

Who Carries Out the Plan of Salvation?¹

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What is the true “plan of salvation”? Is this plan something God follows, or is it what He requires of us? Do we follow it as a joint project along with God? Is the plan of salvation the entire cosmic design which God laid out before time and then followed in order to Redeem Mankind? Or, is it the one, two or three steps of response we are required to make in order to “apply” salvation to our personal lives? Is the plan a progressive series of eras in human history in which one is saved by obeying all the truth they know? Do we “carry out” the plan of salvation or did Jesus Christ fulfill it alone? Is it a plan “of” salvation, or is it the plan “for” salvation? Does the plan of salvation come to the believer in installments: First, the simple Gospel and then a more “full Gospel”? These questions came to mind after reading Jim Yohe’s statement about the plan of salvation:

His death, burial, and resurrection typified the forthcoming plan of salvation preached by Peter on the Day of Pentecost: “Repent (death), and be baptized (burial) everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost (resurrection)” (Acts 2:38).²

This United Pentecostal Church minister submits that the “plan of salvation” comes AFTER Jesus’ death burial and resurrection. He claims that when Jesus died, was buried and rose again, it “typified” the “*forthcoming* plan of salvation preached by Peter on the Day of Pentecost.” “Forthcoming,” means that it had not come yet. In other words, Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection were not *the* “plan” of salvation. For Yohe, the “plan” is the three steps of Acts 2:38: Repent, be baptized, and receive the Spirit. Rev. Yohe holds this view because it is the standard teaching of the UPCI. For example,

¹Excerpted from: Bernie L. Gillespie, *The True ‘Plan of Salvation,’* (Findlay, OH: In Christ Alone! Publishing, 2001), pp. 1-13.

²Jim H. Yohe, “Sign of the Empty Tomb,” *The Pentecostal Herald*, May 2001, p. 14.

Who Carries Out the Plan of Salvation?

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a prominent teacher in UPCI history, S. G. Norris, stated in reference to Acts 2:38: “Thus, the Book of Acts consistently presents the same keys – the same plan of salvation.”³ This plan of salvation is called the only plan and the “true gospel:”

This apostolic pattern – faith, repentance, water baptism, and infilling of the Holy Spirit – is still the pattern of salvation for us today. There is no other plan of salvation, no other true gospel.⁴

This historically and theologically unique interpretation of the “plan of salvation” lies at the heart of the UPCI’s doctrinal identity. It is the issue which predominated and defined the 1945 merger which formed the UPCI:

These men had been ministers in their respective organizations for many years. They knew, therefore, that the main problem to be worked out concerned the fundamental doctrine of the proposed new organization. It was brought out in chapters seven and eight that both the Pentecostal Assemblies of Jesus Christ and the Pentecostal Church, Incorporated believed in repentance, water baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, and receiving the Holy Ghost with the initial sign of speaking with other tongues. To be a minister in either organization, one must have obeyed these gospel precepts, and must teach and preach them. But in general, the two groups differed in the spiritual significance attached to each of these “steps” in the plan of salvation. The vast majority of the ministers in the Pentecostal Assemblies of Jesus Christ believed that water baptism in Jesus’ name remitted sins and was the birth of the water. They further believed that the baptism of the Holy Ghost was the birth of the Spirit. The belief of some in the Pentecostal Church, Incorporated was identical with this. Others, however, believed that the word “for” in Acts 2:38 meant “because of,” and that one was baptized because his sins had been remitted, through the efficacy of Jesus’ shed blood, at the time of

³“The Keys,” by SGN, Tract # 6119 (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press), p. 3.

⁴“The Biblical Experience of Salvation,” by JLH, Tract # 6150, (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press), p. 3.

Who Carries Out the Plan of Salvation?

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repentance. The Pentecostal Church, Incorporated had accepted ministers who believed either way, seeking to keep the unity of the Spirit until they all came into the unity of the faith. So it is easy to see that before a merger could be effected, there must be a fundamental doctrine relative to the plan of salvation that ministers in both groups could conscientiously accept.⁵

However, the major question here is not concerning the unique way that the UPCI interprets these three elements separately [we've addressed that elsewhere; [cp. "Hearts Purified By Faith"⁶; "How Did Paul 'Wash Away' His Sins?"⁷; "Remission of Sins in Acts 2:38"⁸; "How Many Stages?"⁹; "What Does it Mean to be 'Born Again'?"¹⁰. It is that they see them as THE plan of salvation. Ostensibly for Yohe, Jesus' work is not even part of the plan (which I am sure he did not intend). According to his statement, the plan of salvation - Acts 2:38 - was not known until it was preached by Peter on Pentecost Day. Instead of a plan which Jesus followed and fulfilled, it was a plan to be followed by those who heard Peter preach. It pertains more to what *they* had to *do* to be saved, than to what *Christ did* to save them. The UPCI views the plan of salvation as what one must obey in order to be saved:

⁵ Arthur L. Clanton and Charles Clanton, *United We Stand*, Jubilee Edition, (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 1995; original ed. 1970, Pentecostal Publishing House), pp. 143f.

⁶ <http://www.inchistalone.org/PurifiedByFaith1.htm>

⁷ <http://www.inchistalone.org/HowDidPaul.htm>

⁸ <http://www.inchistalone.org/RemissionOfSins.htm>

⁹ <http://www.inchistalone.org/HowManyStages.htm>

¹⁰ <http://www.inchistalone.org/WhatMeanBornAgain.htm>

Who Carries Out the Plan of Salvation?

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There are several things man must do in order to be saved. He must hear the gospel preached, he must repent, he must believe, he must obey God's Word, and he must be baptized in Jesus' name.¹¹

It is this writer's conviction that the Bible teaches that the plan of salvation is *all about God and what He has done to save His people*. It is not about the sinner's response. The Scriptures present the plan with a stress on what God has done. Yes, the Bible speaks strongly that the sinner must respond with repentance and faith. Nevertheless, what we must do is not the chief Scriptural accent. The Bible's call to repentance and faith are consumed with the magnificence of God's sovereignty and grace in salvation. The focus is not on repentance, nor is it on faith. The Bible's emphasis is on the object of that faith. The focus is on Christ. Faith is the way the believer looks at Christ. Whereas, the UPCI places great stress on one's obedience to Acts 2:38 as the plan of salvation, the Gospel places the stress on *Christ's obedience in fulfilling God's plan on the Cross and through the Resurrection*. There are a number of reasons why the UPCI position is wrongly focused. We will address some of those reasons in the next pages.

Confounding the Gospel

The "plan of salvation" is a phrase that is frequently used by certain Christian groups in referring to the "steps¹²," "keys¹³," or "stages" "How Many Stages?"¹⁴ a person

¹¹ *Salvation – The Key to Eternal Life*, (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 1985), p. 119.

¹² A few examples of writers who use the word "steps" in reference to Acts 2:38: "The first **step** we should take in the process of the new birth is repentance." [J. T. Pugh, *How to Receive the Holy Ghost*, (Hazelwood, MO: Pentecostal Publishing House, 1969), p. 17.]; "Romans 8:28-30 describes five **steps** in God's eternal plan of salvation for fallen mankind:" [David K. Bernard, *The New Birth*, p. 333-334.]; "The biblical **steps** of repentance, water baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, and the baptism of the Holy Spirit had long ago faded from the institutional church, . . ." [David K. Bernard, *A History of Christian Doctrine Vol. 1*, p. 274.]; "One of the distinctive positions of Oneness Pentecostals is that God's standard of full salvation for the New Testament church is repentance, water

Who Carries Out the Plan of Salvation?

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must follow in order to be saved. It is a confounding of what Jesus did with what we must do. Is it biblically and theologically correct to speak of the Christian's response as a "plan" of salvation? I do not believe it is. It is not the way the biblical writers speak about salvation. Paul states emphatically that the Gospel is Jesus' own death, burial and resurrection (1 Cor. 15:1-4). Rather than what God *requires* of us, the Gospel is what Jesus has already *done* for us. Since the Gospel is so clearly stated by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, it is hard to see how anyone can redefine it.¹⁵ Therefore, *the corruption of the Gospel must come by how the believer "applies" it.* This is exactly what happens with certain groups when they add to the Gospel by saying one must apply the Gospel

baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, and the baptism of the Holy Spirit with the initial sign of speaking in tongues. The major Oneness groups hold that this experience is "the New Birth," although there is some debate on this issue. While there are differences between groups and even within groups on the proper theological characterization of these three **steps** of faith, there is agreement that God commands everyone to obey them. There is also agreement that these steps do not constitute salvation by works. Rather, they are applications of the grace of God, purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ, and they are expressions of faith in God." [David K. Bernard, A History of Christian Doctrine Vol. 3, p. 112-113.] Bold in quotes mine.

¹³On the front of one Oneness Pentecostal periodical I found this title: "The First Order Unto Salvation Is The New Birth of Water and Spirit, St. John 3:5 -- Acts 2:38" followed by three diagrams. The first was a person praying with "Conviction Brings Repentance" above it and "Key No. 1 'REPENT'" beneath it. The second diagram was a baptism with "Repentance Brings Obedience" above it and "Key No. 2 'BAPTISM'" below it. The third was of a person with raised hands descended on by a radiant dove. Above it was "Obedience Brings the Holy Ghost" and below it was "Key No. 3 'THE HOLY GHOST.'" This perfectly illustrates the distortion that occurs when Acts 2:38 is made to be the "plan of salvation." The elements of Acts 2:38 are viewed as keys which unlock the door of salvation. Rather than faith in what Christ has done, the obedient follower of Acts 2:38 possesses the real means of "opening the door" to salvation. Nevertheless, Jesus said, "I am the door." (John 10:9). A few verses later he states: "He that believes in me, though he may die, yet shall he live." (John 11:25 NKJV).

¹⁴<http://www.inchristalone.org/HowManyStages.htm>

¹⁵Lee Strobel, in his book *The Case for Christ*, (pp. 229-230) states that such Evangelical scholars as Gary Habermas, William Lane Craig, and Craig Bloomberg "are convinced that this passage is a creed of the early church and not just the words" that originated with the Apostle Paul. Habermas informs, "The eminent scholar Joachim Jeremias refers to this creed as, 'the earliest tradition of all,' and Ulrich Wilckens says it 'indubitably goes back to the oldest phase of all in the history of primitive Christianity.'" (p. 230) Thanks to Shelby Smith for pointing out this reference to me. BLG.

Who Carries Out the Plan of Salvation?

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by obedience to “something,” rather than simply believing God for what He has done in Jesus Christ. This confounding happens too often among Evangelicals as well as other Christian groups:

The expression “God’s eternal plan of salvation” is often used in gospel tracts to refer to three or four things God wants the sinner to do in order to be saved, such as: (1) “Acknowledge that you are a sinner and need to be saved,” (2) “Believe that Jesus died on the cross for sinners,” (3) “Ask God to forgive you of your sins,” (4) “Put your trust in Jesus.” While these are things which the sinner must surely do in order to be saved, they hardly constitute the content of God’s “eternal plan of salvation.” And it is only a debased level of theological awareness, but one quite current in our day, that would suggest that it is. What the expression more properly designates is “the order of decrees” in the mind of God (Eph. 3:11).¹⁶

In the case of the UPCI, faith in the biblical Gospel is confounded by their unique interpretation of Acts 2:38 as the plan of salvation.

The Purpose of God

Interestingly, the word “plan” is not found in the King James Version of the Bible. The word “purpose” is used instead. Often, when “plan” is used in other translations it refers to human “schemes” rather than those of God. The words that best parallel the idea of “plan” in the New Testament are found in these verses:

Acts 4:28 They did what your power and will had *decided beforehand* should happen. NIV

Romans 8:29 For those God foreknew he also *predestined* to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. NIV

¹⁶Dr. Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1998), p. 461f.

Who Carries Out the Plan of Salvation?

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Romans 8:30 And those he *predestined*, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. NIV

1 Corinthians 2:7 No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God *destined* for our glory before time began. NIV

Ephesians 1:5 he *predestined* us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will-- NIV

Ephesians 1:11 In him we were also chosen, having been *predestined* according to the *plan* of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, NIV

As we see, the word “plan” is found in the New International Version translation of Ephesians 1:11. The word used here for plan (*prothesis*) refers to “that which is planned or purposed in advance - 'plan, proposal, purpose,’”¹⁷ and is also found in the following verses, which speak about God’s eternal purpose or will:

Romans 8:28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his *purpose*. NIV

Ephesians 3:11 according to his eternal *purpose* which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. NIV

2 Timothy 1:9 who has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of his own *purpose* and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, NIV

The word “purpose” is translated from the Greek verb *prooidzo*, which means “to come to a decision beforehand - 'to decide beforehand, to determine ahead of time, to

¹⁷Louw-Nida Greek-English Lexicon - *proqesij, ewj, h'(1) a placing before, a setting forth, presentation; idiomatically, in ref. to the sacred bread set out weekly in the tabernacle or temple, oi` artoi thj proqesewj lit. the bread of the placing before, i.e. consecrated bread, loaves placed before God (MT 12.4); (2) plan, purpose, design; of men (AC 11.23); of God (RO 8.28).*

Who Carries Out the Plan of Salvation?

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decide upon ahead of time.”¹⁸ The truth that God is a personal God assumes the idea of purpose. An eternal God would have an eternal purpose:

That God acts upon a plan in all his activities, is already given in Theism. On the establishment of a personal God, this question is closed. For person means purpose: precisely what distinguishes a person from a thing is that its modes of action are purposive, that all it does is directed to an end and proceeds through the choice of means to that end.¹⁹

It would be an irresponsible if not an irrational God who would create the world and direct its course of events with no prior plan or purpose behind such activity – or who would not direct it at all.²⁰

If God is a personal God, as we believe, he therefore has a purpose. And being God, He, by His very nature, has all power and wisdom to make sure His purpose or plan is completely carried out.

If we believe in a personal God, then, and much more if, being Theists, we believe in the immediate control by this personal God of the world he has made, we must believe in a plan underlying all that God does, and therefore also in a plan of salvation. The only question that can arise concerns not the reality but the nature of this plan.²¹

¹⁸Louw-Nida Greek-English Lexicon.

¹⁹Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation*, (Avinger Texas: Simpson Publishing Co., 1989), p. 6.

²⁰Reymond, p. 462.

²¹Warfield, p. 7.

Who Carries Out the Plan of Salvation?

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Many Christians (as evidenced by the “Openness of God” debate²²) have a severe allergy to the idea of God’s exclusive, sovereign control of the world. They chafe against the notion of an eternal plan and of Divine decrees. They cringe at the thought that God has unilaterally ordained specific things for our lives according to His sovereign will. I have personally heard teachers who instructed their class not to read from certain passages, such as Romans chapter nine, because they said it would be too confusing for people to understand. This thinking has grave implications for one’s knowledge of Scripture, and ultimately of one’s faith in God. Does this imply that God’s Word is too confusing for His people? If so, I am compelled to make this strong response: God has placed in His Word all that is necessary for us to know His will and be comforted by His salvation. If, then, we claim there are statements of His foreknowledge, foreordination, and predestination which we should avoid or neglect, then we usurp God. We suppose that we know more than God. And by avoiding or neglecting these portions of Scripture, we impugn the very character of God, because we say He has put things in His Word which are confusing, unnecessary or detrimental to our understanding. Who are we to tell God that these inspired passages of His Holy Word are too confusing for the “average” Christian?

Therefore we must guard against depriving believers of anything disclosed about predestination in Scripture, lest we seem either wickedly to defraud them of the blessing of their God or to accuse and scoff at the Holy Spirit for having published what is in any way profitable to suppress. . . Whoever, then, heaps odium upon the doctrine of predestination openly reproaches God, as if he had unadvisedly let slip something hurtful to the church.²³

²²Clark Pinnock and Brow, *Unbounded Love*; Pinnock, et. al., *The Openness of God*; Richard Rice, *Foreknowledge and Man’s Free Will*; and John Sanders *The God Who Risks*.

²³John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III. xxi. 3,4.

Who Carries Out the Plan of Salvation?

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One of the most tragic developments among a number of Christians is a hurtful and irrational prejudice against the biblical doctrine of predestination. Whatever one's interpretation of predestination may be, all readers of Scripture must acknowledge that God has placed the idea of predestination in His Word (Romans 8:29-30; Ephesians 1:5, 11²⁴) and intended it to bring faith, hope, comfort and security to his children. Instead, being ignorantly misunderstood, it has fomented a near hostility and bitter denunciation among unwitting detractors. What is most tragic is that God intended it for the assurance of salvation for His people, but it is unskillfully obscured and dismissed by those who find it unsavory to their human sensibilities.

The Decrees of God

The general idea of a salvation plan in the Bible pertains more to the idea of the decrees of the one Holy God in eternity, than it does to a temporal order with which we must comply. The text of Scripture which expresses this most succinctly is Ephesians 1:9-12:

Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself: That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him: In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will:

²⁴A side note: Many say that God predestined the Church as a people (corporately and abstractly) but not the individuals in the Church. This is really an attempt to make a difference without a distinction. How can one have a set for which there is no sub-set? It is obviously illogical. You cannot have a people predestined *without having the individuals that make up that people predestinated also*. Practically, these references were not first addressed to the corporate mystical body called the Church, but to individual members gathered to hear Paul's letters (as individuals) in the churches of Rome and Ephesus. They were also written by an individual who claimed to be individually predestined. The doctrine of predestination may be extremely difficult for one to accept, but if it is the teaching of Scripture one must put aside one's human opinions and accept God's Word.

Who Carries Out the Plan of Salvation?

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That we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ.
(KJV)

This passage contains several words which communicate the idea of a plan of salvation. In Ephesians, Paul uses words from two Greek word-groups to express the majestic scope of God's plan. The first group (*thelema; boule*) speaks mostly of God's "will" or intention and decision. The second group (*proginosko; prothesis; prohoridzo*) deals with the notions of foreknowledge, predestination and plan or purpose, as something set forth before time. The fact that Paul uses such a complex of words, compacted into a few verses in Ephesians, reveals the immensity and richness of the subject. Notice that: *the emphasis for Paul is on what God does and not what we must do.*

In Ephesians 3:9, the word "will" (qelhma^{25}) conveys the idea of intention. God has decided to do something. The force of the word is that God resolved to do something which He will not fail to do. Next, in the same verse, Paul speaks of God's "good pleasure" (*eudokia*²⁶). This word connotes that which is good in its nature and what God is pleased to do. That mystery which pleases God is that He will gather together all things in Christ at the fullness of time. The next word "purposed" (protiqhmi^{27}) - is that which God sets before Himself to accomplish. It is the goal of God's work. He sets before himself a goal or "purpose" toward which He is working. That which God decides to do,

²⁵In Louw-Nida Greek-English Lexicon - qelhma , atoj, to, gener., as the result of what one has decided *will*; (1) objectively *will, design, purpose, what is willed*; (a) used predominantly of what God has willed; creation (RV 4.11); redemption (EP 1.5); callings (CO 1.9), etc.; (b) of what a pers. intends to bring about by his own action *purpose* (LU 22.42);

²⁶In Louw-Nida Greek-English Lexicon - eudokia , ajh — gener. *what pleases*; (1) of men; (a) as having good intent *good will* (PH 1.15); (b) as a feeling of strong emotion in favor of something, *desire, wish, good pleasure* (RO 10.1); (2) of God *good pleasure, favor, approval* (EP 1.5);

²⁷In Louw-Nida Greek-English Lexicon - protiqhmi only mid. in the NT 2aor. proeqemhn (1) put forward publicly, present, offer (RO 3.25); (2) strictly, set before oneself; hence, intend, purpose, plan (RO 1.13).

Who Carries Out the Plan of Salvation?

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which pleases Him and which He sets before Himself to accomplish, is called a “plan” (Proqesis). This plan was formulated within God’s own counsel (Boulh²⁸), known (proginosko) by Him before time, and established - “predestined” (proorizo) by God sovereignly before all created things. The result of all of this is to bring praise to God’s glorious grace as it is revealed in those who trust in Christ.

If we are to stay close to the Bible’s way of articulating God’s salvation “plan,” we should focus more on the *prothesis* - the preordination or predetermined plan of God, worked out in and through Christ Jesus. We should avoid applying it to anything that we do in response to what God has done. It is never presented in the Bible as a prescription of personal responses for obtaining personal salvation. It is not a plan “for” salvation, as is supposed by Yohe’s treatment of Acts 2:38. One could say that our response to Jesus (such as Acts 2:38) was planned by God. It is true, that by placing faith in Jesus we do “participate” in God’s plan. But we cannot say that our faith in Christ is the plan “for” salvation. It is Jesus who actively works to fulfill the plan, while we passively through faith receive it. We do not receive it by performing a series of steps. By trusting in Jesus we are, in effect, saying it is Christ who does the work. That is what saving faith truly means. The plan of God always refers to those eternal decrees fulfilled in history by God in the Person and Work of Jesus Christ.

Certainly, all who use the phrase “plan of salvation” are not referring to a set of steps. It is not wrong to use the phrase “plan of salvation,” because God does have a plan for saving the lost. The problem comes with how some define it. Unfortunately, not all who espouse a “plan of salvation” present it as God’s plan revealed in the Gospel of Christ. There are several serious mistakes made when the Gospel (the culmination of

²⁸In Louw-Nida Greek-English Lexicon - βουλη, η/φ, η` (1) as an inward thought process leading toward a decision *deliberation, motive* (1C 4.5); (2) as the result of inner deliberation *resolve, decision, purpose, plan* (AC 5.38); (3) as the result of community deliberation *counsel* (AC 27.12); as the divine will *counsel, purpose* (AC 2.23).

Who Carries Out the Plan of Salvation?

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the true plan of salvation) is turned into a subordinate pre-figuring type, while the commands of Acts 2:38, a plan of action that humans must follow, is made the fulfillment of God's salvation. It is God himself who carries out the plan of salvation which he purposed from all eternity. He carries out His plan in and through the Person and Work of Jesus Christ.

The last two sections addressing the purpose and decrees of God establish that the emphasis or focus of God's plan is on God. This is the truth of *sola deo gloria* - all glory to God alone! The plan of God is cosmic in scope involving Heaven and Hell, angels and Satan, time and eternity, and the whole course of human history. It is about far more than one person's individual response. The focal point is the work of God to give us redemption and not on what we must do to receive it. It is about the steps God took in his incarnation – to live, die and live again as our Savior. It is not based on whether or not we have obeyed certain commands, kept the right procedures, or followed the correct steps. The cosmic, holy, eternal plan of God is more than a multi-step instruction sheet for do-it-yourself salvation. It is a mega-story of the purpose, decrees and consequent mighty acts of God carried out in the Person of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.