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"The Churches of God Outreach Ministries provides leadership, information, and biblical teaching in spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Matthew 28:19-20"

1-800-611-8080 / www.cgom.org
PO Box 54621, Tulsa, OK 74155-0621

What Do You Mean Repent?

"Is it essential for salvation to keep the Sabbath?"

"Can you be saved if you eat unclean meats?"

"Must you be baptized?"

Questions like this often reach our letter-box! The implication is that any Church teaching such doctrines is preaching a *gospel of works*. Indeed the least whiff of a preacher declaring the need for "works" draws the fire of many Protestants. But is there any place for works? Are they an essential part of salvation? Indeed, what are they? Why did Jesus say He would reward our works? Do they connect with the Bible concept of "repentance"?

by James McBride

Many believe that salvation is "by faith alone", that there is no need for works. But probe deeper and you will find such folk shocked if an able-bodied Christian were to choose not to attend Church. Or if he or she said Sunday - or Easter or Christmas - were unimportant. Or if they never gave to the Church. Or refused baptism or the Lord's Supper. All *works*, surely!

Saved By Grace

So - what's the difference? The Churches of God believe Christians ought to worship on the *7th-day* Sabbath and on the annual Bible Holy Days listed in Leviticus 23. We believe that the Biblical instruction (Lev 11) not to eat certain foods is as applicable today as in Moses' day. We believe a repentant person ought to be baptized, and have hands laid on to receive God's Spirit. That it's important to take part in the Lord's Supper.

Does that mean we teach "a gospel of salvation by works"? Just what is the role of the Law and of works in the Christian life? Can we, indeed, be saved without them?

Let's be clear. This Church fully accepts Paul's words in Ephesians 2:8-9: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God - not because of works". No amount of frenetic activity on the Lord's behalf will earn salvation, whether from the most hyperactive televangelist or the newest babe in Christ. No religious act whether a three-day Lough Derg retreat, or the lighting of a thousand candles or stepping into the shoes of Mother Theresa or the observance of a life-

time of Sabbaths will *earn* salvation. Our placement as "sons and daughters of the Almighty" is *God's gift* through Jesus Christ. Certainly no-one is saved by *their works*.

Yet, I say we must keep the Law of God. Why?

The Law In The New Testament

God's Law is a major Old Testament theme. But what of the *New Testament*?

Well, you don't read many pages into the New Testament before you encounter the words of Jesus Christ Himself: "Think *not* that I am come to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them. Till heaven and earth pass away *not an iota, not a dot will pass from the Law* until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:17-19)! And in the final NT book He said through John: "Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who *keep the commandments* of God and the faith of Jesus" (Rev. 14:12).

The same message is repeated frequently throughout the New Testament - especially in the writings of John, the "apostle of love"! He said, for example "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and *obey his commandments*. For this is the love of God that we keep his commandments" (I John 5:2-3). Read also I John 2:4, I John 3:4, 22, II John 5-6, Romans 7:7, 13:8-9 etc!

The apostle Paul is often called up to support those

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who detest God's Law. Yet near the end of his life he told a Roman Governor: "But this I admit to you, that according to the way that they call a sect I worship the God of our fathers, *believing everything laid down by the law* or written by the prophets" (Acts 23:14). This same *apostle*, believe it or not, had just before this *sacrificed* in the Temple!

How do *you* deal with those statements?

You will recall, even if we limit the "commandments of God" to the Ten Commandments - that one of those "awful" laws is "Remember the Sabbath day [not Sunday!] to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8-11). [It is curious, in the light of this text, that some who urge an obligation for Sunday observance will roundly condemn *7th-day* observers!]

But it's unlikely you will quarrel with the last six commandments. They "stick out like a sore thumb" in the New Testament. For doesn't the apostle Paul tell us (I Corinthians 6:9-10) "Do not be deceived; *neither* the immoral....nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers *will inherit the Kingdom of God*". (The dots indicate an omission of mine. Paul adds "nor idolaters" - thus excluding from the Kingdom those who worship God in a way contrary to His revelation in Scripture!) Read also Ephesians 6:2 (the 5th commandment), Romans 7:7 (the tenth), I John 3:15 (the sixth) etc.

To be saved, Paul says here, you simply can't just do as you please. Clearly "works" - whether moral purity or honesty or sobriety etc, or idolatry - are an essential part of the way to eternal life! In that passage from Ephesians he adds "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for good works*, which God prepared beforehand [in the Law!], *that we should walk in them*" (v. 10).

It's absurd to suggest that a Sabbath observer is looking to works for salvation any more than an observer of the first day of the week, Sunday. Yet we insist that it is important, and would challenge any faith which observes another day, or none. Now there's bigotry for you!

So why place such emphasis on it?

Ask A Different Question!

In a sense, to ask "Is Sabbath observance [or any other aspect of God's Law] necessary for salvation?" is entirely the *wrong question*. For the correct question we must backtrack somewhat. The apostle Paul tells us that "without the Spirit of Christ we are none of His" (Romans 8:9). And in the book of Acts (ch 5:32) Peter speaks of "the Holy Spirit which God has given *to those who obey Him*". That is - God gives His Holy Spirit only to the obedient!

We have already seen that the apostle John says a true Christian keeps the commandments. So, clearly the

very beginning of the Christian life - receiving the Holy Spirit - involves *obedience*. (Are we truly converted, we might ask, if we are consistently *disobedient* to God's Word?)

The bottom line, then, is that we truly express the will of God *only when we begin to obey Him*. This means obedience to His revealed Word, the Scriptures. In other words, when we first "repent" we are making an about face [that's what *repent* indicates] from our own ways (which may include what we were taught in Sunday School or Bible class!) to following *God's* ways - the one way revealed in Scripture. As Peter told the assembled Jews on the first Christian Pentecost when they asked what they should do: "*Repent* and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and [then] you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

Those Jewish hearers of Peter were as much in need of repentance as twentieth-century man!

At the outset of our Christian life, then, not knowing all that God expects of us we turn brokenly to God in sorrow for our sin. We accept the Savior's suffering, death and resurrection for our total forgiveness. And if we have truly repented *we turn to doing God's will* as revealed in the Scriptures. It's a quest that will occupy us till our last breath! I doubt that *any* Christian has died having all knowledge or having achieved perfection! But from the time we receive His Spirit we have become a part of the Family of God!

To re-state: the repentance which accompanies our conversion means we look to *the Word of God only* - not church tradition, not what our minister may say to the contrary - to find out how we should live. Go forward at the altar call and the preacher may, for example, urge you to "come along to service next Sunday". Do you meekly accept his advice - or do you search the Scriptures to check that's what *God* wants you to do - as did the Bereans when the apostle Paul preached to them (Acts 17:11)?

Love Your Neighbor

Jesus Himself pointed out the essence of the Christian life. He said: "You shall love the *Lord your God* with all your heart...and you shall love your *neighbor* as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-40).

What does it mean in practice to "love your neighbor"? Simply nice thoughts about them? In fact, it means the practical application of all those things which are described *in the Law*: helping our neighbor when they're troubled, safeguarding your property so they don't fall into a hole you dug in your drive, or fall off your balcony. It means ensuring your dog doesn't attack your neighbors' children - nor, by extension, your TV disturb their peace! It means sharing your food if he's hungry (also an *Old Testament* concept!) It means a good relationship with them. Even if you don't like them!

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This is the *Biblical* love for neighbor, and it is done not just from “duty” but as an expression of the spirit of Christ in us. Nor out of cringing fear to somehow *earn* salvation but from a repentant and thankful and obedient heart.

Indeed “love your neighbor” (anyone we are in a position to help) is, as Paul wrote, a summary of the last six of the Ten Commandments (Galatians 5:14, Romans 13: 8-10)! And note that the command to “love your neighbor” is straight out of that *Old Testament Law* - Leviticus 19:18!

We would probably look askance at any professing Christian whose life does *not*, where possible, express such “works”!

No Christian would argue with this concept of love for neighbor. But there is another - and much neglected - side of the coin. Just *how* do you *love God*?

The Neglected Commandment

To “love God” wholeheartedly is equally practical. It is not just swaying, hands outstretched, in ecstasy as you mutter “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus”. It’s not devotedly attending Mass every morning or gathering round the crib at Christmas. To love God is to worship in the manner and at the times He prescribes in His Word. And, again, not *merely* from obedience nor to somehow “earn” salvation but out of a desire to follow God’s revealed will. It is the application of the *first four* of the Ten Commandments!

Did you ever notice that *none* of the first four commandments are directly quoted in the New Testament, yet all the last six repeatedly are? Does this mean we may bow down to idols? Or put other gods before the God of Heaven? Or take God’s Name in vain? Of course not. Clearly the writers took for granted that their readers were worshiping God *as He prescribed!* And, of course, the New Testament record bears this out. And in regard to the Gentile Christians all the New Testament writers pointed them to the inspired Scriptures of the *Old Testament* (e.g. Acts 15:21).

It’s the same Law which Jesus said would not pass away as long as Heaven and earth remained! It’s the same Law which Paul declared to be “holy and just and good” (Romans 7:12) and “spiritual” (v. 14).

When we repent, then, we *want to do as God says*. And we *do* as God says! If we don’t begin to “search the Scriptures” to see how we should love God (the *form* of religion) and how we should love neighbor then we must *question our initial repentance*. For most who profess Christianity this command to love God is truly a neglected commandment!

So - search the Scriptures, as Jesus said. At another time He told the Adversary that we must *live by every Word of God* (Matthew 4:4). Paul said those same

Scriptures (he was referring to the *Old Testament!*) are “profitable for teaching (doctrine), for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, *equipped for every good work*” (II Timothy 3:16-17).

Tremble Before God’s Word

Note that neither Jesus nor Paul nor any New Testament writer urge us to follow *tradition* at the expense of the Word of God! Rather they *condemned* traditional teaching that’s contrary to Scripture. Jesus rounded on the scribes and Pharisees for this. Quoting Isaiah He said “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me *teaching for doctrines the precepts of men*. You *leave the commandment of God* and hold fast the tradition of men. You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition” (Mark 7:6-9).

Are you following teaching contrary to Scripture? Do you follow human tradition in your worship? Has your repentance been of sufficient depth to cause you to *tremble* at God’s Word (Isaiah 66:5)? Can you, for example, find anywhere in Scripture that says you should worship on Sundays? Or even hints at observing Christmas? Check it out! Those same Scriptures that Paul says are profitable for doctrine also say “To the Law and to the Testimony. If they speak not according to this word it is *because there is no light in them*” (Isaiah 8:20).

Is the light of God’s Word shining from *your* pastor or priest or spiritual teacher, from *your* church? It doesn’t matter how compassionate or how eloquent or how many masses or miracles he performs or how frequently he speaks in “tongues” - if his teachings, your denomination’s teachings, don’t reflect the Word of God in such fundamentals as the “form” of religion - or indeed its content - then *you need to start asking some searching questions!*

True Repentance

Sabbath and Holy Day observance, then, or the laws regarding foods, or baptism etc, are *an expression of conversion*. If truly repentant, then the teachings of God’s Word will impact our daily life - in the *form* of Christianity, and in its spiritual *content*. True Bible religion in its essentials is a seamless web woven through history since Adam’s day, and filtered through the teachings of Jesus down to the twentieth century and beyond. Jesus extolled the perfect Law of God. He “magnified [it] and made it glorious” (Isaiah 42:21).

Not only do Christians, for example, obey the command forbidding adultery, but Jesus focused on the *cause*, and showed that lustful thoughts, too, are sinful. Not only is it sin to kill - but also to be angry with or to insult a brother. The principle applies in all aspects of our Christian life - in our giving, for example: not *only* our tithes but our all (Matthew 5-7). The Law is *not* “done away”, but in Christ -

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because we can be empowered by the Spirit - is more probing, more of the spirit, more expressive of the mind of God. *And more demanding.* We are each answerable to Jesus Christ for how we apply it in our own life!

Not one of us is saved by any form of works. But *true* repentance means our lives are turned around to follow the only way God has revealed for mankind. Out of filial obedience to Him, and stemming from His love for us we return that love in obedient service. As we “study to show ourselves approved” we “learn to have nothing to do with godless and silly myths” (I Timothy 4:7). Joyously we daily apply the Law of God to our own circumstances, allowing it to mould our lives to conform to His revealed will.

As Christians we are “slaves of Christ”. This is no sterile cringing obedience, but obedience that stems from the Spirit of Christ within us, graciously given through His love for us. As God works with each individual Christian we develop and express those fruits which reflect the mind of Christ: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. But we do this within the framework of His revealed laws and statutes and judgments.

Future Reward

It is instructive that Jesus Christ closes His revelation through John by stating “Behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man *according as his work shall be*” (Revelation 22:12). In the *Letters to the Seven Churches* (Revelation 2-3) He repeatedly says “I know your works”. Paul informs us that God will “render to every man according to his works” (Romans 2:6), and asserts “the *doers* of the law shall be justified” (v.13). Jesus Christ will reward faithful obedience to Him and to His Law!

This same theme is echoed by the prophet Daniel when he wrote: “Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever” (ch 12:3). Works, again!

The clear conclusion is that we can by no means be saved by any action on our part, by any “works”. Yet unless we express our repentance, our faith *by our works* faith is useless! As James - an inspired writer - wrote: “A man is justified by works and not by faith alone...faith apart from works is dead” (ch 2:24-26). Do you “only believe”? So also do the demons (v.19)! If you have been drawn by the goodness of God to a deep godly sorrow that has led you to true repentance

- then your desire will be to *live by every Word of God!* You will hunger and thirst after righteousness - which is the expression of the Law of God (Psalm 119: 172).

What Is Sin?

The apostle John adds a further dimension. Writing to fellow Christians he said “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (I John 2:8).

How would you define “sin”? There are probably almost as many definitions as there are professing Christians! However, John tells us (ch 3:4) that sin is “transgression of the Law”. Paul wrote to the Romans (ch 7:7) that the Law told him *what sin is*. How then do you determine if some practice is sin? By *searching the Scriptures* - both of the Old Testament and the New. So to quit sin means *we obey the Law of God*.

Clearly, the Law has a vital role in the Christian life.

There is absolutely no conflict between *grace* and *works!* We are saved wholly by grace. But we *express* our repentance and our faith by our *works*. To again quote James, “Faith without works is dead” (ch 2:26). It is unquestionably vital that we be sure our works do not negate the commandments of God.

Let's recall that Jesus said: "No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God (Luke 9:62).

Ancient Judah and Israel turned their backs on God's revealed form of worship - and were cast out of their land for adopting foreign religious practices. The wrong kind of works. They offended in both the *form* of God's religion (they changed the time for worship, for example), and in the content (each did what was right in his or her own eyes). Our own nations, and Christendom as a whole, have followed suit - and are due to suffer a similar correction from the hand of a loving God.

You need not suffer the same fate - *if you truly repent*, and turn to God in loving filial obedience. You will, truly, be a child of God.

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