Lordship Salvation: Is it Biblical

A Study of the Lordship Salvation Controversy

Part Two

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This article is continued from: Lordship Salvation: Is it Biblical? - Part One

In General, the Lordship Salvation view presents an inadequate (rigid) view of the salvation procedure. Supporters seem to see salvation as a process following these steps: the lost sinner is befriended by caring believer(s), trust and fellowship ensues, the unbeliever is witnessed to, church and or Bible study is attended, the Gospel message is understood, and salvation is accepted. To be sure, this is the pattern in many, many cases. It is possible for a person to gradually learn more of the Gospel, come to understand and appreciate who Christ is, decide to follow Him, and get saved. In such cases a person may actually understand (though not fully) what it means to "make Christ Lord."

But it is also true that in many, many cases a non-believer is not in the evangelism-discipleship scenario, is not systematically witnessed to, there is no church attended or Bible study encountered. In fact, a non-believer may not be seeking the Lord at all (as was the case with this writer!). Instead of being like the Ethiopian eunuch, seeking guidance in the Scriptures, many are like the thief on the cross, crying out for last minute mercy! They only know that Christ has died for them, and that He offers the gift of forgiveness and salvation from damnation. Only after salvation do they cry out, "Truly, this was the Son of God!"

The Witness of the Spirit to the individual is rendered inadequate in the Lordship Salvation position. When it comes to the security of the believer, the knowledge that one is truly saved, the internal Witness of the Spirit cannot be dismissed as inappropriate or unreliable. Jesus himself said, "And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever; the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you" (John 14:16,17, 26, NKJV).

Surely greater than evidential works is the witness to the believer of their own personal salvation, given to them by the indwelling Lord. This is sensitive ground, to be sure, and is not to be confused with Pentecostalism or Charismatic belief, but rather should be in line with the classic Protestant position, articulated by Calvin, of the witness of the Spirit.

In M. James Sawyer's excellent paper, The Witness of the Spirit in the Protestant Tradition, he states:

God, the Reformers thundered, was not bound by men. The authority of His word was not vouchsafed by human authority. He himself took the initiative in assuring the believer of the shape and veracity of his Word. In so asserting, the Reformers challenged directly the pretentious assertions of late medieval Catholicism and contended that the Word of God has authority over the church, rather than the church having authority to declare what is the Word of God. Likewise, the Reformers declared that God the Holy Spirit witnessed directly to the heart of the believer giving assurance that believer is in fact saved, regenerate and a child of God. Thus was born the doctrine known today as the Witness of the Spirit, or the Internal Testimony of the Holy Spirit.(20)

For any evangelical to argue that the professed believer does not really know that he is a believer, is to, in the view of the Reformers, have a shallow if not heretical view of the power of the Holy Spirit. According to Sawyer, Calvin believed there was a dual testimony of the Spirit to the new believer. "John Calvin, the first theologian to develop the teaching of the witness of the Spirit, speaks at length of that witness under two separate headings, the immediate testimony of the Spirit to the heart of the individual that the Canon of Scripture is the Word of God, and the activity of the Spirit touching the hearts of men and women to give assurance of their new status before them as his children."(21)

This present writer has found this to be true in his own life. When I was saved at age 35, I had very little, if any, knowledge of Biblical salvation. I was raised in a Roman Catholic home and went to Catholic school for 9 years, but never heard the Gospel message. I had passing knowledge of Christian principles, knew that Christ was The Second Person of the Holy Trinity, but that was it. When I became saved, two truths were immediately witnessed to me by the Holy Spirit: The Bible in its entirety is true, and I knew I was saved, because I knew, by the Spirit's witness, that Christ was the Savior God. I cannot say that this assuredly happens in every situation, but this is attested to by Calvin, who expressly rejected any attempt to build a faith in the Scriptures upon evidence as an approach which amounted to "doing things backwards."(22) Instead, he rested all assurance upon the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit working on the heart of the believer.

To Calvin, Scripture was "self-authenticated; hence, it is not right to subject it to proof or reasoning. And the certainty it deserves with us,
It cannot be overlooked that for the greatest part of Christian history, believing Christians have not had clear and undenied access to the Scriptures themselves displayed in the heart of the believer a certainty more convincing than any human argument. In our modern secular, post-Christian society, the need for Christian Apologetics is certainly required, but the truth of Christianity never rests on the legs of logical or historical evidence. The basis for the truth of Scripture is always the witness of Scripture to itself, being the God-breathed Word of God. The Holy Spirit convicts the new believer of the truth of Scripture; likewise the indwelling Spirit assures of salvation as well.

Sawyer writes:
The doctrine of salvation is developed at great length by Calvin in book three of the Institutes. It is here that one sees the pastoral heart of the Geneva reformer and the lengths to which he went to ground the believer's salvation in the experience of the presence of God in his/her life. Calvin insists that assurance is of the essence of faith and a sine qua non of salvation. He assails those who would rob the believer of the immediate assurance of the presence of God and replace it with an assurance mediated by any so-called evidences of grace which could be found in the life. In many places Calvin explicitly references the witness of the Spirit in the life of the believer, heaping scorn upon those who would deny the experiential aspect of His ministry or suspend assurance of salvation upon something other than the Spirit's immediate witness. (24)

For Lordship Salvation proponents, many who are Reformed and Calvinist, to insist on external evidence of the Lordship of Christ in the life of a new believer, is in direct opposition to the beliefs of the Reformers in general, and Calvin in particular.

The Genesis of the Lordship Salvation position may be traced back to the Puritans. When one turns his focus from Calvin and the early Reformation understanding of the ministry of the Spirit, especially with reference to Salvation and the assurance that the believer is to have in his confidence before God, to the later Puritans, one finds a decided shift in emphasis. (25) The Puritans continued the emphasis of Calvin and other Reformers on the necessity of the witness of the Spirit, and applied it especially to the doctrine of Salvation; however, there is now an emphasis of a Spirit given assurance as being a fruit of faith rather than endemic to the very nature of faith itself.

Sawyer says: "The concept of the immediate witness of the Spirit was not denied. Rather, the immediate internal testimony was seen as being given later in the Christian life rather than at its outset. Some of the Puritan writers go so far as to call the experience of the immediate direct supra-rational witness of the Spirit as a 'new conversion.'" (26) This is directly opposed to Calvin's belief: "Calvin insisted upon the 'witness of the Spirit' as a vital aspect in the assurance of salvation. This 'witness' involves a personal communion with God.

Isaac Dorner, reflecting Calvin, argued that spiritual truth made a demand on the soul if certainty were to be attained. Thus, certainty and assurance of spiritual truth were qualitatively different in nature than certainty of all other knowledge. Faith became the principium cognoscendi. This faith was a product of the personal experience of the presence of God and the medium of His presence.

Faith has a knowledge of being known by God, and of its existence because of God, and in such a way that it knows God as the one self-verifying and self-subsisting fact. . . Thus faith offers a divinely assured certainty since it involves a genuine reciprocal divine communion attested in the human soul. This is not mysticism in the classic sense of the term. Rather, God, as a person reaches out to directly touch the soul of the individual and give certain knowledge of Himself. (27)

It seems apparent that the witness of the Spirit is an essential Protestant teaching of the Reformation, and also one that has been, if not directly denied, then carelessly overlooked in modern Evangelical theology, particularly among Lordship Salvation proponents.

Conclusion

We have looked at both sides of the Lordship Salvation controversy, and arguments as well as opposition can be made for each position. It is the belief of this writer, that once all of the Biblical evidence as presented by the Lord Jesus Christ and the Apostles is weighed, the true Biblical doctrine is that of Free Grace Salvation, with some necessary Biblical qualifications describing true belief, as opposed to "mental assent" or "lip service."

It seems that both sides of the issue are guilty of some use of Straw Man argumentation. I don't believe either side has intentionally misrepresented the other side's position, but I believe it is true that each position does not completely understand the other. It is apparent that the holders of the Free Grace opinion are not saying that one may simply pay lip service to the Lord and be saved. Likewise, Lordship Salvation proponents are not claiming that one must adhere perfectly to the Lordship of Christ to be saved. Both sides have slightly, yet unintentionally, distorted the other side's view. In addition to the above discussion for and against each position, I feel the following major points have been overlooked in the controversy in regards to their importance.

Sawyer says:
In the medieval period the assurance of the presence of God was cut off from the ordinary believer and held captive by the Roman Catholic magisterium and in the sacerdotal system. The Bible was proclaimed to be the Word of God on the authority of the Church, and it was the Church that mediated God's presence to the believer through the sacraments. God the Father was utterly transcendent, and Jesus Christ was the righteous judge of the earth. Communication from God was mediated through the church hierarchy. (28)
While undoubtedly the early church had some access to copies of the Autographs (hence our voluminous library of ancient New Testament manuscripts) they most certainly were not in the hands of every believer in every church. Many Scripture copies were destroyed in the Roman persecutions, and as the church slid into Roman Catholicism it quickly became an anathema for believers to possess and read the Scriptures.

I don't think it is an overstatement to say that the vast majority of believers throughout history did not possess, nor know the full contents of, the Scriptures. Indeed, believers would not have access to the New Testament until the Protestant Reformation, and even then, ready access would be slow in forthcoming. It can be said that Protestant believers did not possess the Bible in any regular fashion until the middle of the end of the 17th Century. This means that true believers could not truly study and know the requirements of Lordship Salvation for over 1600 years!

Christians certainly received the Word in sermon and lecture, and oral tradition, but how is one to fully submit to Lordship Salvation from hearing, only? One may hear the Word and believe, but unless one can study the Scriptures daily as the Bereans did, it is quite doubtful that one could make Christ the Lord of their daily life. Even today, when we live in a society of Bible gluttony (as far as access to multiple numbers of Bibles and translations) how many Christians live in the Word daily and submit to the Lordship of Christ? I believe the Lordship Salvation position takes a short-sighted view of the history of Christianity.

In regard to point 1, if the large majority of Christians throughout history did not have ready access to the Word, and could not know the revealed will of Christ, then the overwhelming number of professed believers must not have been saved. This seems impossible, both Biblically and historically, and denies the statement of the Lord that “I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not stand against it.” Submitting to the Lordship of Christ is a learning experience, conducive to Biblical study and discipleship. Hence Lordship cannot be pre- or mid-conversion, as no one can know the Lord until they are first saved.

**Summary**

The Lordship Salvation view does not exemplify the historical position of the church, nor the clear teaching of Scripture. Too many "also's" must be incorporated into the Gospel message if one is to submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in order to obtain The Free Gift.

Still, both "sides" in this issue are much closer than many realize. Men like MacArthur, who decries the term Lordship Salvation, are not claiming that one must make Christ Lord of one's entirety in order to be saved; they are arguing against the profession of belief only; the apostate false believer. Similarly, Free Grace advocates are not arguing that one can claim to be a Christian and then continue to live in unrepentant sin and antinomianism; good works of some sort must follow faith. Both sides need to come to a better understanding of one another and realize that they are looking at different sides of the same coin. Both can enthusiastically agree with James that "faith without works is dead."

Let me end with these great words from Spurgeon's classic, *All of Grace*:

> Better the poorest real faith actually at work, than the best ideal of it left in the region of speculation. The great matter is to believe on the Lord Jesus at once. Never mind distinctions and definitions. A hungry man eats though he does not understand the composition of his food, the anatomy of his mouth, or the process of digestion: he lives because he eats. Another far more clever person understands thoroughly the science of nutrition; but if he does not eat he will die, with all his knowledge. There are, no doubt, many at this hour in Hell who understood the doctrine of faith, but did not believe. On the other hand, not one who has trusted in the Lord Jesus has ever been cast out, though he may never have been able intelligently to define his faith. Oh dear reader, receive the Lord Jesus into your soul, and you shall live forever! "HE THAT BELIEVETH IN HIM HATH EVERLASTING LIFE."

The links below are direct links to where the book can be purchased from [Books-A-Million](https://www.booksamillion.com).
The "lordship salvation" controversy (also "Lordship Controversy") is a theological dispute regarding key soteriological questions within Evangelical Christianity, involving some non-denominational and Evangelical churches in North America at least since the 1980s. The dispute spawned several books, pamphlets, and conferences. According to one website advocating Lordship Salvation, "the doctrine of Lordship salvation teaches that submitting to Christ as Lord goes hand-in-hand with trusting in Christ. The Distinctives of Lordship Salvation. There are many articles of faith that are fundamental to all evangelical teaching. For example, there is agreement among all believers on the following truths: (1) Christ's death purchased eternal salvation; (2) the saved are justified by grace through faith in Christ alone; (3) sinners cannot earn divine favor; (4) God requires no preparatory works or pre-salvation reformation; (5) eternal life is a gift of God; (6) believers are saved before their faith ever. The following are nine distinctives of a biblical understanding of salvation and the gospel. First, Scripture teaches that the gospel calls sinners to faith joined in oneness with repentance (Acts 2:38; 17:30; 20:21; 2 Pet. Lordship Salvation is basically the view that in order to become a true Christian a person must receive Jesus as both Savior and Lord and that he must also cease from sin or be willing to cease from sin in order to be saved. If it is God who grants us repentance and faith, then there is no room for the Lordship salvation because we understand that the Lordship of Christ and. Is salvation by faith alone, and nothing beyond it is required (one step)? Or, is faith to be accompanied by a submission to the Lordship of Christ and repentance (two steps)--both of which result in salvation? Let's see if we can make sense of it. Related to this topic is what is called the ordo salutis, the order of salvation.