

Is Obedience a Condition of Salvation?

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"If victory and obedience were a condition of salvation, then salvation would be by works." So says Marvin Moore in the foremost Seventh-day Adventist outreach publication, Signs of the Times.¹ He also states that "the condition of salvation is faith, not obedience."² Is he right? Is he making a sound statement of the Adventist understanding of salvation? Is he making, for that matter, even a biblically sound statement about salvation?

Let's notice a fundamental presupposition in his thinking: meeting a condition = ascribing merit. We all know, of course, that the Bible clearly teaches that salvation is "by grace through faith, and that not of ourselves; it is the gift of God. Not of works, lest any man should boast."³ Therefore it is placed beyond discussion that we can have no meritorious part in the process of salvation. Upon this we all agree. But what of Moore's bizarre presupposition, that to meet a condition is to acquire merit?

Does Inspiration Agree?

Jesus answers this for us: "And behold, one came and said unto Him, 'Good Master, what good thing shall I do that I may eternal life?' And He said unto him, 'Why callest thou Me good? there is none good but One, that is, God: *but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.*"⁴

Was Jesus telling the rich young ruler to do something meritorious when He told him to keep the commandments? Obviously not, for salvation is "not of works, lest any man should boast." But was Jesus telling this man plainly what the condition of salvation was? If we will enter into life, is it not necessary that we obey God? Is it not necessary that we keep His commandments?

We could discuss any number of Scripture passages that would echo the teaching of Jesus in the above incident, but let's focus just a bit more on this one. What does the Holy Spirit tell us through the writings of Ellen White?

Commenting on this very incident, Mrs. White writes "In reply to this question [what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?] Jesus told him that obedience to the commandments of God was necessary if he would obtain eternal life All should consider what it means to desire heaven, and yet to turn away because of the conditions laid down."⁵

White's language is helpful here, as it directly contradicts Moore's assertions. She freely uses words like "necessary" and "condition" when she speaks of salvation, yet nowhere in her

writings can we find the idea that by fulfilling conditions one achieves merit, a share in their own salvation. A sampling of White's remarks regarding this illustrate the language that she felt very comfortable in using on this point:

- "Under the new covenant, perfect obedience is the condition of life."⁶
- "Could there be an excuse for disobedience, it would prove our heavenly Father unjust, in that He had given us conditions of salvation with which we could not comply."⁷
- "God works; but man must cooperate with Him in the great plan of salvation. The condition of eternal life is not merely to believe, but to do the words of God."⁸
- "Self-denial is the condition of salvation."⁹
- "Implicit obedience is the condition of salvation."¹⁰
- "You cannot enjoy His blessing without any action on your part."¹¹
- "Obedience brings salvation, disobedience, ruin."¹²
- "The terms of salvation for every son and daughter of Adam are here outlined. It is plainly stated that the condition of gaining eternal life is obedience to the commandments of God."¹³
- "The great gift of salvation is freely offered to us, through Jesus Christ, on condition that we obey the law of God; and individually we are to accept the terms of life with the deepest humiliation and gratitude."¹⁴
- "In the gift of His only begotten Son He has ensured to us eternal life upon condition of our faith and obedience."¹⁵
- "Entire obedience to the law of God is the condition of salvation."¹⁶
- "The atonement of Christ has been made to save all the sons and daughters of Adam from the penalty of the violated law, on condition that they repent of their transgressions, and are converted through the exercise of faith in Christ."¹⁷
- "He does not save us by law, neither will He save us in disobedience to law."¹⁸

Does Obedience Only Come After Salvation?

By Moore and others it is argued that "Obedience is something we do *after* we are saved, not that we do *in order to be* saved."¹⁹ I am very concerned when in publications like Signs I read such statements. Why the accent on obedience *following* instead of obedience *accompanying*?

Is it because the presuppositions that Moore holds are at war with the biblical gospel of conventional Adventism? Conventional Adventism recognizes that the law and the gospel function together, that the law is not against us but that sin is against us. The law defines what sin is. The law never defines only by letter, but always by letter and spirit. Thus, when we consider obedience, we are inevitably weighing entire obedience, not partial.

Moore obfuscates the issues in his editorial with an attempt to project the idea that the unconverted can obey outwardly but not inwardly, and that inward obedience can only be rendered after one is saved. Inward obedience can be rendered *after* one is saved, this is true. But it can also be rendered in the very moment of salvation. To believe is to obey. We act on the word of Christ, and He gives us the power to obey. It all goes together. In fact, I would go so far

as to say that biblically, it happens in the same event. The Bible states that what really counts is "Faith that worketh by love."²⁰ That is, Real faith is a working faith. And obviously a working faith is a faith that empowers obedience. This obedience is not a carrot dangling just out of reach in the future somewhere beyond us, but it is an obedience that is near at hand.

Moore presents a ridiculous analogy to help prove his point. He suggests that someone who is dirty, who wants to take a shower would be stymied if the condition necessary to be fulfilled before getting into the shower would be to be clean. But this analogy doesn't fit. You see, the condition of obedience can only be met through the power of God. We may choose to act,²¹ but our actions require heaven's empowerment in order to come into being. No obedience at any time can be rendered apart from God's power.

No amount of washing ones' self after conversion through one's own works would have any positive impact upon one's spiritual state. *What Moore really refuses to do is to permit man to do any choosing at all, because if he let's us choose, he must let us obey.* And he can't allow that because in the gospel as he understands it, this would be to incorporate works into the salvation equation, and works to him mean merit. Thus, to be consistent with the structure of his evangelical soteriology, he must stand where he does.

Mr. Moore separates obedience from conversion. He insists that a saved person "must be converted, and conversion, which leads to salvation, is what makes true obedience possible."²² With no basis for his assertion he reduces obedience from a necessity to a non-necessity. He has lowered the bar considerably and tweaked the whole salvation process.

Obedience Comes in the Same Act

Would that he could see a broader picture: a gospel where faith and obedience function together (in fact, there is no other way they could function); where conditions are non merit-bearing; and where odd analogies are not needed to justify biblically groundless theories and dubious points; where we find the Bible and the Ellen G. White statements to easily harmonize with each other by taking them as they plainly read.

Unbiblical. This is the only designation that we could possibly assign to these new theories so in tune with the age and yet out of tune with authentic Adventism. Friends, when a person believes in Jesus for salvation, they are choosing to obey. The gospel "is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth."²³ At the close of his gospel, John states that these things are written "that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through His name."²⁴ If we believe, we obey in the same act. If we obey we meet the condition. If we meet the condition, we have life through His name. I like how Ellen White puts it: "In the very act of duty, God speaks and gives His blessing."²⁵

This is something that falls into what I call the "un-difficult" category. It is not hard to understand. It is not *after the act of duty*, God gives obedience; it is not *before the act of duty*, God gives obedience; but it is "*in the very act of duty*" that God speaks and gives His blessing.

When we reach out, willing to obey, He reaches back, enabling us to obey. It is a simultaneous occurrence.

Consider the lame man.²⁶ Jesus walked up to him and just plain healed him on the spot. "The sick man might have said, 'Lord, if Thou wilt make me whole, I will obey Thy word.' But, no, he believed Christ's word, believed that he was made whole, and he made the effort at once; he *willed* to walk, and he did walk. He acted on the word of Christ, and God gave the power. He was made whole."²⁷

Obedience does not follow faith, it comes in the same wave as faith. But... This means an altogether different gospel. There is no sliding in this gospel. Consider how this gospel plugs into the great controversy in a way that no other gospel does:

Through obedience to the commandments of God, our characters are built up in such a way that we may be safely entrusted with the gift of eternal life. Justice, truth, love, pity, forgiveness must be found in the heart of the Christian, for in His sermon on the mount Jesus said, 'Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.'²⁸

Our business today is not to downplay the law of God, to hold to an ill-conceived idea that never makes our position any stronger.²⁹ The ark of God's covenant is open in heaven.³⁰ The way into the holiest of all is standing open.³¹ We are heaven's currently designated agency for upholding that law. For anyone to say that obedience is not a condition in salvation is quite sad; for Seventh-day Adventists to say it is almost infinitely worse; for our publications to say it is criminal.

Adventist outreach publications should spread light, not poison, regarding salvation.

Balancing Statements

On one occasion not long ago, I attended a colloquium on Christian leadership. As the presentation unfolded it was soon apparent that the individual presenting it was bent on selling us a version of the gospel very much like the one presented in the Signs. He shared statements from the Bible and Ellen White to uphold his teaching, but left out the balancing statements. During a break I left and returned with my copy of Steps to Christ, sharing some of them with him. He claimed that he was in full agreement, but went right on teaching the conditionless gospel.

I want to close by sharing with you one of those balancing statements. But I want you to know that in some venues your ministers are being taught a "gospel" incompatible with inspired writings. Every wind is blowing. I share this to heal my church. Regular members in the pews must keep us honest. If you do not study, if you accept at face-value everything that we "clergy" say, you won't like the outcome. Hold our feet to the fire.

Consider with me, this statement:

Our only ground of hope is in the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and in that wrought by His Spirit working in and through us.³²

Our only "ground of hope" plainly has two necessary elements in it: the righteousness of Christ imputed to us is the part with which none will complain or disagree. We are all quite sure of that being necessary! But whereas the cry today is so often that "there are no conditions," it is actually the case that "there are decided conditions..." to salvation.³³ "That [righteousness] wrought by His Spirit working in and through us" is the portion that is unacceptable among some in Adventism today. It means that we are changed here and now. It means that obedience matters. It means that Adventists do not share the gospel of the evangelical churches. Friends, it means that we can't go on redefining the investigative judgment as God simply affirming that we are His. The investigative judgment is a determining of our eternal salvation. It involves a process wherein "names are accepted, names rejected."³⁴

What can we make of the statements in the Signs that "the condition of salvation is faith, not obedience," and its glaring contrast to the inspired words, "In the gift of His only begotten Son He has ensured to us eternal life upon condition of our faith *and* obedience?" What shall we conclude? That the Signs editor either is willingly ignorant of what the Spirit of Prophecy says, or that he doesn't care what it says? Is either option appropriate for the editor of our major outreach magazine? Nor is this an isolated incident. He announced in the June 1999 editorial that "in several recent editorials" he had been discussing these themes.

Obedience matters in the real gospel. It only gets after-the-fact lip service in the false gospel.

We are reevaluating our use of the Signs outreach magazine. If it won't teach the Biblical, Adventist gospel, then what reason is there for sending it into the community?

Endnotes

1. Moore, Marvin, "Viewpoint: The Condition of salvation," Signs, April 2000, 5. Moore addresses these statements that were originally published in his June 1999 Signs Editorial, "What is Faith."
2. Ibid. This makes an interesting contrast to Ellen G. White's statement that "In the gift of His only begotten Son He has ensured to us eternal life upon condition of our faith *and* obedience" Signs of the Times, 6 May 1889 (emphasis supplied).
3. Ephesians 2:8-9.
4. Matthew 19:16-17 (Emphasis supplied).
5. _____. Desire of Ages, pp. 518, 523.
6. White, Ellen G., God's Amazing Grace, p. 138.
7. _____. Sketches From the Life of Paul, p. 296.
8. _____. Home Missionary, 1 October 1897.
9. _____. Bible Echo, 9 December 1895.

10. _____. Signs of the Times, 15 November 1899.
11. _____. Manuscript Releases, vol. 6, p. 18.
12. _____. Manuscript Releases, vol. 7, p. 264.
13. _____. Review and Herald, 26 October 1897.
14. _____. Signs of the Times, 15 December 1887.
15. _____. Signs of the Times, 6 May 1889.
16. _____. Signs of the Times, 14 April 1898.
17. _____. Signs of the Times, 4 August 1898.
18. _____. Faith and Works, p. 95-96.
19. _____. Moore, Marvin, "Viewpoint: The Condition of Salvation."
20. Galatians 5:6
21. White, Ellen G., Steps to Christ, p. 47: "The power of choice God has given to men; it is theirs to exercise. You cannot change your heart, you cannot of yourself give to God its affections; but you can *choose* to serve Him. You can give Him your will; He will then work in you to will and to do according to His good pleasure. Thus your whole nature will be brought under the control of the Spirit of Christ; your affections will be centered upon Him, your thoughts will be in harmony with Him."
22. Moore, "Viewpoint: The Condition of Salvation."
23. Romans 1:16.
24. John 20:31.
25. White, Ellen G., Testimonies, vol. 4, p. 145.
26. John 5:1-9.
27. White, Ellen G., Steps to Christ, p. 50.
28. _____. Review and Herald, 28 March 1893.
29. _____. Faith and Works, p. 112.
30. Revelation 11:19.
31. Hebrews 9:8
32. White, Ellen G., Steps to Christ, p. 63.
33. _____. Manuscript Releases, vol. 13, p. 22.
34. _____. Great Controversy, p. 483.