

I Was Telling People the Wrong Way to Heaven

By David Kesey¹

My wife and I have been involved in evangelism and discipleship for a combined total of more than 70 years. Many of these years were spent targeting college students, assisting a Christian organization which ministers to college students. We have served both in the U.S. (full time) and overseas (short term). We have had many wonderful experiences with this campus ministry and have grown a lot spiritually.

Even after we stopped working alongside this Christian ministry, we still used the evangelistic tool produced by the organization in our personal ministry for several more years. For 30 years, I used this evangelistic booklet to share with people—sometimes as many as 300 per year one on one—how they could go to heaven when they died. Furthermore, I disciplined and trained hundreds of people to share their faith using the same tool.

About 10 years ago, I was shocked to realize that I was telling people the wrong way to go to heaven. My evangelistic goal had been to help people believe in Jesus. But the tool I had been using stated that they must also yield control of their life to Christ, in addition to believing in Jesus. While this was certainly a worthy goal, I began to see that I was not clearly communicating to people that it was enough to simply believe in Jesus for eternal life—to stop trusting in themselves and to trust only in the Person and work of Christ as their only hope of heaven. I was not communicating effectively that salvation was a free gift, and by faith alone in Christ alone. Instead, I was communicating that salvation from the penalty of sin was more like a contract with God. If people did their part (yield/surrender/give control of their lives), then God would do His part (grant them eternal life).

Because of the evangelistic tool that I was using, I was telling people that if they believed in Jesus for eternal life (as God the Son who died for their sins and rose from the dead) *and* allowed Jesus to take control of the throne of their life by surrendering to and giving their life to Him, God would give them eternal life as a result. I began to see that this is hardly a free gift. Instead, I was making salvation costly, and a matter of one's giving control of his life instead of one's receiving a free gift.

While hundreds of people had “prayed to receive Christ” with me by asking Jesus to forgive their sins and to take control of the throne of their lives, I often wondered why so many of them never seemed to grow spiritually. After their decision to receive Christ, numerous people met with me for several weeks of basic follow-up. Yet, their lives seldom changed. Now, sadly, I understand that many of them were probably not born again. They were trusting in something that they had done (yielding control) instead of solely in Christ. So, in effect, their faith for eternal life was still in themselves—something they had done, and not in the finished work of Christ alone. Because of our sin nature, most people want to be able to take some credit for deserving something as important as eternal life. But, Eph 2:9 clearly states “that no one should boast” of the salvation they have been given.

Selective hearing can cause non-believers to be drawn to and focus on the part of the evangelistic message which makes the most sense to them. And, since the world does a good job in convincing non-believers that nothing is free in this life, they erroneously apply this rule to spiritual matters. “Doing something for God” (i.e., “giving control of one's life” to Him) in order to get something (heaven) makes more sense to non-believers. It assuages guilt, as well as appeals to their pride.

It is wonderful if non-Believers do yield control of their life to Christ at or near the time that they also trust in Him alone for their eternal destiny. This is certainly desirable. When a person clearly understands that salvation is wholly due to the work of Christ alone and because of His great love for them, this should automatically produce humility and gratitude. That, in turn, makes wanting to serve Christ the rest of one's life a natural response. But, because of the tool I was using, I was inadvertently making surrender a condition to

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gain eternal life. What is ironic is that I didn't even really believe this myself; nevertheless, the evangelistic tool that I had been using communicated this error. Hopefully, some of the people who prayed with me were born again in spite of my erroneous message. Yet, that is certainly not a good excuse for me.

I am grieved to see so many church websites communicate the same mixed and erroneous message that I shared for years. I know that I am partially responsible. My prayer to God is that He would open the eyes of the Christian world to the one true gospel.

I praise God that He has opened my eyes and has allowed my wife and me to communicate the Free Grace message for the past decade. We have learned from our past errors and can now pass on what we have learned to others. At the same time, I often wish that I could go back and apologize to thousands of people to whom I told a mixed message, regarding how to go to heaven.