



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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A Perspective on Salvation

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“For by the grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” (Eph. 2:8) The meaning of this text seems pretty clear. Salvation is God’s doing.

“...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” (Ph. 2:12) The meaning of this text seems pretty clear as well. It is up to me to work out my own salvation.

When it comes to the matter of my salvation, what do I do with the apparent contradiction in these two texts? For that matter, how important is the matter of my salvation? Do I really need to be concerned about it?

It appears to me that the desire on the part of humans to stay alive – forever – is virtually universal. What must I do to be saved? What actions do I take to make sure I don’t die? If my life is in the hands of God, what does God require of me so that I don’t lose my life? Even if God isn’t in charge, how do I protect myself against those who would destroy me? However important it may be, concern about salvation is expressed from the beginning to the end of the Bible, in the doctrines of the Church, in the thrust of the message of the Church, and, indeed, in the very history of humankind.

The Garden of Eden story suggests rather pointedly that to disobey God is to die. One interpretation of the story is that the big issue facing the man and the woman was whether or not to trust God for their life, or for them to take on full responsibility for preserving it. It appears that they decided not to trust God, but to look to the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil for the resources to make sure they could stay alive forever. They decided to try to be one of the gods, with the power of life and death in their own hands.

The history of human beings isn’t a very good record of success in staving off death. Nor do we seem to have learned in any definitive way that our commitment to saving ourselves by whatever methods we can devise just never works. Oddly enough, despite our bad experiences, we seem not to be able to believe God’s oft repeated message to us that God has, from the beginning, provided us with our salvation. It doesn’t need to be a concern, since God has taken care of the matter.

Because of what God has done, I am saved. I don’t need to do anything to save myself. Indeed, I cannot. I am free to experience all that it means to be truly and fully alive. I just need to be about the business of living – each day and every day. Thanks be to God.

I am aware, however, that many of the messages I keep hearing from the religious community have to do with what I must do to be saved, to gain heaven, and to avoid hell – all of them continually pointing toward the future, and life after this life.

Expressed concisely, I am reminded that, it being God’s will and God’s doing, Jesus died on the cross for my sins. Therefore, if I want to be saved, I need to believe in

the Lord Jesus Christ, although I confess that I have trouble understanding just what that means, or how it manifests itself in my life. I am reminded, too, of the necessary steps of salvation. I must take those steps or I do not obtain salvation. As I understand it, I am not saved until I do the right things, although I am assured that salvation is God's action, and God's alone. However, I must please God, or salvation will not be mine.

I feel confused. Why? Because I get a mixed message from the scriptures and from the church about what is involved in this business of being saved – whether it has already happened, or is going to happen when I take the right steps.

I guess I need a different perspective on the matter of my salvation.

The first text I quoted at the beginning of this paper seems crystal clear to me. My salvation is the action of God who loves me unconditionally. There isn't anything for me to do. I can't earn my salvation. It is God's doing. According to the scriptures, Jesus' death on the cross is, in some manner, a key factor in God's action. However it works, Jesus, in accordance with God's will, paid the price for all my sins. In and through Jesus, the Christ, God has forgiven me, and promised me eternal life – here and now – whatever the future may hold.

And the other text I quoted seems equally clear. If I want salvation, it is up to me to work it out. Despite the apparent fact that my salvation is God's doing, I have to face the other apparent fact that it is up to me to work it out. It is not yet an accomplished fact. Even though it is labeled "free gift," somehow I have to earn it. Only that doesn't compute. When something is given to me, no earning is involved. If I have to pay a price, then whatever it is that I get I have purchased. So I wonder how salvation can be a gift of God, and yet I have to work it out to have it.

If salvation to eternal life is the free gift of God, then it is free. There is nothing for me to do to gain or earn it. If that be the case, I wonder why the focus of the messages of the church so often centers in obtaining salvation, and in seeking to persuade people to accept Jesus Christ as savior? How can something be a free gift to me, and yet not be available to me unless I take the right steps to obtain it?

As I indicated at the beginning of this paper, I am confused about this.

Maybe I am not as confused as I have indicated. Despite all that is written and said about works and earning, I do believe that God loves me unconditionally, and that I am, and always will be, safe in that love. Eternal life is mine. It is not an illusive goal for which I desperately long, and which I fear I will not be able to obtain. By the action of loving God, eternal life is already mine. I have no need to be worried about my salvation. Maybe the messages of the Church need to stress this aspect of salvation more than they do.

I think of an analogy that helps me understand about God's saving activity.

The bank holds a very large mortgage on my house. When times are good, I struggle to make the monthly payments, but get them made. When times are bad, struggling does no good. I just can't make the payments. My only alternative, it would appear, is to lose my house.

Then you – whoever you happen to be – come into my life. You owe me absolutely nothing. I have done nothing for you. However, you come to me and hand me the deed to my house, and you say as you do so, “I have paid your mortgage in full. You no longer owe the bank any money at all. Nor do you owe me anything. The house is now yours, free and clear. It is my gift to you. You will always have a place to live.”

How about that for a shocker. The mortgage on my house is paid in full. Absolutely no obligation remains. I am completely and totally free of debt for the house. I no longer have a monthly payment in any amount to make. The money I once set aside to pay for the house is now available to me to do anything I choose to do with it. I have a house. It is all mine. And there are no stipulations as to what I must do for the house to continue to be mine.

I confess that I don't really understand why you have done this for me. You tell me that you have paid my debt in full, and have put no obligation on me because you value me so highly. However, I find that hard to believe since I am unaware of having ever done anything that would be a reason for you to value me so highly. It seems to me that I have some basis for being at least a little suspicious. Under these new circumstances, I wonder what it is that I am supposed to do. There must be something.

What am I supposed to do? As I puzzle over the question, it occurs to me that I do have options as to how I respond to what you have done for me. I think it is up to me to consider those options, and to decide on my actions.

I could refuse to believe that you have paid the mortgage in full. If I choose this option, I will continue to feel anxious and afraid about the money I owe the bank, and will try to insist that I take my money as payment on the mortgage. Of course, the bank will refuse to take my money, and I will feel frustrated and angry because I can't continue to pay. With this choice, I will refuse to believe that the house is really mine.

I could believe that you have, indeed, paid the mortgage in full, and refuse to believe that you put no obligation on me to repay you. If I choose this option, I will insist that I owe you, and will not accept that I do not. I will make all kinds of efforts to repay you despite your protestations to the contrary. I will feel frustrated and angry – and anxious – when I can't seem to do enough to repay you. I will not allow myself to rejoice that I own a house debt free because of what you have done for me.

I could believe that you have, indeed, paid the mortgage in full, and that you mean it when you tell me I am totally free of the obligation, and owe you nothing. If I choose this option, I can, then, tell myself that there is no way I can be that valuable to you, and, therefore, I must find some way to repay you for what you have done for me, even

though you won't take my money. I can feel deeply obligated to use the mortgage money I would have paid you in some way that I think – or hope – will make you happy. Despite your reassurances, I can refuse to accept that you have made me debt free, or that I am valuable enough to you for you to pay off my mortgage without strings. If that is the case, I will have to keep on trying to pay my obligation by making sure that I do the “right things” with the money I would have used to pay the mortgage.

I could believe that your action does, indeed, result in my being debt free and under no obligation to you or anyone. If I choose this option, I can embark on a course of wastefulness and extravagance – a process of throwing my money and my life away. After all, it is my money and my life. Even if I do this, it will not alter the fact that you have paid my mortgage in full, and that I owe you nothing.

I would believe that your action does, in fact, leave me debt free and under no obligation to you or anyone for the payment of my mortgage. If I choose this option, I can also choose to believe that I am valuable enough to you for you to pay off my mortgage, and not to obligate me in any way. That being the case, I can choose to believe that I am as valuable as you believe me to be – not because I have done anything to be valuable, but just because I am. With that decision, I can give much care and attention both to how I use the money that is now available to me, and how I live my life, since I am that valuable. I can continuously bear witness to my value by how I live. This option appeals to me.

It all adds up to this. You have paid my mortgage in full. You have put no obligation on me for having done so. I am free to make any decision and do anything I want with the money that is mine because I no longer have a mortgage payment to make. No action of mine alters what you have done. I didn't do anything to earn such generosity on your part, and I can't do anything to erase what you have done. Because of what you have done, I own a house debt free and obligation free.

I suppose that I could see this analogy as rather far fetched, but somehow I don't. The parallel is something like this. God, who values me highly just because I am, has, through Jesus Christ and through God's other actions, paid in full any obligation I have to God for my life. God has provided my salvation. There is nothing for me to do to obtain my salvation, and certainly not to earn it. God has given me my life without any strings. I am free to do with it whatever I choose.

In the analogy of my mortgage being paid, I said nothing about any guidelines for how I might choose to live my new life free from debt. I find many directives and instructions in the Bible to guide me in living the life God has given me. I suggest that those guidelines and instructions are further evidence of the reality that God loves me unconditionally. Valuing me as God does, God desires that my life be as full and rich as it can possibly be. However, for that fullness and richness to be mine, I must choose and act on the options that bring it about.

Maybe the reason that God gives me the directives and instructions is so that I can

clearly see just what my options are for living my life, and what I can expect as consequence, depending on the ones I choose. Maybe they have nothing to do with my being saved, but with what I do with my saved life.

Maybe Jesus lived and taught as he did to show me what one of my choices could be, and what kind of life I could expect. Maybe through his death and resurrection, he is pointing out to me what might happen to me if I choose his way. Maybe he is underscoring that his way is the way of life, and that any other way is death – a rejection of the salvation God has already provided. Maybe God is yearning for me to believe that the mortgage on my life is paid in full with no strings attached, and for me to get on with living a debt-free life.

Maybe all the directions about the importance of good works are to let me know the kind of life I am free to live, and something of the satisfactions I can experience.

Maybe to “work out my own salvation” means for me to declare by the way I live that I know my life is God’s gift to me.

In any case, my perspective about my salvation is that it is entirely and totally God’s doing. There is nothing for me to do to be saved. I can reject my salvation, and live as if it is not so. I can also accept it, and manifest that it is so by how I live.

I choose to believe that my salvation is God’s doing, and I choose to “work out my salvation” by living accordingly.