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ARE WOMEN SAVED BY FAITH PLUS WORKS?

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Salvation by faith alone is one of the most important Christian doctrines. It also is a doctrine that is discarded by every cult. I remember my frustration when, as a young Christian, a Mormon missionary tied me into a doctrinal pretzel after I told him I believed that salvation was by faith alone. He asked me if I would reject my view if he could show me at least one Bible passage that proved it was not true. In my youthful exuberance (and confidence that the Bible contains no contradictions) I answered jokingly, "Of course! If you can show me that salvation is by faith plus works, I may even become a Mormon!"

The Mormon missionary chuckled and told me to start packing my bags for Utah as he turned to 1 Timothy 2:14-15 and read, "And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression. Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety" (KJV). He claimed this passage proves that a woman's salvation is by faith in Christ *and* by bearing children and continuing in faith, love, and holiness — a clear statement, according to him, that eternal salvation is by faith plus works.

I did not have a convincing answer for the clean-cut young man in the white shirt and tie. I stammered a few words and told him I would have to read a bit to find the answer. He soon left, confident that he had moved me toward becoming a convert.

After my bumbling encounter, I set out to find an answer to this perplexing passage. It seems, at face value, to allow for the interpretation that salvation is by faith plus works, at least for women; but this interpretation is unacceptable because it contradicts numerous other verses in the Bible that state that salvation is by faith alone and not by works (e.g., John 1:12; 3:16; 6:47; 11:25; 20:31; Acts 2:21; 16:30-31; Rom. 3:28; Eph. 2:89; 2 Tim. 1:9; Titus 3:57). If the Bible is the Word of God, who cannot err, then the Bible cannot contradict itself; so there must be some other interpretation of this unclear passage that would prove to be harmonious with the other passages that clearly say that salvation is by faith alone.

After a bit of study, I soon discovered a principle of hermeneutics (i.e., interpretation) that cleared up this and many other problem passages. That principle is this: just because two (or more) passages use the same word doesn't mean they are talking about the same thing. This means that not every passage that uses the word "saved" is talking about *eternal salvation*.

Saved from What? In the New Testament, the Greek verb *sozo*, translated "save," and all its variations, such as "saved" or "salvation," have one general meaning: to rescue, or keep safe. The question is, however, saved *from what*? Most New Testament passages that use the word "save" or one of its different forms are, of course, talking about being "saved" from eternal spiritual death, or hell; for example, God promised to save those who believe (1 Cor. 1:21); Paul exhorted the Philippian jailer to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ to be "saved" (Acts 16:31); and Paul declared that we are "saved" by grace through faith, and not as a result of works (Eph. 2:89).

There are, however, a number of other things from which people were saved, or rescued in the New Testament; for instance, Jesus disciples were "saved" from shipwreck at sea (Matt. 8:25), as were Paul and his fellow travelers (Acts 27:20, 31); a woman with an issue of blood was saved or "made well" (*sozo*) from physical illness (Matt. 9:22), as were others (Acts 4:9; 14:9); and Jude recalls that God saved the Israelites from Egypt (Jude 23). Note that these passages also use the word save (*sozo*), but they are not talking about eternal salvation.

It is evident that we cannot assume that every passage that uses the word save or salvation is talking about eternal salvation. In fact, this assumption can lead to some very unorthodox interpretations, such as the one offered by the Mormon missionary who visited me. If, therefore, Paul did not have salvation from eternal spiritual death in mind, what danger *did* he have in mind when he said that women will be saved through childbearing? Is there an alternative interpretation that we can offer to the unorthodox one that the Mormon missionary suggested?

Preventive Measures. The surrounding context of 1 Timothy 2:15 yields several clues to the danger Paul had in mind. In chapter 1, Paul warns the young pastor Timothy of false teachers and their abilities to shipwreck a Christians faith (1:19-20). His concern is to guard Timothy and his flock from these dangerous teachers. Chapter 2 begins with "Therefore," which indicates that Paul is building on his warnings in chapter 1. Having the protection of the church from false teachers in mind, Paul gives instructions on preventive measures, urging believers to pray and lead quiet, peaceable, godly lives (2:18). False teachers were having a negative effect on the women in Timothy's church, so Paul instructs the women to adorn themselves with good works rather than expensive clothing and jewelry (2:9-10). The false teachings had resulted in the women usurping authority in the church; hence Paul charges women to learn quietly and submit to the authority of the ordained leadership (2:11-12). In 2:13-14, Paul gives two reasons for this charge: the order of creation and the order of transgression: For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression (NKJV). In other words, Paul requests that women learn quietly and submit to the ordained church leadership, because historically God designed men for the task of leadership, and because of the possibility that women will fall into deception and sin as did Eve if they usurp that leadership.

Paul concludes this section by offering another means of protection for Christian women: "she will be saved in childbearing if they continue in faith, love, and holiness, with self-control" (2:15 NKJV). Salvation here cannot be from eternal spiritual death, because the context of this passage and the clear teaching on eternal salvation elsewhere in the Bible will not allow for this interpretation. The context suggests that salvation here is from the danger of being deceived by false teachers and falling into sin. Paul says that a woman will be saved from the danger of deception and sin by busying herself with the activities for which God created her: caring for her home and children, and nurturing her faith, love, and holiness.

Paul's instruction for women in the church, therefore, is twofold: First, they are to submit to the recognized authorities in the church and not to usurp authority for themselves (2:12). Second, they are to submit themselves to Gods plan that they nurture their children and their faith (2:15). Commentators Robert Hughes and Carl Laney explain, "Eve and women generally, by accepting their God-given functions, can be saved the trouble that results from overstepping their bounds. Although equal in spiritual privilege (1 Pet. 3:7), men and women have different roles in terms of ministry. God's created order establishes these role relationships for men and women which, if bypassed, lead to disaster as illustrated by the fall." Paul's instruction to women is similar to what he tells Timothy two chapters later: "Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you" (1 Tim. 4:16 NKJV). By

fulfilling his God-given duties and continuing in sound doctrine and faithfulness, Timothy would rescue himself and those to whom he ministered from a shipwrecked faith, deception, and sin.

There are other possible interpretations of this passage. Some interpreters suggest that Paul is saying women are saved from eternal spiritual death by the birth of a *specific* child: the Messiah. Others say that the passage is talking about women being saved from the physical dangers of childbirth. Egalitarians have a different interpretation than the one I presented above. They believe that men and women are equal in being and function in Jesus Christ; hence, both men and women may serve in positions of leadership in the local church. Their interpretation of Paul's exhortation in 1 Timothy 2:8-15, therefore, is that it does not apply universally to all women at all times, but only to a specific situation in Paul's day. Christians can legitimately disagree over what Paul meant when he said women are *saved* through childbearing and holy living, but we can know for certain that it *does not* mean that they are saved from eternal spiritual death by faith plus works.

— Jeff Spencer

NOTES

1. *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 637. This view is called the complementarian view. Complementarians believe that men and women's God-given functions are complementary rather than equal; hence, some complementarians believe that women were not designed to function as leaders in the local church.