

How To Determine If Something Is A Salvation Issue

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The question about whether something is a “salvation issue” gets thrown around occasionally among some circles. “Is using instrumental music in worship is a salvation issue?” “Is what you wear to worship a salvation issue?” “Is church attendance a salvation issue?” Used this way, the phrase “salvation issue” (never found in Scripture) is employed to describe an issue that Christians must get right in order to go to heaven. I’ve always thought that this theoretical distinction of whether something is a “salvation issue” is kind of silly—if not outright arrogant. After all, it doesn’t matter what I, or any other human, thinks is a “salvation issue.” Are we willing to embrace a pseudo Christianity that categorizes certain commands of God as being either “important” or “non-important?”

If There Were Such A Thing As “Salvation Issues” vs. “Non-Salvation Issues...”

...Who Gets To Decide?

The phrase “salvation issue” was coined only a generation ago in an effort to justify those who failed to believe what the Bible taught on a given issue. “You can be mistaken about a host of different Biblical issues so long as you believe the truth about Jesus or salvation,” or so the argument goes.

With that being said, what issues can I label as being “inconsequential” to my salvation? No one has the right to walk up to God’s throne and tell Him to scoot over. If I disobey God regarding any issue He has addressed in His word (either explicitly or implicitly), I am guilty of sin. Sin is the violation of God’s will on a given issue (1 John 3:4; 5:17; Jas. 4:17; Rom. 14:23; Prov. 24:9). All issues – from “big” matters to “little” matters – have the power to damn my soul (Rom. 6:23).

Who gave me the right to compartmentalize issues such as sexuality and marriage, worship, gender roles in the church, baptism, and denominationalism as either “essential” or “non-essential” matters? Which of these am I willing to be wrong about and still be found pleasing to God?

...What is the least I have to do to be pleasing to God?

One of the dangers of categorizing things as “salvation issues” is that it fosters a sort of “checklist” mentality when it comes to Christianity. (“As long as I’m good on these things over here, I don’t have to worry about those things over there.”) Yet Christianity has never been a merit-based system. It is a system of salvation granted to us only by the grace of God (Eph. 2:8-9). God’s free gift of salvation of course has some requirements of receipt (belief & obedience, cf. Mark 16:15-16), but a saving relationship with God is a result of our obedient love for Him. Someone who is deeply in love with God never tries to categorize His law into “essentials” and “non-essentials.” Jesus rebuked the ancient scribes and Pharisees for forgetting the basis from which their obedience was to spring (cf. Matt. 23:23-24).

...Which of God’s commands can we sacrifice on the altar of relativism?

When I take matters on which God has spoken and depreciate them to mere “matters of opinion,” I have sacrificed the conviction that God’s Word can be known and understood. God has never spoken out of both sides of His mouth on an issue. There is no Biblical teaching about which all interpretations are equally valid.

If I don't get everything right in my understanding of the Bible, it isn't because God could not adequately communicate His Word—it's because of me. The human heart itself is the most common limitation in understanding God's Word. The heart that does not recognize or desire truth is the most common and pervasive pitfall in Bible interpretation. We need to be levelheaded about this question. The first order of business is to get our baseline right: God, and God alone, gets to decide what is a "salvation issue."

Things We Must Get Right From The Beginning

Of course, the Bible teaches, in no uncertain terms, that there are things one must do and believe in order to be saved by God's grace, despite the sincerity of someone to the contrary.

I must have faith in God and His reward for the faithful (Heb. 11:6; cf. Rev. 2:10).

I must repent of my sins, entering into a covenant with God to conform to the identity of His Son (Luke 13:3; Acts 3:19; Gal. 2:20).

I must have at least a basic, though no-less fervent, understanding of what it means to yield to the Lordship of Christ (Matt. 28:28; Acts 2:36; 10:36; Rom. 10:9-10; Jude 4; Rev. 17:14).

I must be baptized for the express purpose of (a) receiving forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; Gal. 3:26-27; 1 Pet. 3:21) and (b) being added by Jesus to His church (Acts 2:47; cf. Col. 1:13).

And, I would argue, I must have at least a rudimentary concept of the kingdom of God, since it was so central to the preaching of the gospel during the beginning of the church (Acts 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31; cf. Col. 1:13).

In other words, sincerity is not enough. There will be plenty of people—a heartbreaking number—who honestly believed they were Christians but did not satisfy the requirements of salvation so clearly stated by the New Testament (Matt. 7:21-23). There are simply some things a person must get right from the beginning in order to be saved.

All Christians Are On A Learning Curve

When someone becomes a Christian, do they have to understand everything about instrumental music, denominationalism, modesty, the Lord's Supper, the church organization, the division between the Old and New Testaments, etc.? As important as these issues are, certainly not immediately!

Once someone has become a Christian, he/she begins a lifelong period of growth. We must remember that all Christians have varying degrees of spiritual maturity—some growing faster than others. [Much of the "speed" of this development is based upon desire (1 Pet. 2:2)].

We need to be patient with Christians if they have not yet attained a coherent knowledge of the truth (cf. Rom. 14:1; 15:1; 1 Cor. 8:9). Someone may hold to an incorrect Biblical position for the time being, but still be searching for the truth.

Not only are we to teach our fellow Christians the truth, but we are to do it with "complete patience" (2 Tim. 4:2). The apostle Paul, knowing Christians mature at different rates of speed, wrote:

We urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all (1 Thess. 5:14).

...with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:2-3).

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive (Col. 3:12-13).

Some Christians used to be members of various denominations, and many will likely have some theological baggage to overcome. Someone who grew up being a Catholic, Mormon, Jehovah's Witness, Methodist, Baptist, etc., will likely be disadvantaged in adapting to pre-denominational Christianity. They will have to "unlearn" several of the false beliefs they had previously been taught.

Other Christians grew up being taught a postmodern worldview, and thus will have some philosophical baggage to overcome. The truth claims of the Bible will run counter to the relative truth culture has taught them through the years. Yet other Christians grew up in an abusive household, or suffer from learning disabilities, and thus will have some psychological or emotional baggage to overcome.

Christians of course have an obligation to contend for the faith if false religion is being taught (Jude 3). Yet, at the same time, those who harshly insist their brethren immediately drop what is deemed to be a wrong belief, without being willing to first patiently teach them, are often a cancer in the church.

So long as a person is still breathing on this earth, he/she must always be in pursuit of the truth (2 Thess. 2:12). It is when a Christian rejects God's Word about something that an issue—any issue—can become a "salvation issue."

God Often Grants A Period of Grace

God is often merciful and gives us a period of grace. Consider the "seven churches of Asia" in Revelation 2-3. Jesus critiqued each congregation, telling them what they needed to change if they still wanted to be saved. To the Ephesian church of Christ, for example, He said:

Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent (Rev. 2:5).

By the phrase "remove your lampstand," I suppose God still considered the names of those Christians still written in the book of Life (cf. Rev. 3:5), but He was placing them on probation. They were guilty of sin—and all sin is a "salvation issue." But by His grace He gave them a period to repent.

When does God's grace period end? To the Thyatira church, Jesus said:

I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works (Rev. 2:20-22).

Did Jezebel get to decide when God's grace period ended? Perhaps her preacher tried to comfort her by saying, "Yes, sexual deviancy is frowned upon at this church, but it isn't a salvation issue."

Only God, in His sovereignty, gets to decide how far His grace will extend. We are not promised an opportunity to repent always (Acts 5:1-11). But when we refuse to obey the words of Christ, any issue can become a "salvation issue" (2 Thess. 1:8).

Conclusion

Before entering into Christ, all sins are salvation issues (Rom. 6:23; 3:23). After the gospel has been obeyed, Christians must “walk according to the Spirit” (Rom. 8:1-2); otherwise any sin can once again become a “salvation issue.”

One of the beautiful things about Christianity is that I don’t have to get everything right—I just have to “walk in the light” (1 John 1:7). I simply must continually try to get everything right. It is when I become dispassionate about serving God – categorizing His commands as “salvation issues” and “non-salvation issues”—that I jeopardize my salvation. I cannot afford to stop pursuing the truth of His Word.

I might not get everything right concerning the various teachings of the Bible (in fact, I’m confident I won’t). I might be honestly mistaken when it comes to issues like church attendance, modesty, gambling, the indwelling nature of the Holy Spirit, the “end times,” the proper use of church funds, etc. This doesn’t mean the truth can’t be known; this doesn’t mean there is “room for disagreement.” But there is, however, room in the church for greater patience with those who are honestly mistaken on these issues—but are still searching for the truth. [And if someone is publicly teaching something that he/she is honestly mistaken about, we should gently pull them aside and explain the truth “more accurately” to them (Acts 18:25-26).]

I must continually strive to better understand the gospel of Christ, because everything becomes a “salvation issue” when I stop seeking the truth and obeying God. By God’s grace, He will let my lampstand burn long enough for me to come to a better knowledge of the truth. And even at my best, at the end of the day, I will just be an “unprofitable servant” (Luke 17:10). Thank God for His grace.