

Was the Message of Life Lost until the Reformation?¹

Water of Life

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August 13, 2015

INTRODUCTION

1 John 2:25 characterizes Jesus' message to unbelievers as promising everlasting life:
And this is the promise which He Himself promised to you [believers in Ephesus; by extension, believers everywhere at all times]—life everlasting.

John 6:47-48 promises everlasting life to those who believe in Him as the Bread of Life [i.e., lifegiver], rather than rejecting that truth (as did the Judeans of John 6:41-42).

Amen amen, I tell you, the one who believes in Me has everlasting life. I am the Bread of Life.

Now, if a person were to believe that Jesus gives him/her life, but thought that the life that He gave would end upon doing a great sin, has that person believed what Jesus promised?

How would a person who thought he/she could lose that life try to keep that life?

Unfortunately, many (even ones believing in eternal security) try to sidestep this. Many would (falsely) assume the following statement to be accurate. (Of course, water baptism is a red herring. The issue is believing Jesus' promise of everlasting life, but we should answer this).

But we have no written record of anyone (from AD 100 to AD 1500) teaching forgiveness of post-baptismal sins once and for all at the point of faith in Christ.²

Many agreeing with the D.R.A.'s assertion (including D.R.A.) would affirm the following:

~~There were believers between AD 100 and AD 1500 (who will be in heaven);
Those people did not believe in eternal security;
Therefore belief in eternal security is not an essential of the Gospel.~~

RESPONSE

Through the years, I have spoken with a number of people who were troubled by the article by D.R.A. The following arguments will show that D.R.A.'s statement ignores weighty evidence and suffers from faulty logic.

¹ Cf. John H. Niemelä, "Was the Gospel Lost until the Reformation?" *GIF* 30 (July–August 2015): 31-33; John H. Niemelä, "Pre-Reformation Belief in Eternal Security: The Word of Faith We Preach Is Near (Romans 10:8)," *JOTGES* 28 (Spring 2015): 63-80. Unless noted, Scripture translations are my own.

² David R. Anderson, "Is Belief in Eternal Security Necessary for Justification?" *CTSJ* 13 (Spring 2008): 49.

ROMANS 10:8

Even during the twenty-first century, do we not say, “The Bible teaches...?” When thinking back to the period between the close of the NT and today, we would still say, “In Rom 10:8 Paul *teaches* (present tense)...” In citation of Deuteronomy 30:14 (written fifteen hundred years before Romans), Paul asserts, “The [ancient] word is near you.” Consider the words of Zane Hodges, as he translates and expounds that verse:

10:8. But what does it (the righteousness which is by faith) say? “*The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart*”— that is the word of faith which we preach.

What then does Paul’s gospel (“the righteousness which is by faith”) actually say? Unlike the statements of unbelief that he has just rejected (vv 6-7), the word of faith Paul preached presented something quite near at hand and readily available...

To express this concept Paul utilizes terminology found in Deut 30:14. Perhaps again he draws verbatim upon his Greek translation of the Torah except that he drops the Greek word *sphodra* (“exceedingly”; [Heb, *m^eōd*]). However, the reference in Deuteronomy is to the fact that Israel already had the law. Therefore, the individual Israelite could recite it (LXX: *en to stomati sou*, in your mouth), remember it (LXX: *en tē kardia sou*, in your heart)...³

Now, imagine an unbeliever who lived between 100 and 1500 claiming at the Great White Throne, “Your message of life was inaccessible to me, so it was impossible for me to believe. It would not be fair for me to go to the lake of fire.” I would imagine that Jesus’ response would resemble Romans 10:8. Ultimately, He would say, “You have no excuse.”

D.R.A. (and Others) Are Looking for the Wrong Evidence (Man’s Word, Not God’s Word)

They seek books containing sermons or theological treatises propounding a clear message. Now, I also would welcome such evidence—as frosting on the cake. It would be nice to have such evidence, but books of that sort would have only a minimal effect, in my opinion.

Let me illustrate. Imagine that an archaeologist excavating a modern Christian book store in the U.S.A. were to ask, “Did anyone in twenty-first century America proclaim faith-alone in Jesus-Christ-alone for everlasting life?” I would venture that he might well conclude, “No written evidence within this bookstore confirms that anyone proclaimed such a message.” Why do I suggest that the archaeologist would be likely to conclude this?

Seeking the writings of men for evidence of the proclamation of truth is a dead-end.

³ Zane C. Hodges, *Romans: Deliverance from Wrath*, ed. Robert N. Wilkin, Introduction and selected notes by John H. Niemelä (Corinth, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2013), 297f.

We Should Look to the Dissemination of Scripture (as Paul Did in Romans 10:8)

Today, 5,000 Greek NT manuscripts (and 8,000 Latin ones) have been published. This is a fraction of the manuscripts that were produced between AD 100 and 1500.

Edwin Yamauchi points out that modern scholarship only sees the tip of the archaeological iceberg. He describes a fraction of a fraction:

1. The Fraction [of the evidence] that Has Survived...
2. The Fraction [of the evidence] that Has Been Surveyed...
3. The Fraction [of the evidence] that Has Been Excavated...
4. The Fraction [of the evidence] that Has Been Examined...
5. The Fraction [of the evidence] that Has Been Published.⁴

Unfortunately, seminary trained people often respond, “Many manuscripts were produced, but

1. few people were literate,
2. books were prohibitively expensive, and
3. most books and sermons were in Latin or Greek—inaccessible to the masses.”

Lectionaries

None of these objections is weighty. Romans 10:8 still applies. Before considering the objections, one issue overcomes all of them. Not all manuscripts are continuous text. Lectionaries are another very common type of manuscript.

What Are Lectionaries? Bruce Metzger says:

The time came when it was found more convenient to gather into a special book the several passages of Scripture arranged in the fixed order prescribed for the appropriate days, every lesson being supplied with the necessary words of introduction and with such trifling modifications at the beginning of the passage as might seem to be necessary when it was detached from the preceding context. Thus the church came to have lectionaries or lesson books.⁵

Emphasis upon Reading Scripture

The emphasis given to the reading of Scripture by the New Testament and beyond.

1 Timothy 4:13

Revelation 1:3

Justin Martyr, *Apology* 1:67, “And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits...”

⁴ Edwin M. Yamauchi, *The Stones and the Scriptures*, Evangelical Perspectives, ed. John Warwick Montgomery (Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott, 1972), 8.

⁵ Bruce M. Metzger, “Greek Lectionaries and a Critical Edition of the Greek New Testament,” in *Die Alten Übersetzungen des neuen Testaments, Die Kirchenväterzitate und Lektionare*, ed. K. Aland, *Arbeiten zur Neutestamentlichen Textforschung*, vol. 5 (Berlin, GER: de Gruyter, 1972), 479f.

How Much of John's Gospel Was Read Publicly Each Year?

Three sets of lectionaries existed (Gospels, Acts and Epistles, Old Testament). I want to focus on readings from John in Gospel lectionaries.⁶ Over 93% of the text of John was read each year. Ninety-four of John's 100 uses of *pisteuo*, (believe) were included. Some vital passages, such as John 3:16 and 5:24 came up more than once during the year.

How Do Lectionaries Overcome the Objections?

1. High illiteracy rates (estimated at 95%)

Lectionaries were heard, not requiring that the hearers be literate.

2. High Costs of Books (A New Testament would cost the equivalent of \$5,600.00)

Most people heard Scripture, not needing to purchase it in book form.

3. Sermons and Books in Greek or Latin (but a populace unfamiliar with those languages)

The NT was translated into at least nineteen languages before AD 1500. Ancient lectionaries exist in many of those languages (and may have existed in the rest also).

1. Anglo-Saxon; 2. Arabic; 3. Armenian (continuous and lectionaries); 4. Caucasian Albanian; 5. Coptic (continuous and lectionaries), a. Sahidic, b. Achmimic, c. Sub-Achmimic, d. Middle-Egyptian, e. Fayummic, f. Boharic; 6. Ethiopic (continuous and lectionaries); 7. Georgian (continuous and lectionaries), a. Early Georgian, b. Revised Georgian; 8. Old High German; 9. Latin (continuous and lectionaries), a. Old Latin, b. Vulgate; 10. Nubian (continuous and lectionaries); 11. Old Church Slavonic (continuous and lectionaries), a. Bohemian, b. Croatian, c. Serbian, d. Bulgarian, e. Russian; 12. Sogdian (continuous and lectionaries); 13. Syrian (continuous and lectionaries), a. Old Syriac, b. Peshitta, c. Philoxenian, d. Palestinian Syriac.

CONCLUSION

Scripture was read publicly all over the known world on a regular calendar. People heard the faith-alone message of John's Gospel. Even if the sermon that followed was unclear or heretical, Isaiah 55:11 is still true:

So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me void, But it shall accomplish what I please, And it shall prosper *in the thing* for which I sent it.

Elijah complained, "The children of Israel... have killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left" (1 Kings 19:14). The LORD corrected him, "Yet I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him" (1 Kings 19:18). God's word went out and was believed before AD 1500.

⁶ During the religious calendar (starting at Easter), these passages in John would be read: 1:1-17₈₅, 18-28*₈₅, 35-52₈₅, 44-52₁₁₇; 2:1-11₈₆, 12-22*₈₅; 3:1-15₈₅, 16-21₈₆, 22-33*₈₆; 4:5-42*₈₈, 46b-54₈₇; 5:1-15*₈₇, 17-24₈₆, 24-30₈₆, 30-6:2*₈₆, 5-14₈₈, 14-27a₈₆, 27-33*₈₇, 35-39₈₇, 40-44*₈₇, 48-54*₈₇, 56-69*₈₇; 7:1-13*₈₇, 37-52*₉₁; 8:1-11+13₃, 12-20₈₇, 21-30₈₈, 31-42a₈₈, 42-51₈₈, 51-59₈₈; 9:1-38₈₉, 39-10:9₈₈, 10-16+12₈, 17-28a₈₉, 27-38*₈₉; 11:1-45*₁₁₈, 47-54*₈₉; 12:1-18₁₁₈, 14-21₁₂₇, 17-50₁₂₀, 19-36a₈₉, 36-47₉₀, 13:1-11₁₂₁, 3-17₁₂₂, 12-17*₁₂₁, 31-18:2₁₂₂, 14:1-11a₉₀, 10b-21₉₀, 27-15:7₉₀, 9-16₁₁₇, 17-16:2₈₇, 2b-13a₉₀, 15-23₉₀, 23-33a₉₀; 17:1-13₉₀, 18-26₉₀; 18:1-28₁₂₃, 28-19:16₁₂₃, 16-37₁₂₅, 31-37₁₂₆, 38-42₁₂₅; 20:1-10₁₂₇, 11-18₁₂₇, 19-25_{85b}, 19-31_{86b}, 19-31₁₂₇; 21:1-14₁₂₇, 14-25₉₁.