

Summary Expressions Of Salvation

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Intro

Summary expressions are very common in the Bible but they often confuse people who misinterpret their theological use and meaning. Let's begin with a definition. In salvation theology, a summary expression (or statement) is an abbreviation of the Christian belief system. It gives a general representation of Christianity without delving into the particulars of salvation doctrine. It views Christianity from a zoomed-out perspective, as it were.

For instance, John 3:16 is a summary expression of salvation. It is so because it summarily describes Christian salvation without going into the particulars about the Christian plan of salvation. However, if a person were to zoom in closer to its context, he would find that the tenets of salvation were indeed addressed by Jesus a few moments earlier in verses 3-8, especially verse 5. But in verse 16, Jesus zoomed out from those particulars to simply and broadly state the crux of His mission. From this example, we can clearly see, then, that summary expressions include the fulness of the belief system they theologically summarize. We will look at other examples of summary statements as we go along.

Summary expressions are an important part of Scripture.

They are pithy and easy to remember. They're effective in making a point about salvation, the mercy of God, etc. They are even doxological (tending to praise God) because they often extol the mercy, grace, and love of God. Sadly, and with serious detriment, many people get confused about the Bible's summary expressions of faith. Their confusion stems from superficial understanding of Scripture and, perhaps, the natural human tendency to claim salvation by the slightest means.

Tenet-specificity

As noted above, summary expressions of salvation are general in nature. They do not zoom in, as it were, on the tenets of salvation. They express salvation more succinctly. They do so for a simple theological reason— the point being made at the time does not necessitate the mention of specific tenets. It is not necessary to enumerate the tenets of salvation each time salvation is mentioned. In fact, to do so would be cumbersome and unnatural to normal human speech.

When is tenet-specificity required?

Tenet-specificity is only required when learning of, or sharing, the Gospel. There are only two places in the New Testament where we see the tenets of salvation presented. They are in the Great Commission where Jesus prescribed them and in the book of Acts, where the Great Commission was fulfilled.

1/ The Great Commission

You would expect to find tenet-specificity regarding salvation in the Great Commission. That is where Jesus charged his disciples to preach the Gospel. And, in that charge, He specified what they were to preach. These specifics comprise the plan of salvation. They include repentance, water baptism in Jesus' name, and the infilling of the Holy Ghost. (This is seen from a full-orbed study of the Great Commission.)

2/ The book of Acts

Consequent to the Great Commission is the Christian evangelism that takes place in the book of Acts. Naturally, you would expect to see evidence of the Commission's tenets there. And, indeed, this is the case, beginning on the Day of Pentecost when the plan of salvation was revealed for the Church age (Acts 2:38-39).

Two sides of the same coin of salvation

The Great Commission and the Day of Pentecost are the two most important events theologically regarding the identity of the true plan of salvation. That is so because, in these two places, the plan of salvation must be revealed because they involve Christian evangelism. In addition to John 3:16, which we have already considered, common summary expressions of the New Testament include Acts 16:31, Ephesians 2:8-9, Romans 10:9-10, and 1John 3:14. But none of these were prescribed in the Great Commission. And, none were stated on the Day of Pentecost when inquiry was made for the plan of salvation. Tenet-specificity was required then because convicted souls asked, "What shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). Verse 38 was Peter's response. It was very tenet-specific because it had to be. He was telling people how to be saved. And he stated the terms imperatively. In other words, what he would say was the only means by which his hearers could be saved. He said, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost". And Peter stated this as the one plan of salvation for everyone (verse 39). Therefore, if you ask the same question about how to be saved, you will receive the same answer— that is, if the person you're asking is a true representative of the Gospel.

So we see that, in broad theological use, summary expressions of salvation are non tenet-specific. On the other hand, describing salvation, as Jesus did to Nicodemus (John 3:3-5), or proclaiming the plan of salvation, as Peter did on the Day of Pentecost, must be tenet-specific (Acts 2:37-39). This is so that people can know and receive the salvation experience. A great example of this truth is the case of Paul introducing the Philippian jailer to the Gospel (Acts 16:30-33). He initially presented Christianity to the pagan man non tenet-specifically. This was, of course, wise missionary practice. The specificity he used was, rather, Person-specific. He first pointed the jailer to faith in the Person of Christ (verse 31), upon which everything to follow would be predicated. And then, when the jailer had put his faith in Christ as Savior, he was directed by Paul to tenet-specificity relating to the plan of salvation, according to the Word of the Lord (verse 32). This is very much in accordance with the necessary progression of faith Jesus described in John 8:31-32. Here's the quote:

“Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

The “truth”, here, which makes a person free, is more than mere faith in the Person of Christ. That is the most evident thing in the passage. It can only refer to the saving tenets of the Gospel, for that is all that is efficacious for salvation in the Christian era (2Corinthians 4:3-4; 1Timothy 4:16).

Summary expressions related to salvation are both prospective (forward-looking) and retrospective (backward-looking).

1/ Prospective summary expressions

Summary expressions can anticipate salvation, as we've pointed out in John 3:16 and Acts 16:31. They usually have a “shall be” aspect about them (e.g., shall be saved”). While the expressions are non tenet-specific, they imply that the person or persons addressed would follow through on the inherent and necessary tenets of salvation. The common specificity the expressions contain regards the result (e.g., “shall be saved”).

2/ Retrospective summary expressions

Summary expressions can also look backward on salvation, as in Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians (2:8-9). All the Christian evangelism recorded in the New Testament is in the book of Acts. That's why we see the tenets of salvation employed there. On the contrary, all the Epistles were written to people who had already received the Acts 2:38 salvation experience. Therefore, since the Epistles do not evangelize, there is no

presentation in them of Gospel terms. Hence, references to salvation could be summarily abbreviated and everyone would understand what was being said. It was another way in which salvation could be referred to from a perspective that was “zoomed-out” from the actual conversion experience.

When Paul was writing to the Ephesians, for instance, he summarily referred to their experience as salvation by grace through faith. That was a perfect way to describe the beautiful Acts 2:38 experience, which he personally brought to them on his third missionary journey (Acts 19:1-6). To try to interpret his words in Ephesians 2:8-9 as being theologically different from what we see him actually practice in Ephesus is egregiously corrupt hermeneutics. Ephesians 2:8-9 must be interpreted in the light of Acts 19:1-6, to which it definitely refers. This is how the charter members of the Ephesian Church were saved and salvation for one is salvation for all (Ephesians 4:5). Retrospective summary expressions, especially in the Epistles, often express Christian salvation in the most basic way, namely grace on the part of God and faith on the part of man as seen in Ephesians 2:8-9. The Ephesian expression represents a sublime truth about salvation reduced to its simplest form. Paul’s purpose was not to elaborate on the tenets of salvation but on the efficacious union of grace and faith. Other familiar summary expressions of Paul include being justified by grace (Romans 3:24; Titus 3:7) and justified by faith (Romans 3:28; 5:1), each of which individually expresses half of what Paul said in Ephesians 2:8-9. While the theological expressions propound the elements of grace and faith in salvation, none of them denies Acts 2:38 as the plan of salvation. In fact, they encompass it. Grace and faith are the great principles underlying Acts 2:38.

Summary expressions were never intended to replace the plan of salvation.

Summary expressions are meaningful statements of faith but they are not the plan of salvation. They summarily describe what is true if a person will believe in Christ according to the terms of the New Covenant. Sadly, people often miss the understanding behind their simplicity. Many people, including preachers, substitute these expressions for the plan of salvation that was announced for everyone on the Day of Pentecost. Because of this serious error, simple summary expressions are the full extent of some people’s faith. They may believe in Jesus, and even be zealous, but not according to true knowledge of salvation (Romans 10:2). They may be ever learning but never coming to the knowledge of the truth (2Timothy 3:7). Many do not have a definitive Christian salvation experience as witnessed in the book of Acts (Acts 2,8,9,10,19). If a person would ask them how they were saved or what they believe about salvation doctrine, their answer would bear no resemblance to Acts 2:38. It is

sad, especially in light of the fact that salvation tenets of the Gospel are set forth so prominently in the New Testament that they are said by Paul to shine and, therefore, be virtually impossible to miss (2Corinthians 4:3-4).

Notice Jesus' advance guard against the error of wrongly using the summary expressions of the New Testament:

1/ John 3:5 Christ's pre-emptive word about the essential tenets of salvation, involving water and Spirit, strikes out any other means of salvation for the Christian Church.

2/ John 8:31-32 Believing in Jesus means continuing in His Word until claiming salvation by a portion of truth designed for this purpose. The truth Jesus referred to that makes a person free is the Gospel plan of salvation which was revealed on the Day of Pentecost. It is exclusively what saves. It involves turning to God, remission of sins, and being filled with God's Spirit (Acts 2:38). No part of that can be left out if a person truly wants to be saved.

3/ The Great Commission

The full-orbed Great Commission, taking place over the course of forty days, contains all the tenets of salvation contained in Acts 2:38. Portions of the Great Commission are recorded in all four Gospels (John 20:21-23; Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:45-49).

4/ The warnings of Matthew 7:13-23 and Luke 13:24-27

In these almost terrifying warnings, Jesus makes it clear that many people of faith will be lost. These passages stress a point of entrance into true faith ("gate") that cannot be overlooked. All the religion and faith in the world are inadequate if a person has not experienced the plan of salvation. A good example of that is Cornelius in Acts chapter ten.

Warnings of self-examination are in the Epistles as well.

2Corinthians 13:5 and Philippians 2:12 are a couple of them.

Importance of the book of Acts

We must be thankful to God for the book of Acts. It is rightly called the book of salvation. It reveals more about Christian salvation doctrine than any other New Testament book. It does this especially by giving us a true history of how the first generation of Christians were saved. It "zooms in", as it were, on their salvation experience. Every person who wants to share their hope of heaven should also share

their experience of salvation (Jude 3). How else could we possibly obtain the same hope?