

Does John 3:16 Teach Eternal Security Through Faith Alone?

By Steve Ray

My mother asked me, “How would you like fifty cents?” I quickly responded, “I would like it very much.” What a silly question to ask an eight year old. Of course I would like fifty cents. Fifty cents was a lot of money when I was a little boy. My mother continued, “Here is a Bible verse I want you to memorize, and when you can recite it perfectly, I will give you the money.” And that is how I first learned and memorized some of the most well-known passages of the Bible. I memorized all of Psalm 23, “*The Lord is My Shepherd . . .*” I learned Psalm 119:105, “*Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path,*” which was a constant reminder of the Bible’s place of preeminence in my life, the sole rule of faith and practice.

Of course the most important verse to be memorized by any Evangelical Protestant child is John 3:16. It is a verse that encapsules the Gospel of Christ in one elegant and pregnant sentence, a sentence that reaches to the heart of God and explains the essence of history and salvation in twenty-five short words. The key action words stand out with stark clarity: *loved, gave, believe, perish, and have*. We can possess (have) something because of God’s act of love, and a response by man. The loving act of God in history, opened an otherwise locked and bolted door, providing man with an escape from damnation and an offer of eternal life.

No one comes to the Bible, or any other information for that matter, with complete objectivity, without a tradition and mindset by which the information is filtered. Before finding the Catholic Church last year, my wife and I, like our Evangelical friends, held to the fundamentalist traditions of *belief in Christ* and *justification by faith alone*. Recently I was approached by a Fundamentalist who said that “Abraham believed God and was made righteous (Gen. 15:6), and since the word *believed* is in the past tense, it meant that Abraham was saved in the instant He believed God. Abraham supposedly was saved and had eternal security from that point in time based upon his one-point-in-time mental assent. The Fundamentalist friend then moved to John 3:16 and tied Abraham’s belief to our belief in Christ.

There is an interesting twist with this verse that seemed to elude my Fundamentalist friend. I asked him if he had ever looked carefully at the tense of the action words in John 3:16. He hadn’t, and because his tradition tells him that one-time-belief is the basis of salvation, he automatically understood John to mean that by a momentary mental assent to Christ, one could be assured of eternal security and a guaranteed place in heaven. I dissected the verse to give him the information he lacked, and which I had lacked all my life before Catholic Church.

First a note about the action words. In Greek, the language of the New Testament there are many tenses for verbs. We will discuss two: *aorist* and *present*. The Aorist tense describes *one point in time*. It is as simple as that. Present is the *current, ongoing present action*. It is also as simple as that. Aorist is represented by a point (.). Present is represented by a continuous line (-----). Now, with this simple understanding, lets look

at John 3:16:

John 3:16 *“For God so loved (aorist, a past point in time) the world, that he gave (aorist, a past point in time) his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth (present, current, progressive action) in him should not perish (aorist, a past point in time), but have (present, current, progressive action) everlasting life.”* (KJV).

Interesting, uh? The present tense “that whosoever *is believing* in Him” puts a different light on the verse. One would expect the word *believe* to be aorist, to show it’s a “once-and-for-all” act, a “one-point-in-time” event. I used to say, *“I believed in Christ on such and such a date so I know I am saved.”* But now I say, *“I did believe in Christ, I am believing in Christ and I am being saved.”* One could ask why Jesus switched to the *present tense* in a verse full of aorists. The present tense implies continually believing, a process of believing, and not the past mental assent I once thought.

Notice that *“have everlasting life”* is also in the present tense. It does not say you *will have* eternal life in the past or future, but that you *will currently be having* eternal life. One Greek Grammar explains the present tense this way, says, *“The present tense is basically linear or durative, ongoing in its kind of action. The durative notion may be expressed graphically by an unbroken line (—), since the action is simply continuous. This is known as the progressive present. Refinements of this general rule will be encountered; however, the fundamental distinction will not be negated.* He who is currently, habitually and continuously believing . . . will be currently and presently having eternal life. One needs to be careful with the interpretation of the Bible, for what what believes and understands has eternal consequences.

Does the word *believe* mean a mere mental assent. The biblical term believe can’t be reduced to just a mental acceptance. The word *believe* in biblical times carried with it the concept of obedience and reliance. Kittel says *“pisteuo means ‘to trust’ (also ‘to obey’) . . .”* Vines says, *“. . . reliance upon, not mere credence . . .”* This is confirmed further by John the Baptist’s statement in John 3:36 *“He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not (apeitheo) the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him. (KJV)* The work *apeitheo* is understood by all good translators and commentators to mean obedience. The opposite (antonym) of believe is *disobey*. The verse in the RSV says *“He who believes (“is believing”, present tense) in the Son. . . he who disobeys (“is disobeying” present tense) the Son . . . “*

The NASB translates the verse like this: *“He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him”.* Kittel, a Protestant reference work, clearly defines *apeitheo* to mean “to be disobedient.” The word *belief* has the element of obedience wrapped in its arms and the opposite of biblical belief is *disobedience*. One cannot consider themselves to be biblical if they teach salvation by mental assent (which amounts to cheap grace) *without* the subsequent and corollary present and ongoing obedience.

My Fundamentalist friend has never responded to the explanation of these verses. I hope someday he will see past the high walls of his Fundamentalist traditions and see the great beauty of the Church and her past. The wall is very difficult to peer over, but many of us have done it. Many of us have not merely peered over the great barrier, we have actually climbed and struggled, finally scaling the barrier and finding the glory of the Catholic Church.

Endnotes:

1. Aorist Tense: The aorist tense is characterized by its emphasis on punctiliar action; that is, the concept of the verb is considered without regard for past, present, or future time. There is no direct or clear English equivalent for this tense, though it is generally rendered as a simple past tense in most translations. The events described by the aorist tense are classified into a number of categories by grammarians. The most common of these include a view of the action as having begun from a certain point (“inceptive aorist”), or having ended at a certain point (“cumulative aorist”), or merely existing at a certain point (“punctiliar aorist”). The categorization of other cases can be found in Greek reference grammars. The English reader need not concern himself with most of these finer points concerning the aorist tense, since in most cases they cannot be rendered accurately in English translation, being fine points of Greek exegesis only. The common practice of rendering an aorist by a simple English past tense suffices in most cases.

2. Present Tense: According to Dana and Mantey in their *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* “The fundamental significance of the present tense is the idea of progress. It is the linear tense . . . the progressive force of the present tense should always be considered as primary, especially with reference to the potential moods, which in the nature of the case do not need any “present punctiliar” tense . . .” Narrowing it down further they say, “There are three varieties of the present tense in which its fundamental idea of progress is especially patent. Under The Progressive Present “This use is manifestly nearest the root idea of the tense. It signifies action in progress , or state of persistence . . .” In short the present tense expresses ongoing action in the present time.

3. *New Testament Greek* (James Hewitt, B.A., B.D., M.A., Ph.D.; Hedrickson Publishers; 1986, page 13)

4. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* by Gerhard Kittel, a renowned Protestant theological dictionary of ten volumes. Eerdmans, 1968

5. *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* by W. E. Vine (TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984)