

The Church of the Servant King

Soteriology Series

SO_2_Introduction (Continued)

Further Comments Regarding the Importance of a Study of Soteriology

In our last lesson, we noted that soteriology represented one of the most comprehensive categories of doctrine in the Bible. We also noted that Satan's most focused efforts at creating confusion of the Truth has been directed towards that category of doctrines known as soteriology.

An example of the extent to which this confusion abounds among those professing to be Christians as well as non-Christians is illustrated in a November 1999 research study commissioned and funded by Park Cities Baptist Church, Dallas. I obtained a copy of the report that resulted from this study and permission to use its findings through a deacon of the church with whom I happened to work at the time. Obviously, I cannot quote the entire report which was approximately 60 to 70 pages including appendices. However, I'll summarize what may be the more relevant points from this report pertaining to our study of soteriology.

- The purpose of the study/research was to gain a better understanding of the perspective of the people who were currently unchurched, but who had a basic understanding of God and Jesus, e.g. why formerly churched people became 'backsliders.'
- The results of the study were to be used for the development and execution of a mass media strategy designed to prompt the unchurched to reevaluate their relationship with Jesus and predispose them to return to seek a church home.
- Nine focus groups were conducted in Dallas during September, 1999. A total of 58 Metroplex residents participated in the study. Some of the requirements that had to be met to participate in the study included:
 - Head of household
 - 25-45 years of age
 - Believe in the existence of God and that Jesus is His son
 - Not currently affiliated with any non-Christian faith
 - Three of the groups were comprised of people who had no current religious/church affiliation and no religious background.
 - Three of the groups were comprised of people who were raised in a religious home but currently have no church affiliation or have not attended on a regular basis in the past five years
 - Three of the groups were comprised of people who have a church affiliation, who were attending on a regular basis but have not been attending in the past six months
- Some of the findings and interesting observations of the research team include:
 - "For many, it seems that church/religion is no longer part of the solution but rather can be a part of the problem – it is one more demand on our time, our energy, our resources."
 - Referring to the changing trends in religious life in America – "It appears to be a search for an 'experiential' faith, an expression of religion that is **not so strictly rooted in doctrine and dogma.**"
 - "It (the new religion) is practical and personal, **more about stress reduction than salvation, more therapeutic than theological.** It's about feeling good, not being good. It's as much about the body as the soul."
 - The report noted that according to Barna (a full-service marketing research firm that specializes in religious research):
 - Belief in God is almost universal among U.S. adults (96%)
 - Six in ten adults (61%) say that Satan is only a symbol of evil
 - More than half (56%) say a good person can earn their way into Heaven.
 - Four out of five (85%) adults in this country call themselves "Christian"

- Only 40% claim to have been born again
- About 31% of all U.S. adults (~ 65 million) are “unchurched”
 - Two-thirds call themselves Christian, with one-third claiming that the personal commitment they made to Jesus Christ is still important in their life today.
 - About 15% of the “unchurched” are considered born again
 - About 62% “feel” that a “good” person can earn his or her way into heaven.
- In the section entitled “Research Conclusions” some of the more relevant conclusions for the purposes of our study of Soteriology include:
 - While the participants in the study may accept that Jesus is the Savior and the only way to heaven as a personal truth, very few would agree that it is a universal truth.
 - To say that everyone has to accept Christ as his or her Savior in order to go to heaven is “arrogant and narrow-minded and generally not politically correct”
 - “They do not believe a loving and merciful Father would condemn anyone to hell, regardless of religious beliefs, providing they are a good, moral person” [Does this sound like the argument that Satan may have used when his sentence was pronounced in eternity past?]
 - “These people are reticent to agree that beyond being a good, moral person you have to do anything else to go to heaven – it relieves them of responsibility for others and, on some level, for themselves. It may be that because of the state of their own lives, by condemning others they condemn themselves.”
 - With regard to attending church, the common theme that pervades all excuses is that they have not been given enough of a compelling reason to attend. There is too much confusion today and there is no easy way to navigate through the vast amount of information.
- In the section entitled “Respondent Questionnaires,” some of the following responses to selected questions are very insightful:
 - 60% disagreed that hell is a literal, physical place
 - 59% believed that “a good person can earn their way into heaven”
 - 38% disagreed that “Jesus is the only way to heaven”
 - 47% disagreed that “accepting Christ as your Savior is the only way to heaven”
 - 41% agreed that “it doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you are sincere”

The Essence of God – The 1st Essential Truth Necessary to Properly Understand the Soteriological Category of Doctrines

To properly understand God’s plan for the salvation of man, we first need to have a proper understanding of the essence of God and the manner in which each attribute relates to it. So much confusion surrounding soteriological truths can be eliminated just through a proper understanding of God as expressed in these ten attributes. There have been other terms used to express and define God and I do not intend to limit God by using the ten I have chosen below. However, these ten attributes seem to capture the idea or essence of every other term I have encountered apart from these ten. In addition, as we have previously noted in another series, to the extent that there is an unbalanced understanding of the manner in which these attributes function as an integrated whole, then to that extent there will be subjectivity in thought and application in the person’s life. I’ll briefly introduce these ten attributes below to include a brief mention of how they relate to the subject of soteriology. Additional examples and relationships to our subject will be made in future studies.

- **S – Sovereignty** = The sovereignty of God is the will of God. God is in control of all of His creation (angels and man, nature and human history); however, God's control does not imply nor require God to override any creature's volition to accomplish His Divine Will. God permits a creature's volition to run its course (Permissive Will) and each creature's decisions have been foreseen by the omniscience of God prior to the creation of the first created being in eternity past. In regard to human history, God's sovereignty insures that His purpose will prevail so as to bring the appeal trial of Satan to its intended conclusion. The Sovereign Will of God includes the following aspects:
 - Preventive – (Gen. 20:6; Psa. 19:13) God uses parents, governments, laws, His Word, His Spirit, and conscience as means to impede the progress of evil and insure that human history will be the convincing evidence in Satan's appeal trial that it is intended to be.
 - Permissive – (Deut. 8:2; 2 Chron. 32:31; Hos. 4:17; Rom. 1:24, 28) embraces that which God does not restrain, i.e. the free will function of His creatures.
 - Determinative – includes those actions of God apart from man's decisions (e.g. the creation of Adam and Eve, the timing of Christ's 1st Advent, the timing of the Rapture and the 2nd Advent, and the extent, nature, and timing of God's revelation to man in times past).
 - Preceptive – His commands.

In connection with our study of soteriology, the sovereignty of God is the determinative attribute that governed the decision of just how God's righteousness would be met by a fallen creature. In the case of angels, no plan of salvation is revealed in Scripture; however, in the case of man, there is clear revelation that man's eternal salvation would be accomplished through a demonstration of His love via the sacrificial death of His Son.

- **EL – Eternal Life** = There has never been a time when God did not exist, nor will there ever be a time when God does not exist. He has no beginning or end. God's omnipresence and His eternity are sometimes expressed by the term *infinity*.
- **L – Love** = God is perfect love, i.e. His love does not depend upon the response of the recipient. God's love is His motivator. Divine love motivated God to provide a solution to the Fall of man in the Garden of Eden, i.e. to send His Own Son in the form of a man to be the payment of the penalty of sin. God's love is never expressed independently from His other attributes, i.e. there always exists a perfect affinity or balance between all of His attributes. In regard to our subject of soteriology, it is this attribute of God that is most distorted in man's understanding. The distortions almost always begin with the question – "How could a God of love...?" Such a question reveals a lack of understanding of the integrated nature of all of God's attributes.
- **J – Justice** = the attribute of God's essence that provides for the requirements of His righteousness, i.e. what the righteousness of God demands, the justice of God executes. For instance, it is the justice of God that pronounced judgment upon man at the Fall and it is the justice of God that imputed the sins of man to Christ on the Cross.
- **R – Righteousness** = God's inherent standard of perfection by which His creatures are evaluated. God's R and J constitute His absolute holiness. With regard to the category of doctrines known as soteriology, it is God's righteousness that demands satisfaction and is the attribute to which man must be reconciled.
- **O – Omniscience** = all knowing. Because God is eternal, there is nothing that God has not known or will not know. He is constantly occupied with all things at once. His omniscience knows the actual and the possible. Therefore, He knows every event, causation, and succession as well as all other possible events, causations, and successions. The Bible only reveals a fraction of that which God knows. Every detail of all creation and history has been known by God from eternity past. His omniscience is not subject to development and no development of human history ever surprises God. The omniscience of God is the attribute that is perhaps most involved in the soteriological issues of predestination and election, not to mention God's knowledge of a need for a provision of salvation before the need ever arose.
- **O – Omnipotent** = all-powerful. God's power is infinite. God can do all He wills, but He may not will to do all He can. God is only limited by His other attributes, e.g. He will

never make right wrong because of His holiness. He cannot do things which are self-contradictory to His own nature, e.g. God cannot cease loving even those His justice must condemn because they have not satisfied His righteous requirement of trusting only in the work of His Son for their eternal salvation. The omnipotent power of the Holy Spirit sustained Christ as He executed God's plan for His life to include dying on a Cross.

- **O – Omnipresence** = God is everywhere. God's omnipresence allows His omniscience to know even the thoughts of every man. Omnipresence is not pantheism since pantheism denies the person of God. God is not restricted to the time/space dimension in which we live. God's omnipresence is not limited because of man's limitation in describing His activities, e.g. Scripture uses anthropomorphisms to describe God's actions, but it doesn't mean that God possess an eye, hand, arm, etc. Scripture also uses anthropopathisms to describe the function of a number of God's attributes, but it doesn't mean that God is limited to time and space. With regard to soteriology, Jesus as God was omnipresent while at the same time limited to a human body. This could be an example of what some have termed the "mysteriousness" of God.
- **I – Immutability** = unchangeable. God does not change. Sometimes the Bible describes God's actions using anthropopathisms; however, since God is omniscient, He is never taken by surprise so as to be angry, remorseful, sorrowful, etc. God's essence doesn't change in the midst of change.

(Personally, I don't like to use the term *mysteriousness* as a description of one of God's attributes since on many occasions, it is used to describe God's activity when the person using it doesn't understand that activity. The result is a view of God as One Who is changeable and not immutable. Therefore, I use it cautiously and advisedly, but I will concede that it has its place when properly related to things not revealed in Scripture or beyond our capability to understand.

For instance, who has ever experienced omniscience or eternity. We can know about it, but there is a sense in which all greater understanding and appreciation in life occurs only through experience. I believe that the experience of such things about which we only have partial knowledge now will be part of the joy we have in heaven when we more fully comprehend the Person of God. We experience some of that joy and peace now as the Holy Spirit bears witness with our spirit about such things, but the completion of that experience will only occur in heaven. I believe that this is what Paul alluded to in 1 Corinthians 13:12 when he wrote – "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known."

The term "mystery" is also the word Paul used to describe the truths of the Church Age which had not been revealed by God until the Apostle Paul – Ephesians 1:9 – thus refers to truth possessed by God the Father and not made known to man for at least two millennia prior to Paul.)

- **V – Veracity** = perfect truth. God has never lied. What He has promised will occur. There is a vast body of truth which we will not know until eternity; however, everything He has revealed to man is absolute truth. Veracity is uncomplicated by any individual set of circumstances, i.e. it is not relative. God's veracity guarantees His absolute freedom from compromise, contradiction, or falsehood.

In our next lesson, we will see how these attributes relate to soteriological truths and issues as we begin to explore the many soteriological doctrines found in the Bible.