

# WHERE DO WE FIND THE 'PLAN OF SALVATION' IN THE BIBLE?

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"Where do we find the plan of salvation in the Bible?" This may seem like a strange question to anyone familiar with the Bible. The answer seems straightforward: We find the plan of salvation throughout the whole Bible - progressively revealed from the Old to New Testament. But, this simple answer is not enough for some; nor is it as easy as it may seem. Some passionately demand that we can only find the plan of salvation in one book of the Bible: the Book of Acts. They assert that it is wrong to look in any other book of the Bible for the plan of salvation. Any teaching about salvation from the Book of Romans is rejected because it is not written to sinners but to those already saved:

Now as far as the book of Romans being a book that you can place all your whole salvation belief in I think that perhaps you should consider that the book of Romans was not given to the unsaved but to 'the church' the difference being that they did not need salvation teaching but teachings on maintaining their salvation . . . God uses the Gospels and Acts to teach salvation or in easy way to look at it is the first four books of the New Testament is for the sinner to become saved and then the books to the churches is for the churches already saved.<sup>1</sup>

An example of this position is illustrated by an online sermon. The minister declared to a conference audience:

And some say the way to be saved is John 3:16. I'm telling you that John 3:16 is not the plan of salvation . . . . That verse is not telling you how to be saved, that tells us how much God loves us. Nobody's getting saved in that verse. In fact, the church had not even been started in John 3:16. The church that I'm a part of started in the upper room on the Day of Pentecost in the Book of Acts.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Email from DS (name withheld for privacy and without grammatical editing) to Bernie Gillespie, January, 13, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. Johnny Godair, "Running Without a Message," Steadfast Conference, Indianapolis, IN, Nov. 8, 2002. Obtained Online at <http://www.calvarytabindy.org/steadfast2002.htm>

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This speaker, a pastor in the United Pentecostal Church (UPCI hereafter), does not believe that the John 3:16 is intended to tell sinners how to be saved. He believes Acts 2:38 is the real message or plan of salvation, and that the way John 3:16 is preached by most Evangelicals is erroneous and misleading millions of people. Many Evangelicals would respond: "What! How in the world do you support that? John 3:16 is one of the most succinct and sublime statements of salvation in the Bible." On the other hand, many Oneness Pentecostal churches (of which the United Pentecostal Church is the largest) would probably reply, "Only Acts tells us how to be saved. The epistles are written to people already saved. You can't find the plan of salvation in the epistles or any other part of Scripture except the Book of Acts."

The guiding hermeneutic, or way of reading the New Testament, behind the latter view is called "Gospels-Acts-Epistles" (GAE). This explication of the relationship between the New Testament books holds that only the Book of Acts contains the true message or formula for how one must be saved. The message of Acts is the message of salvation *for the unsaved*. On the other hand, the epistles have a different purpose and therefore a different message. They were written *only for the saved*. Therefore, by this logic, since the plan of salvation does not need to be taught to the saved, the epistles, it is assumed, do not contain directions for how to be saved. The epistles only address *how to live the Christian life and not how to be saved*.

This view leads us to several important questions: Is this approach to the Book of Acts and the Epistles valid? *What is the relationship between the books of the New Testament to the plan of salvation? What is the proper way to relate Acts to the Epistles?* Is it true that the Book of Acts must be given priority concerning the plan of salvation? Does the logic of those who believe GAE follow sound biblical interpretation? If it does not, why? Why do those who teach it respond so vigorously when others cite passages in the Gospel of John, Romans, or Ephesians epistles as containing the plan of salvation? A larger question in this whole subject may be: "What is behind the UPCI's tenacious argument that the plan of salvation can *only* be found in the Book of Acts?"

### What is "Gospels-Acts-Epistles"?

The impulse behind the GAE teaching is the search for an answer to the question: "Where do we find the plan of salvation in the Bible?" The current leading writer of the UPCI, David Bernard, answers this question using the GAE interpretive grid:

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The New Testament consists of four divisions: (1) Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John), (2) Church History (Acts), (3) Epistles (Romans to Jude), and (4) Prophecy (Revelation). The Gospels are historical accounts of the life, teachings, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. None of them describes the establishing of a church; they describe the One who would establish the church upon His person, teaching, and work. The Book of Acts is a narrative history of the New Testament church, describing its beginning in Jerusalem and its spread to all Judea, Samaria, and the Gentile world. The Epistles are letters of instruction and admonition written to born-again believers to help them in Christian living. While the Epistles do contain references to the initial conversion experience, they assume the readers have already been born of water and the Spirit. The Book of Revelation is also addressed to established churches and believers, revealing God's plan for the future. Acts is the only book in the Bible to contain historical accounts of people who received the new birth experience in the New Testament church, including all accounts of Christian water baptism and Spirit baptism. Because of the nature and purpose of the book, it contains most of the direct evidence relative to the question, "How can I be saved?" The Book of Acts is the pattern and norm for the New Testament church, not the exception. If Acts is not the norm, then the Bible gives no example of what the church should be like. The five accounts of the Spirit baptism in Acts are not exhaustive, but representative of the way in which God poured out His Spirit across the entire spectrum of humanity.<sup>3</sup>

Bernard asserts that the Book of Acts provides the pattern and norm for New Testament salvation, while the epistles do not because they are written to those already saved. Therefore those saved do not need to hear the plan of salvation again. His assumption is that the epistles teach Christian living rather than the plan of salvation. What is rather interesting is the fact that Bernard uses the epistles to prove his Acts 2:38 doctrine. He asks and answers the question:

How do we identify personally with the gospel? Paul gave the answer to these questions in Romans 6:3-5, in which he explained how a person actually identifies with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection.<sup>4</sup>

Bernard and the UPCI say we cannot find the plan of salvation in the epistles because they are written to save people who do not need that information. But, he uses the epistles to prove his definition of the plan of salvation as identifying "personally with the gospel" by obeying Acts 2:38. This is a clear inconsistency. Others cannot use the epistles as sources for the doctrine of salvation, but Bernard can use the epistles to prove his view of Acts 2:38. Either Bernard's use of Romans six, to define "identifying with the gospel," is invalid, or the GAE doctrine is invalid and we can reference the epistles to define the plan of salvation. This same thing is true for many who write me. In an attempt to argue for the UPCI doctrine, they use the Epistles and Gospels to support Acts 2:38 teaching. They cite Mark 16:16; 1 John 5:8,9; 1 Corinthians 6:11; 1 Peter 3:21; Romans 8:16; et. al.

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<sup>3</sup> David K. Bernard, *The New Birth*, (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 1997), 202f.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

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This brings out the important point that *the UPCI often contradicts its GAE understanding by using the Epistles and Gospels to prove their interpretations of Acts*. If the Epistles can't be used to teach salvation, they can't be used to support or prove (their interpretation) Acts teaching salvation. This is an important point, because Bernard and others build their case for Acts 2:38 as the plan of salvation on the GAE hermeneutic. If GAE is proven invalid as a hermeneutic, his whole assumption, that Acts alone provides the plan of salvation, falls flat. Many others in the UPCI join Bernard in his view of Acts and Epistles:

This gift, the baptism of the Spirit, was promised by Jesus (John 7:38). It is the earnest of our inheritance (Ephesians 1:13-14). In the actual examples of men and women being saved in the Book of Acts, the Bible records that they received the gift of the Holy Ghost. In fact, the only biblical examples of people being saved in the New Testament church age are recorded in the Book of Acts. We do not see anyone actually receiving salvation in the Epistles, for they are letters written to those who have already received salvation.<sup>5</sup>

In order for the book of Romans to make sense it must be placed in its proper chronological order of events and other books of the Bible (sic) must absolutely support the intent (sic) meaning of the book of Romans. You cannot depend solely on this book for salvation.<sup>6</sup>

On a recent discussion board, a Oneness Pentecostal minister rejected finding the plan of salvation in the epistles, saying:

Paul (a saved man) is writing to saved people. He is not telling them how to get saved or relating how he got saved. They are already saved. The things he is saying, he is saying in the present tense.<sup>7</sup>

I received a recent email from a member of a church who said the GAE was the main reason his pastor still teaches Acts 2:38-is-the-New Birth:

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are really before the new dispensation of Grace and are really considered old testament (sic). Acts is where one learns how to be saved, and the epistles are what keep one saved. We must rightly divide the word of truth. Certain things are not mentioned, as far as salvation, in the epistles because Paul understands he is writing to people who are already saved. So we can not look to the epistles for salvational truths.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> William B. Chalfant, *Ancient Champions of Oneness*, (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame® Press, Revised edition 2001), p. 138.

<sup>6</sup> Private email from M (name withheld for privacy) sent to In Christ Alone! Ministries Aug. 19, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Post by the late Jim H. Yohe, Obtained Online Nov. 10, 2003 at:

<http://faithchildforum.com/InvisionBoard/index.php?s=9608a956a54570333a76be0826442481&act=ST&f=27&t=47&st=15>

<sup>8</sup> Email to Bernie Gillespie October 30, 2008 at incamin@ameritech.net. Name withheld for privacy.

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In a recent YouTube video, a Oneness pastor is preaching about Acts 2: 38 as the only way to be saved.<sup>9</sup> In the blog section below the video, a non-Oneness person asked this questions:

Also can you tell me what Romans 10:8-10 means? Because it seems pretty clear from the words that it means 8 But what does it say? The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart[e](that is, the word of faith which we preach): 9 that if you (confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.) 10 (For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.)<sup>10</sup>

There was a response to the blog that said:

It means exactly what it says, but this epistle wasn't (sic) written to the sinner. It (sic) was written to the "church" in Rome. (believers) Paul was clearly speaking about Israel and them being saved. That was his hearts desire.<sup>11</sup>

Where does this form of interpretation come from? And why is it used and held so tenaciously? The UPCI's application of GAE is derived from a particular way of interpreting the Bible, originally developed by Pentecostals to support their view of the "Full Gospel" and their view of Spirit-baptism, *vis-a-vis* most other Christians. Gordon D. Fee, raised as a Pentecostal, and now one of the foremost New Testament scholars, explains:

. . . in general the Pentecostals' experience has preceded their hermeneutics. In a sense, the Pentecostal tends to exegete his or her experience. . . . They took the scriptural pattern they had found, supported by their own personal experience and that of thousands of others, and made it normative for all Christians.<sup>12</sup>

Fee further clarifies in a footnote:

It was not the natural reading of texts that led them to a view of distinct from and subsequent to. They were in search of something, and found it. This is not quite the same thing as simply reading texts and coming to the conclusion that it clearly teaches that this is the norm of Christian experience.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Brother Kenneth Phillips, "A Revelation of the Name," Online December 11, 2008, at: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FINQQhSqd\\_Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FINQQhSqd_Y)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), pp. 86.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 86f.

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I would go further and suggest that, while the development of specific religious beliefs or practices is not always neat and clean, there is usually a combination of both experience and cognition that goes into forming a belief. For Pentecostals it was not simply that they had an experience, which they tried to find in the Bible. It was that in reading the Bible, and feeling that something was lacking in their experience, they found a phenomenon in the Book of Acts that provided an answer. They sought to recreate the experience found in the Book of Acts. When the descriptions they longed for in the Bible became realized by their experience, the interpretation developed that "this is that." For them, experience, at long last, matched what they saw in the Bible. The assumption followed, they had experienced what the Bible taught. The next logical step in their thinking was that those who did not have this experience were missing something that the Bible expected or required. This urged them to conclude that all Christians who did not have the Pentecostal experience must not be "full" Christians. They believed that it was their responsibility, as experienced Pentecostals, to bring them up to the New Testament standard.

Pentecostals in the main have employed the GAE form of interpretation because their central doctrines of Spirit baptism and speaking with tongues as initial evidence were not found in the Epistles. Even so, they believe their experience was the restoration of those found in Acts. As a result, they viewed Acts as holding a special theological role in the doctrines of the Church. It was important for the heart of Pentecostalism to reinterpret the didactic nature of Acts. The Epistles do not lend sufficient didactic or theological weight to the Pentecostal distinctives. Thus, another way of viewing the nature of Acts and its function in the New Testament canon was needed.

Protestants have traditionally interpreted Acts by the Epistles. In order to support their Pentecostal distinctives, Pentecostal teachers and theologians attempted to place Acts on equal interpretive grounds by advocating a more didactic, and thus normative role for the narrative sections of Acts. It is granted that all biblical narratives have a theological quality. But Pentecostals say the Acts narratives intend to present paradigmatic accounts of Spirit baptism, which are normative for all Christians, of all times, everywhere. They assert the Acts narratives are of equal authority in forming doctrine as the Epistles. In this way, speaking in tongues as the initial evidence of Spirit baptism is normative, even though there is no confirming doctrinal testimony found within the Epistles. Acts is said to establish doctrine through the use of narratives. This is a basic premise for the GAE model.