul explains, “Where formerly we were hostile or indifferent...toward Christ, now we perceive him as a Pearl of Great Price that we must possess at all cost....This [desire to possess] certainly involves a change in emotion, disposition, inclination, and volition. We now *choose Christ*.”<sup>7</sup>

The result is *two different approaches* in which a decision is necessary for salvation. The *first* is an appeal by an evangelist to

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prompt a decision for Christ, leading to salvation, in gratitude for Christ's work on the cross. The *second* is a prompting by God to make a decision for Christ in gratitude for God's work of regeneration. The motivation may vary, but a decision, a choice for Christ, is necessary for salvation in both instances.

### *Persuaded He Is Able*

Contrary to the above, a *nondecisional approach* understands that saving faith does not involve a willful choice. Understanding that both new birth and faith occur simultaneously,<sup>8</sup> faith concerns the persuasion of the trustworthiness of Jesus to provide eternal life, while regeneration is God's work of imparting life. Faith is passive.<sup>9</sup> It does nothing. To believe in Christ is to receive Christ's gift of eternal life.

### *The Big Question*

Ultimately the issue under discussion is, How does one come to faith in Christ? It involves both the convicting and drawing ministry of God. Commentating on the drawing of God from John 6:44, "No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day," F. F. Bruce writes, "Those who come to Christ are here described as being drawn to him by the Father...the divine initiative in the salvation of believers is emphasized...none at all would come unless divinely persuaded and enabled to do so."<sup>10</sup>

While Billy Graham's organization embraces the general influence by the Spirit of all mankind, "which renders men able to respond,"<sup>11</sup> the decision-for-Christ response in R.C. Sproul's position occurs after the new birth, since regeneration precedes faith. In the non-decisional approach, the "divine initiative" is understood as an "inclining of the human heart to faith,"<sup>12</sup> or "the work of the Holy Spirit which effectively moves men to believe in Jesus Christ

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as Saviour.”<sup>13</sup> This moving or wooing of the sinner by the Spirit brings the realization of the truth of salvation in Christ alone. Like a curtain being raised, men come to a persuasion concerning Jesus, not to a willful decision.<sup>14</sup>

Identical to *Humpty Dumpty*, we are enable put ourselves back together again. We can not deliver ourselves from sin and be saved. God must draw and make us spiritually alive. Our part is to believe in Christ alone for eternal life. That faith, Robert Wilkin writes, “is not a decision. It is the conviction that something is true.”<sup>15</sup> Zane Hodges, likewise, indicates that faith in Christ is an inward conviction or persuasion. He explains, “What faith really is, in biblical language, is receiving the testimony of God. It is the *inward conviction* that what God says to us in the gospel is true. That—and that alone—is saving faith.”<sup>16</sup>

Faith is simply the *realization* of the trustworthiness of Jesus and His promise to grant eternal life to all who believe. It is the *internalization* of the reliability of that object of trust. It is *embracing* the dependability of Christ. Initial salvation is not “because of” a volitional choice; it is “by means of” realizing the sufficiency of Christ to save you. Coming to Christ is not a choice. Christ is merely received by believing.

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### Offer or Gift

Is the saving message to believe in Christ alone for eternal life an offer or a gift? The answer varies with each approach.

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### *Believe to Be Saved*

In evangelistic efforts as illustrated in the decide-to-be-saved approach, often the presentation of the saving message is envisioned as an *offer* to be *accepted or rejected* rather than a *gift* to be *received*. Acceptance of Christ as Savior is an implied precondition for salvation. In those cases evangelism is similar to business recruitment where a prospective employee is offered an excellent position, with great pay and numerous perks. The offer is a deal of a lifetime that certainly would not be turned down by a reasonable person.

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My daughter was sitting in a college group when this acceptance approach to believe in Christ as Savior was used. After presenting the gospel message and encouraging the acceptance of Christ, the speaker indicated that anyone would be “foolish if they didn’t accept Christ as Savior.” Continuing, the speaker said, “If a person really understood this offer, he would accept it.” Now it would be the height of foolishness to expect a physically dead person to be able to decide to resurrect himself. How absurd, then, is it to expect a spiritually dead person to decide to come to Christ and be reborn? That would be absolutely impossible (Matt. 19:25-26). God alone undertakes the divine initiative to draw one to Himself.

### *Saved to Believe*

Likewise, Reformed Theology requires the acceptance of an offer at conversion. While regeneration is the work of God, conversion is here understood to refer to the response by man to God’s offer of salvation.<sup>17</sup> The response actually comes through *two volitional*



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*choices*. Remember, in the Reformed view the new birth precedes faith. The *first* willful decision concerns repentance, a behavioral turning from sin.<sup>18</sup> Without turning from sin, they say there is no proof that regeneration actually took place.

The *second* decision revolves around the third aspect of their definition of faith—*fiducia—the act of choosing*.<sup>19</sup> As previously discussed, John Piper, John MacArthur, and James Boice teach that Christ’s appeal for disciples to “follow Him,” including denying self and taking up one’s cross daily, must be accepted and obedience demonstrated at conversion.<sup>20</sup> If not, this means that saving faith did not occur. Boice writes, “The cost [of discipleship] must be paid if a person is to be Christ’s disciple and be saved.”<sup>21</sup> Further, MacArthur elaborates, “Let me say again unequivocally that Jesus’ summons to deny self and follow Him was an invitation to salvation....The contemporary teaching that separates discipleship from salvation springs from ideas that are foreign to Scripture.”<sup>22</sup>

*Discipleship at conversion*, which these teachers expound, is *not a gift* to be received, but rather *an offer* to be accepted or rejected. Requiring discipleship at conversion is alien to Scripture—unless, of course, one misinterprets Scripture and comingles saving faith with the walk of faith or discipleship. In so doing, faith and works are combined, resulting in a faith-works salvation. Keep in mind, however, that discipleship is a choice, “If anyone wishes to come after Me” (Luke 9:23). This is certainly not a gift. You don’t choose to have faith in Christ; but faith is the basis of choices that lead to changed behavior following one’s initial salvation in the Christian life.

### *Received by Persuasion*

Remembering that every illustration has its flaws, the game show, *Wheel of Fortune*, may provide insight. The object of the game is to solve a word puzzle. The first contestant to guess the right answer wins. The host asks each participant for his best guess as

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the letters are revealed. As the game progresses, the host continues to encourage each contestant to piece the puzzle together. But letters are what they are; evidence is evidence. The issue is how the participant perceives the evidence. When seen clearly, the winner receives his gift.

I remember studying advanced calculus with a group of friends. One of my more intelligent friends would work through a difficult problem as the rest of us observed his work. I remember saying,

*Men only come  
to a persuasion  
concerning Jesus  
Christ, not to a  
willful decision.*

“I just don’t get it! Please walk through each step again.” He had solved the problem correctly, but I did not understand how he reached his conclusion. The evidence of his work was staring me in the face. Again the issue was not with the evidence. I could not grasp the solution. Either I grasped it or I did not. Faith is like that!

The issue at initial salvation on man’s part is coming to faith in Christ for eternal life. If the evidence has been presented clearly, it is sufficient in itself. Are we persuaded? If so, a willful decision is not required! Salvation is a gift merely to be received by faith.

### Persuaded

I grew up in the Mormon Church. Because of the ministry of a good friend, Larry Green, and Campus Crusade, I began to reevaluate the faith-works teaching of the Mormon Church. While driving back to the University on a Sunday evening, *I realized it was true.* Jesus alone, without my help, provides eternal life. That evening, I believed in Jesus. I believed in Jesus, and in Him alone, for eternal life. It was not a decision; rather it was a persuasion, the realization that what Christ said was true.

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Providing unique insight to this troublesome concept for some, David Anderson writes,

It is unfortunate that modern evangelicals have imposed the non-biblical idea of decisional evangelism onto the Bible. Quite often people think that they are going to heaven because they decided to walk down the aisle, because they decided to raise a hand, because they decided to pray a prayer. What a person decides to do (works) is irrelevant. Becoming persuaded that Jesus Christ has taken away my death-sentence as a sinner is the only issue that determines one's eternal destiny. Persuasion is not a decision.<sup>23</sup>

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### Myth 6, NOTES

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1. *Myth 5: Faith Causes Salvation* previously addressed the issue that faith is not the cause of initial salvation. However, many evangelists using the “decision” approach consider the necessity of both regeneration and faith to occur simultaneously.
2. Iain Murray, *The Invitation System* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1973), p. 20.
3. *How to Know God Personally* (Campus Crusade for Christ International website; [www.campuscrusade.com](http://www.campuscrusade.com)), p. 3.
4. Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), pp. 68-69.  

The issue in Revelation 3:20 concerns the renewal of fellowship with Christ, not the establishment of a relationship with Christ.
5. R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), p. 87.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 82, 84 (italics his).
7. *Ibid.*, p. 87 (italics added).
8. Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1986), p. 326.
9. See *Myth 2: Faith Is Active*.
10. F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 156.
11. Murray, *The Invitation System*, p. 23.
12. John F. Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), p. 122.
13. Charles C. Ryrie, *The Holy Spirit* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), p. 61.
14. Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), p. 340.

Explaining the distinction between regeneration and faith, Enns writes, “The two [regeneration and faith] are set side by side in John 1:12-13. In John 1:12, at the moment of receiving Christ (believing), the person becomes a child of God; in John 1:13 it indicates that at the very moment the persons have been born of God. [However] John 1:13 indicates the new birth is not effected by the will of man.”

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15. Robert N. Wilkin, *Confident in Christ* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), p. 6.
16. Zane C. Hodges, *Absolutely Free* (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1989), p. 31 (*italics his*).
17. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, p. 338.
18. See *Myth 8: No Salvation without Rehabilitation*.
19. See *Myth 2: Faith Is Active & Myth 3: Faith Is a Tricky Word*.
20. See *Myth 9: Surrender All to be Saved & Myth 12: Co-Payments Required*.
21. James Montgomery Boice, *Christ's Call to Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1986), p. 107.
22. John F. MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), p. 196.
23. David R. Anderson, "The Nature of Faith," *CTS Journal*, 5 (Dec. 1999): 12.

