

*Ephesians 2:1–10 (NIV)*

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, <sup>2</sup> in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. <sup>3</sup> All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. <sup>4</sup> But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, <sup>5</sup> made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. <sup>6</sup> And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—<sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

*James 2:14–18 (NIV)*

<sup>14</sup> What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? <sup>15</sup> Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. <sup>16</sup> If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? <sup>17</sup> In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. <sup>18</sup> But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.

*Paul tells us that our salvation is a gift from God. But what is our part?*

And so we come to the last week in this series on important heresies that have been with the church over the millennia. By way of review, here is what we mean, and don’t mean, by “heresy”:

- “Heresy” is an intramural word; it is about beliefs within a religion. It isn’t the word to use when speaking of any other religion. Heresy comes from within the church, not from the outside.
- A heresy is not just a mistake. We all make those. The essentials of the Christian faith to which all Christians ascribe are relatively few. Consider the brevity of the Apostles’ Creed. A heresy is not built on a run of the mill error. Rather . . .

A heresy is a distorted, vulnerable, and fragile form of Christianity that cannot sustain itself.

The last heresy we’ll consider is named after its talented and persuasive proponent from the British Isles, Pelagius, who lived about 400 years after Jesus. Pelagius implicitly denied the existence of original sin, the deep and enduring darkness that lurks in the hearts of all humans. Thus, Pelagius claimed, people can take their own initial steps toward salvation by their own efforts. Pelagius was trying to work out the relationship of our own efforts to the grace of God. To put it another way, can people be saved by their own efforts?

If you asked the American people, you’d hear a resounding “yes.” When pollsters ask people about heaven, the vast majority (as much as 85%) will say that they believe they will be in heaven after their death – because they are a “good enough” person. Heaven, thus, is the home of those who are good enough to get there – and that includes almost

everyone. This is not surprising. Most people think pretty well of themselves and most of us want to think that we are in control of the things that really matter.

When we put the question to the Bible (can people be saved by their own efforts?), we find what feels like a contradiction, a disagreement even, within the New Testament. Honestly, that is about how Martin Luther viewed it. Take a moment and read the two Scripture passages from Ephesians and James. . . . Don't you feel a bit forced into choosing between them?

Doesn't Paul write in Ephesians say that we are saved by faith, not works? But then doesn't James ask sarcastically, "Can faith save you?" Paul seems to make it all about faith while James, Jesus' half-brother, seems to make it all about works. We wonder, which is it?

But, as in much Christian theology, we don't have to and, indeed, must not choose between them. The Christian faith is built on a series of "ANDs" not "ORs." God is three AND one. Jesus is fully God AND fully human. Salvation is instantaneous AND a process. And so on. We fall into error when we feel like we have to *choose* one or the other. Roger Olsen's excellent book, *The Mosaic of Christian Beliefs*, is an overview of the history of Christian theology and is organized into twenty-two chapters, each one devoted to a theological "AND." Coming to embrace the ANDs and not feeling forced to choose between the ORs is essential to grasping the biblical message.

Augustine acknowledged the towering intellect of Pelagius, but also believed that his smarts had gotten Pelagius into trouble and led him down the path of heresy – embracing a weak and fragile form of Christianity which could not stand, a Christianity that was focused on humanity rather than on God. Pelagius wanted "the answer." We do too.

So, how much of a part do we play in our own salvation? Are we like a drowning passenger who is tossed a life preserver and must grab the life preserver to be rescued? Or perhaps we merely have to hold out our hand to accept the salvation God offers us by his grace? Many Christians would hold that both of these examples are *semi-pelagian* – still minimizing God's grace, as if God can't rescue us unless we help out. Others would say that we are like the dead and it is up to God and God alone to bring us to new life. But, then, where does this leave our own free will? Does this mean that God drags people into salvation whether they want it or not?

Sometimes these different perspectives are expressed as the difference between *Calvinism*, after the teachings of John Calvin, and *Arminianism*, after the teachings of Jacobus Arminius, a Dutch theologian of the Reformation. In Calvinism, the attribute of God that is preserved above all else is God's sovereignty. In Arminianism, the attribute of God that is preserved above all else is God's love. Because love necessarily entails a free and willing heart (who wants to be "loved" by a robot), Arminians tend to emphasize the role of free will in salvation.<sup>1</sup> Yet, how could there be any role for us to play in our own salvation – after all, as Paul wrote, our salvation is by God's grace and not our own efforts. How do we possibly make any real sense of this?

Roger Olson of Baylor Seminary is an Arminian theologian and offers the following illustration, which gets about as close to peering within this mystery as we are going to get. This is from his excellent and provocative book, *Questions To All Your Answers*, which I highly recommend.

Let me try out a homely illustration on you. Imagine that we humans are fallen into a deep pit (sin) with steep and slippery sides. We're helpless to free ourselves but must get free or we'll die. There are three Christian views of how we get out of

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to remember that I'm speaking of emphases not choices.

<sup>2</sup> Though "born again" is often used to denote some particular group of Christians, that is a mistake. In the Bible, all Christians, i.e., all those who have faith in Jesus Christ, have been born a second time, or born againagain. Jesus' conversation with the Pharisee Nicodemus in John 3 sets forth the essence of this claim

the pit. The semi-Pelagian says God throws a rope down into the pit and says, “Grab the rope and start pulling yourself up and then I’ll pull from up here and together we’ll get you out.” The Calvinist says God throws a rope down into the pit and comes down on the rope, ties it around some people (the elect), and carries them out without their help or cooperation. Once they get out of the pit he gives them mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and revives them. They do absolutely nothing.

The Arminian says God pours water into the pit and says, “Float!” All people have to do to get out of the pit is allow the water to do its work — lift them out of the pit. That means not resisting it by holding onto things at the bottom of the pit or struggling against the water. If people get out of the pit, the water did all the work. All they had to do is let it lift them up and out by relaxing and floating on it. That “relaxing” is a picture of admitting our need for God to do everything for us because we are helpless sinners. Yes, we have to make a decision. Yes, we have to do the “work” (which is not really work at all) of allowing God to save us. But the initiative and power are all from God.

Well, no doubt the analogy has its limits. All analogies do. But I ask you which is a more biblical picture of salvation as both gift and task? “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith —and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8 – 9). Grace is God’s provision and includes everything saving. Faith is our contribution, which is simply receiving and not resisting God’s provision. Grace goes before (prevenient) and enables even our faith.

Salvation is both gift and task. Our re-birth into God’s family<sup>2</sup> is all about God’s grace and his grace alone. We don’t contribute to it or assist in any way. AND . . . it is our own willingness to entrust ourselves wholly and completely to our Savior (i.e., faith) that makes our rescue the beginning of a long journey toward true Christlikeness. In addition, this gift of salvation must be embodied in how we live, i.e., our “works.” Both Paul and James would embrace this AND. Both knew that genuine faith in Christ must result in good works, or, as Paul put it, the “fruit of the Spirit.”

Faith AND works. When we come to faith in Jesus Christ by virtue of God’s saving grace, we are re-born. But we still have to be made into disciples, for what we do (our “works”) is the embodiment of our faith. It isn’t so much that the good works are an “ought,” but that they are the *inevitable* outworking of genuine faith. Thus the New Testament writers can speak of salvation as both gift *and* task, as instantaneous *and* as a process.

Jesus spent two and a half years or so with his disciples. Teaching them by way of parables and more. Enacting for them the arrival of God’s kingdom. Showing them what it really means to live in God’s way. Why? Why so much teaching and doing? Because Jesus was making them into disciples, genuine apprentices learning to be like the Master. They weren’t to be just hearers of Jesus’ words, but doers of them. And before Jesus returned to the Father, he told them, in the Great Commission, that they were to go out and make still more disciples (Matthew 28:19). We are re-born into Christ, but we are made into disciples. Salvation encompasses acting like the people that God has already made us into.

### *The Holy Club*

John Wesley was an Arminian. I’ve often wondered how much his own experiences shaped his theology, his own embrace of Arminianism. While at Oxford, John Wesley

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and his brother, Charles, recognized that even though many of their peers professed faith in Christ and could get an “A” on any theology exam, you’d never guess it from how they lived or what they did. Many Christians, embracing the Reformation slogan of “faith alone,” thought they could sever what they believed from how they lived. It was, and still can be for many, the perspective that coming to faith in Jesus gets one’s ticket to heaven punched and anything that follows is just gravy – nice to do, but certainly not part of the business of salvation.

It was Charles’s idea to form a small group of Christians who would pursue lives of genuine discipleship. The group, which never exceeded twenty-five, was mockingly referred to by fellow students as the “Holy Club.”

The “Holy Club” members fasted until 3 PM on Wednesdays and Fridays, received Holy Communion once each week, studied and discussed the Greek New Testament and the classics each evening in a member’s room, visited prisoners and the sick, and systematically brought all their lives under strict review.

Later, the Wesleys’ methodical approach to discipleship and holy living led to the tag, again meant mockingly, “methodists.” This “Methodist” movement within the Church of England grew and spread to the American Colonies, where Methodism began as a lay movement. After the revolution, John Wesley put in place the tools and mechanisms that would ultimately allow the Methodists in America to separate from the Church of England and become an independent church. John sent to America a prayer book with orders of worship and twenty-five articles of faith. John even sent over lay preachers that he ordained himself.

Thus, from our beginnings, Methodists have always emphasized the living out of one’s faith grounded in the profession of God’s love. The stated mission of the UMC is simple and reflects the Great Commission given us by Christ: “to make disciples of Jesus Christ.” Here, at St. Andrew, we strive to live out our Wesleyan heritage by calling the Christian-ish to become passionate servants of Christ.

We Methodists embrace a practical theology – or “practical divinity” as John Wesley put it. Here is what the UMC says about our theological task:

“Our theological task is essentially practical. It informs the individual’s daily decisions and serves the Church’s life and work. While highly theoretical constructions of Christian thought make important contributions to theological understanding, we finally measure the truth of such statements in relation to their practical significance. Our interest is to incorporate the promises and demands of the gospel into our daily lives.

Theological inquiry can clarify our thinking about what we are to say and do. It presses us to pay attention to the world around us.

Realities of intense human suffering, threats to the survival of life, and challenges to human dignity confront us afresh with fundamental theological issues: the nature and purposes of God, the relations of human beings to one another, the nature of human freedom and responsibility, and the care and proper use of all creation.”

A word of caution – by “practical” we mean that we put our theology, our beliefs, into practice. We don’t mean a utilitarian, “whatever works,” sort of faith. We mean simply that our rebirth in Christ must be borne out in how we live. Do we build up the body of Christ? Are we a good witness to Jesus in all that we say and do? Do we seek to help those in need and minister to those who suffer? Do we build our houses on sand, only hearing Jesus’ words or do we build them on rock, on being doers of the Word?

Do we? That is really the question for us all.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Much of this series has focused on the ANDs of the Christian faith. How can we become more comfortable with this? How can we use our intellects wisely and not allow our desire for “the answer” to drive us down the path toward heresy?
2. Rev. Pam White wrote some questions for our Connection Groups to consider as they discuss this week’s topic:
  - How does your own ego get in the way of accepting God’s gift of salvation?
  - What can we do to more fully embrace this gift of salvation in our own lives?
  - If we live as though our salvation is an undeserved gift from God, how does this affect our behavior?

### *Daily Bible Readings*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday, Matthew 28:16-20</b> Jesus gives his disciples the Great Commission.</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, Micah 6:6-8</b> What does God require of us?</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, Leviticus 19:1-18</b> God instructs Israel on love as caring. See esp. v.18</p>	<p><b>Thursday, Luke 6:27-36</b> Jesus talks about loving those who are the hardest to love.</p>
<p><b>Friday, John 13:1-20</b> Jesus washes the feet of the disciples at the last supper.</p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

## Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org) to make sure the class is meeting.

### Monday Evening Class – now studying Romans

Meets every Monday from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

### Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying 1 Peter

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall on Tuesdays.

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## Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

*Saints and Sinners: True and Not-So-True Stories of the Pope*  
An entertaining and enlightening history of the Papacy, from Peter to Gregory to Joan(?) to Francis

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**Scott's New Book, *Restart: Getting Past Christian-ish*, is available in the St. Andrew bookstore.**

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**Scott Engle and Robert Hasley will be leading a trip to Israel in late October 2014. This will be a land-only trip that will include all the major sites in Israel.**

*For more information go to [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org) or email Scott at [sengle@standrewumc.org](mailto:sengle@standrewumc.org)*

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Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at [www.standrewumc.org](http://www.standrewumc.org). Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org)

## Sermon Notes

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