

Salvation Is Not About Denomination—It Is About Jesus!

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | June 23, 2022



I am so thankful for my church, for having been raised in a conservative Christian denomination that taught me about Jesus, instilled in me a confidence in the Bible, and gave me a biblical worldview of a Creator God who made human beings in His image.

Yet, somehow during my upbringing, an idea got imbedded into my mind that salvation is not from Jesus alone but is also connected to, if not determined by, church membership—by being a member of the “right” denomination and believing the “right” doctrines. I am not suggesting that my church overtly and intentionally taught this idea in words, but it was certainly what was taught by function. For instance, counties that had Christian churches of other denominations but not one of ours were called “dark counties,” as if the light of the gospel had yet to be brought to them. Evangelism wasn’t focused on merely reaching non-Christian peoples, but also on converting people from other denominations to ours, of convincing other Christians of how their various doctrines, rituals, or ceremonies were wrong and ours were right. In other words, the focus wasn’t simply on bringing people to accept Jesus as their Savior, but also bringing people to accept our denomination as the only church with the “truth,” which meant accepting our specific list of doctrines and rules. And I have discovered that my church is not the only denomination that believes this or functions in this way.

But as I have studied Scripture for myself, I have discovered that the Bible teaches that in the church, the wheat (saved), which Jesus has planted, and the weeds (the lost), which His enemy has planted, grow up together—and will do so right up until the harvest (Matthew 13:24–30).

This means that belonging to a church organization is not the same as belonging to Jesus, that being a member in good standing with a denomination is not the same as being a member of God's kingdom.

Jesus said, "Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" (Matthew 7:22, 23 NIV84). Such people are working in ministry in the name of Jesus—not in the name of Buddha or Muhammed or Hare Krishna. These people are Christians and almost certainly members of one denomination or another, perhaps even church employees or in leadership. Yet Jesus will say that He never knew them, and He calls them evildoers. This indicates that the "weeds" in the church are not merely the backslidden whose names remain on the books or the nominal member who isn't committed to mission, but are also those who are actively working for the cause.

We all recognize that the "church" in Christ's day was the Jewish nation, blessed by God with the Scriptures, the prophets, the Sabbath, truths about healthful living, the object lessons of the temple and its services—all designed to enlighten minds with heavenly truth and free people from the bondage of sin. Yet the "church" leaders of that God-blessed organization rejected God when He stood among them. Their membership in the tribe, in the community, even their positions in church leadership, did not deliver them from sin, nor did it make them part of God's kingdom.

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

He answered: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:25-37 NIV84).

Who in this parable is part of God’s kingdom? Was it the priest or Levite—or the Samaritan? But who had membership in the right organization? Which of them would hold to the right doctrines? Who worshipped on the right day or brought the right sacrifice? Did membership, doctrine, or ritual make a difference? If not, what did?

What determines whether we are part of God’s kingdom or not? What determines whether we are among the wheat or the weeds? Jesus said, “Everyone will know by this that you are my disciples—if you have love for one another” (John 13:35 NET).

And how do we experience this love? Only by having a trust relationship with God, which only comes from accepting the truth that Jesus revealed about His Father. Jesus told us that if we have seen Him, we have seen the Father (John 14:9). It is by accepting the truth about God that we are won to trust and experience the intimate knowledge of God, knowing God and being known by Him, that restores us to eternal life (John 17:3), because that intimate connection restores God’s living law of love into our inmost being, solidifying us into faithful friends of God who cannot be shaken from our loyalty to Him (Romans 5:5; Hebrews 8:10; Revelation 12:11).

Throughout human history, there has only and always been three groups of people:

- Those settled completely into their loyalty to God so that nothing can shake them out of it: Enoch, Noah, Job, Moses, Daniel, Shadrack, Meshack, Abednego, Stephen, and so many more who loved God and others.
- Those who have persisted in sin such that they have destroyed the faculties that are sensitive to the movements of the Spirit of truth and love. They are so settled into lies, sin, and rebellion that no amount of truth, love, or intervention will have any saving impact upon them: those who refused to get on the ark, those who died in Sodom, Judas, and so many more.
- Those who have neither been sealed to God nor persisted in sinfulness and rebellion to God to the point of destroying the faculties that are sensitive to truth and love: those who are still reachable for the kingdom of God.

But before Jesus comes to take us to heaven, members of this third group settle into one or the other of the first two groups. Every single person will decide upon the methods they prefer—the methods of truth, love, and freedom or the methods of lies, selfishness, and coercion. Every person decides which law they prefer (love or selfishness) in how they treat others. And in choosing how we treat “the least of these” (Matthew 25:31-46), we are choosing for or against Jesus, we are choosing for or against the law of love, we are choosing which kingdom we prefer, we are choosing what character we develop. Each person shapes and solidifies their own character, either by faith in Christ and practicing His methods via the power of the indwelling Spirit, or by fear and distrust and by embracing and practicing the methods of this world.

Doctrinal attestation doesn’t determine salvation; church membership doesn’t determine salvation; ritual and ceremony doesn’t determine salvation. Salvation is found only in a faith relationship with Jesus that transforms the character.

Those religious people who crucified Christ belonged to the same organization as Jesus, the organization we recognize as God's chosen for that time. Yet their membership in that organization did not make them friends of God. Those same religious leaders who crucified our Savior would have agreed with Jesus on:

- The inspiration of Scripture
- The creation as described in Genesis
- The seventh-day Sabbath
- The Ten Commandments
- The observance of the annual feasts and temple ceremonies
- What foods were permissible to eat
- Tithing

Their correct doctrines, ceremonies, and rituals did not make them friends of God. Yet the Good Samaritan, who didn't keep Sabbath, sacrifice at temple, eat the proper diet, or observe the proper feasts, is the one commended by Christ as fulfilling and living out the law of God.

The issue has always been and will always be one of character. That does not mean our doctrines are irrelevant; however, the central question, the issue that all other concerns hinge upon is the truth about God, His character, His methods, how His design law functions (2 Corinthians 10:3-5). If we don't first have the truth about God, His character and methods as Jesus revealed, then we might have the right doctrine (like the Jews had the right Sabbath) but like them kill the Lord of the Sabbath—and then want Him off the cross in time to observe the right doctrinal day of worship.

If we don't first understand, admire, and worship the true God, then having right doctrines will not save us. Why? Because it is a design law of how God created us that we become like the God we admire and worship. It is by beholding that we are changed (2 Corinthians 3:18). If we worship worthless idols, then we become worthless (Jeremiah 2:5). If we exchange the truth of God for a lie, our minds become darkened, depraved, and futile (Romans 1:18-31). If we believe the lie that God is as Satan says He is, an imperial dictator who makes up rules and enforces those rules by inflicting punishment, then having the right doctrines will not help us. Instead, we will become just like the legalistic Jews who crucified Christ.

It is only by accepting the truth about God that Jesus revealed, by fixing our eyes on Christ, that He finishes (perfects) His work of transforming us (Hebrews 12:2). Our hearts, minds, and characters are changed to be like His when we worship Him for who He is: the Creator God of love whose laws are the protocols upon which life is built to operate.

The Jewish leadership in Christ's day didn't have wrong doctrines; they had a wrong understanding of God and how His law functioned. Thus, they became like the law-imposing god they worshiped.

In every church group, organization, and denomination today, the wheat and the tares grow together and will continue to do so right up until the harvest. In every church, there are those who are planted by Jesus and those who are planted by His enemy; those who have accepted the truth about God that Jesus has revealed and those who prefer the dictator god; those who embrace God's laws as design laws and those who prefer imposed human-like laws. For those who worship the Creator God of love who Jesus revealed, whose laws are the protocols of life, we find that there is a unity in our faith (Ephesians 4:13) regardless of what church organization we choose to affiliate with. This unity is built upon our love for God and each other, understanding and living out His principles of truth, love, and freedom in

our lives.

Salvation is not found in organizational affiliation; salvation is found specifically and only in Jesus. We either have Jesus or we don't. We either are renewed in righteousness or we are not. We either are reborn into the kingdom of God or we remain dead in trespass and sin. We either trust Jesus with our entire being or we trust in something else. We either love God and others or live for self.

There is loyalty to Christ—and there is everything else. Salvation is not about denominations; it is about Jesus!