

Are You A Christian

By Voddie Baucham

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Kabwata Baptist Church

Plot no. Ch 20422
Chilimbulu Road
Libala, Lusaka, Zambia

Website: www.kabwatabaptistchurch.com

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/kbcl

Are you a Christian? This is a question that I've asked many people on a number of occasions, some of them informal, some of them formal. We had student interviews at ACU last couple of weeks, that's a question that we asked: are you a Christian? It's amazing the kind of answers you get from people when you ask that question: are you a Christian? In a place like this, very few people will answer no. Very few people you run into in Zambia and ask, "Are you a Christian?" and they say, "No." If they do say no, it's because they have another religion so they would be a Hindu or they would be a Muslim and they'd say, "No, I'm not a Christian, I'm a this." But other than that, no matter what it's, "Yes." But then it gets real serious when you ask the next question: why? Now everything gets complicated and people will look at you with anything from shock that you would ask such a question to utter despair because they have no idea what to say next. If you can't say amen, you ought to say ouch.

We just don't know and oftentimes when we begin to answer the question, we give answers that are anything but the truth concerning the doctrine of salvation, and so in the 10 Sunday mornings that I will be privileged to preach this year, Lord willing, we're going to address the doctrine of salvation and 10 subsets of the doctrine of salvation. Today we're going to look, for example, at the covenant of redemption which is really where salvation starts. But there are two obstacles to us having a right understanding of the doctrine of salvation, one is tradition, and the other is theology.

The tradition one, I'll give you an illustration that I've used frequently. There was a woman who cooked a roast for her husband and he always enjoyed the roast that she would cook but he asked her, "Why is it that you always cut the ends off of the roast when you cook the roast?" And she said, "Well, I do that because my mother always did that. If you're going to cook a roast, you cut the ends off the roast." So the next time they were with the in-laws, he asked the mother-in-law, "Why when you cook the roast, why do you cut the ends off when you cook the roast?" And the mother-in-law, you know, she says, "Well, you know, my mother always did that." So finally he gets to the grandmother and he says, "Listen, my wife, she cooks a roast, she cuts off the ends. Your daughter, my mother-in-law, she cooks a roast, she cuts off the end and they both say they do it because that's what you always did." And the grandmother looks at him and says, "Well, my pans were always too small." Some of you will get that on the way home.

But the fact is, many of the traditions we follow, we have no idea why and we can't explain them, and in church, we have traditions around Christianity. So you grow up in the church and what do you do? Well, you believe in Jesus, you get baptized, and then you stop drinking, smoking, cursing, and don't have sex outside of marriage, and saved. So someone asks you, "Are you a Christian?" "Yes." "Why are you a Christian?" "Well, because I followed the tradition that I saw at church. I did the things that you're supposed to do in order to become a Christian." Listen to me carefully: hell will be filled with people who are baptized. Hell will be filled with people who don't drink and don't smoke and don't curse and didn't have sex outside of marriage. There will be millions of people in hell who can make every one of those claims because not one of those things makes you a Christian. Not one.

So there is a traditional barrier, then there's the theological barrier and they are interrelated. The theological barrier comes because it's difficult to wrap your head around the doctrine of salvation. For example, there are four main metaphors that the Bible uses when addressing the doctrine of salvation. The metaphor of marriage and redeeming a bride. The metaphor of slavery and someone being freed from slavery. The metaphor of crime and punishment and someone being freed from or having their guilt removed from them. And then there's the metaphor of adoption and family. All of these metaphors teach various aspects of salvation but this becomes difficult for us. Why? 1. Because sometimes we will choose one of the metaphors and that's the only thing that we know or think about salvation. So it's the marriage metaphor and it's God's love and there's nothing apart from God's love and we read passages of Scripture about God's wrath and suddenly we have a dilemma. Do I believe that part of the Bible because my salvation metaphor doesn't fit this? Or sometimes we will mix the metaphors and we'll have bad doctrinal understandings because we put this metaphor in the place of this doctrine, and that metaphor in the place of that doctrine, and all of a sudden it just doesn't fit anymore. For example, the adoption and family metaphor. Well, if we start with the idea that we're all children of God by virtue of having been created, then the adoption metaphor of salvation completely breaks down.

Other times, we have difficulty because we take the metaphor out of the Scriptures and immediately drop it into our cultural context and so now all of a sudden instead of looking at what the Bible means when it talks about marriage in the Ancient Near East, or what the Bible means when it talks about adoption in the Greco-Roman culture, or what the Bible means when it talks about crime and punishment, now all of a sudden we say, "Well, I'm American and when Americans say marriage or adoption or crime and punishment or whatever, this is what we mean. Or I'm Zambian and when a Zambian says this, this, this, this is what we mean." Now all of a sudden we've ripped this out of its cultural context, put it into our context and redefined salvation based on the metaphor as we use it in our culture and that always leads to problems.

So with these two difficulties, the tradition that we don't understand or with the theology that we mix up or confuse, we often come to a place where if someone asks us that question, "Are you a Christian?" we're okay at step 1 because we know the answer to that

question, "Yes," but when they get to the next one, "Why?" we're in trouble. Well, not anymore, amen? Let's look, John 17, the clearest picture of the covenant of redemption, and as we being, let me say this: there are 10 parts to this and all of them are necessary. I don't intend to be confusing or to leave you with cliffhangers that you absolutely need in order to put things together, but it's going to take a while for the whole picture to come together, and by definition when we look at certain aspects of salvation, there will be other questions that remain to be answered. Eventually our goal is to answer them all but in every one of these, the goal is to answer enough of the question for you to number one, know whether or not you're a Christian, and number two, know what to do about it if you're not. Amen? Eventually we want to have a fuller understanding of the doctrine of salvation. By the way, news flash, you can't do that in 10 sermons either. Now I thought at least the preachers in the house would say amen on that one. We want to have a fuller understanding of the doctrine of salvation and that's important, however, you do not have to have a complete understanding of the doctrine of salvation to be saved. What you need to know for that is very simple: that you are a sinner in need of a Savior and that God has provided a Savior through the person and work of Jesus Christ, and that you must abandon all reliance on yourself and what you can do and flee to Christ and put your trust in who he is and what he has done.

You don't have to understand every aspect of that and I'll use a metaphor here. Bridget and I have been married for 28 years in a row. When we stood at the altar and said our "I do's" we did not know everything there was to know about each other but we knew enough. Amen? When you come to Christ, you will not know everything about him and you will spend eternity unfolding the mystery and the majesty of who Christ is and you will never run out of mystery and majesty, but you don't have to know all the mystery and majesty in order to know you're a sinner in need of a Savior and he is the Savior whom God has provided.

John 17. We didn't have our Scripture reading today. We're going to read this whole chapter. It is well worth the journey.

1 When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, 2 since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. 3 And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. 4 I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. 5 And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed. 6 "I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. 7 Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. 8 For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. 9 I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. 10 All mine are

yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. 11 And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. 12 While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. 13 But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. 14 I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. 15 I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. 16 They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. 17 Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. 18 As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. 19 And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth. 20 "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. 24 Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. 25 O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. 26 I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

Amen.

There are six month's worth of sermons in this chapter but I want to highlight the doctrine, the overarching doctrine that we find in this chapter and that is the doctrine of the covenant of redemption. The covenant of redemption, as I've said, is the beginning, it's the starting point of salvation and this is very important because many of us when we think about salvation, you've heard the term "man-centered versus God-centered," many of us have a man-centered view of salvation and that man-centered view of salvation starts with us. We are here and we are in trouble and God is more like a superhero who goes into a phone booth, changes his clothes, dons his cape and flies to our rescue because we mean so much to him, but the fact of the matter is, the doctrine of the covenant of redemption starts in eternity past in the Godhead, not with you and me. The covenant of redemption starts in eternity past in the Godhead and not with you and me.

Look at some of these phrases. Verse 1, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you." Verse 5, "now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed." Go down with me and look at

verse 23, "I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world." The covenant of redemption is established in eternity within the Godhead. It's established before the world began.

This is important, saints, because when we think about our salvation, we must know that it was not an afterthought, we must know that it was part of God's design since before the world began that we would be his; that there would be a people called by his name; that there would be a people that he would redeem, that he would save. You're not an afterthought. You are here on purpose and you are here with a purpose, amen? The covenant of redemption is rooted and grounded in eternity past.

Secondly, the covenant of redemption begins with the love of God within the Godhead. It begins with the love of God within the Godhead. Again, the verse that we just read, verse 23, "I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world." Last verse, verse 26, the second half, "that the love with which you have loved me may be in them." The covenant of redemption is important not only because it begins in eternity past but because it's rooted in the love of the Godhead. It's not rooted in imperfect horizontal love, it's rooted in perfect vertical love.

Somebody needs to hear that today because there are people who think about their salvation and almost never have a sense of security because your understanding of your salvation is rooted in horizontal love. You've grabbed on to one of the horizontal metaphors, the marriage metaphor, the family and adoption metaphor, and you look at your marriage or you look at your parents' marriage or you look at your family, you look at the family experiences that you've had, it's so common that it's cliché, the person who says they have a hard time embracing the love of Father God because they had such a terrible father in a human sense. Or you come from a family that has no sense of forgiveness and all of a sudden you belong to the family of God where God supposedly has forgiven you, but your only understanding of what forgiveness means comes from your vindictive family, how can you then rest in the forgiveness of God? You see, when we start horizontal, we have a problem but God's love for his people does not begin horizontally, it begins vertically. It's rooted and grounded in the love of the Godhead, in the love that the Father has for his Son, the perfect love that has existed in the Godhead throughout all eternity that has never failed and that can never fail.

So when we see imperfect examples what we have to realize is this: you don't go from the imperfect to the perfect, you go from the perfect to the imperfect. So I don't look at my imperfect father or my children don't look at their imperfect father and say, "Well, that's what fatherhood is therefore God is imperfect." No, we start with the perfect Father God and we say, "That's what fatherhood is and this is why I can never be satisfied with an

imperfect human father, but it's okay because there is a perfect Father." Amen? We don't start with the imperfect love that humans have for each other, we start with the perfect love that the Father has for the Son, this perfect love that is actually personified in the person of the Holy Spirit. You don't start with the horizontal and the imperfect, you start with the vertical.

So the covenant of redemption, it's rooted and grounded in eternity, it's rooted and grounded in the Godhead, and it's rooted and grounded in a love gift that the Father gave to his Son. This is the heart of the covenant of redemption. Look at this, and a lot of people have a problem with this and we have problems with this, again, because we start with the horizontal, right, and if we start with the horizontal, we want a democratic view of salvation, we want a democratic view of salvation that says salvation is up to the individual, right? Folks, God is not running for God. Amen? He was the only one around when the votes were cast and there's never going to be a recap. He's God. He does not need your approval. He's not after your approval. He's God. Amen? So let's try instead of taking this horizontal picture and imposing it upon God, saying this is how God ought to act, let's look at what God says about himself here in the covenant of redemption and we'll see some things. Oftentimes you go through John 17 with people, not just John 17, there are a lot of chapters in the book of John that you read with people and they start looking, "Did you, did you... You replaced my Bible" because we read these things so many times and skip right over them and never see them although they are there.

Look at this, verse 2. Let's start at verse 1, put 1 and 2 together. "When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all,'" who would want it enough to seek it. No, that's not in the book. "To give eternal life to all whom you have given him." Go down to verse 6, "I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word." Verse 9, "I am praying for them." This is the one that makes people look at their Bible like, "No, that's just not, that's not, that's not... That wasn't in my Bible yesterday." "I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours." Look at verse 11 about two-thirds of the way through, "which you have given me." Verse 12, "which you have given me." And as if that's not enough, verse 24, "Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am." Whom you have given me.

You see, this is the covenant of redemption. In eternity past, the Father gave a gift to the Son and that gift that he gave was a people, a people for his possession out of his love for the Son. So here's a newsflash: God's salvation of you does not begin with his love for you, it begins with the Father's love for the Son. Lest you think that that's bad news, hold onto this: the Father has loved the Son for all eternity and will never stop loving the Son, which means that if my salvation is rooted and grounded in the Father's love for the Son, it is as secure as the Godhead. The Son because of his love for his Father, gave his life. He left heaven and gave his life in order to redeem those whom the Father had given to him before the world began and the Spirit who is the personification of the love between

the Father and the Son, applies the redemption that the Son achieved in time to all those for whom the Son died. It starts at eternity past, it's rooted and grounded in the love that the Father has for the Son and in a love gift that the Father gave to the Son.

Now, I know this raises all sorts of questions and we're going to get to answering those questions, but for now, for now rest in this truth: salvation begins and ends with God. This has implications for a lot of the other doctrines that we're going to address. For example, we're going to address the doctrine of perseverance. Can you lose your salvation? Only if God can stop being God. That's what would have to happen for a believer who is saved, redeemed by the Lord Jesus Christ, to lose their salvation. You would have to brick up the Godhead in order for that to happen.

"Ah, but wait a minute, that just gives me so many problems because, you know, are you saying because I've seen people, you know, and they've made a profession of faith and they've gotten baptized, you know, and then they went and they lived the Christian life for a while and then all of a sudden they're out there and they're gone." Guess what you just did? Remember when we started with tradition? You equated salvation with making a profession, being baptized, and living a certain kind of life. You do that, you're saved. You stop doing that, you're not saved. So you created your doctrine of whether or not a person could lose their salvation based upon a faulty tradition-based doctrine of what it means to be saved. Huh? Do you see?

Every person whom the Father gave to the Son in eternity past will be saved in time. Every person that the Son out of love for the Father died to redeem will be saved in time. Every person to whom the Spirit applies the redemption that the Son achieved will be saved in time. And all of us, as Jesus says here, will be with him. We'll be with him.

We'll be with him. Why? The last thing. It's actually the first thing and the second and the third and the fourth but it's the last thing we'll address. The covenant of redemption is about the glory of God. Look at verse 1, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you." And what is that glory tied to? "Since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him." The salvation of those whom the Father gave the Son, the Son saves them for the glory of the Father who in turn glorifies the Son because he saved the ones that the Father sent him to glorify.

But we're not done yet. Verse 5, "And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed." This is not new glory, this is old glory. Huh? And we're not talking about the American flag here. This is old glory, this is the real old glory. Jesus is speaking of glory that existed in eternity past, glory that has now been tied to the salvation of the elect, glory that has to continue otherwise God's glory is gone from heaven. He has to redeem the elect for the sake of the glory of God.

But wait, there's more. Verse 10, "All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them." The Son is glorified in them. In whom? In the ones whom the Father gave to him. He has tied his glory to our redemption. We have to be redeemed.

Verse 22, "The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one." And the whole rest of this chapter is about oneness, the oneness in the Godhead that is now joined by those for whom Jesus is praying, and he says not only them but those who will believe because of them who will also join the oneness. Here's the picture: the Father in eternity past is living in perfect harmony and unity with the Son and the Spirit, this one God in three persons and this perfect love within the Godhead, and the Father decides to give a love gift to his Son in the form of a people who will be redeemed for the glory of God, and the Son because of his love for the Father, actually goes and pays the price for the redemption of his people whom God the Father gave to him out of love, the Spirit applies redemption to them and now the love of God is actually expanded and expressed in the world through the redemption of God's elect so that now – wrap your head around this – we become part and parcel of the expression of the love in the very Godhead itself.

The Father loves the Son and he demonstrated it. How? If you're a Christian you can say, "By giving me to the Son." The Son loves the Father and he demonstrated it. How? If you're a Christian, "By dying in my place in order to redeem me." The Spirit loves the Father and the Son and is the very expression of the love between the Father and the Son and he's demonstrated it. How? By applying redemption to me. But wait, there's more. I am now in union with Christ because of this redemption and I will spend eternity in union with the Father and the Son and the Spirit as their love is now forever expanded and expressed through the redemption of the elect. It's almost too much. How can we possibly reduce this to, "Ah, you raised your hand. Ah, you walked an aisle. Ah, you got wet. Ah, you stopped doing a few things outwardly, though still loving them and yearning for them inwardly." No. No, this is much bigger than that. It's much bigger than that. This is about the eternal glory of God.

So back to our question: are you a Christian? "Yes, I'm a Christian." Why? Why? How can we ever answer with, "Because I did this. Because I don't do that." How can we ever answer with anything other than, "Because God in his grace has included me in the greatest love story ever known, and in love the Father gave me to the Son, in love the Son died to redeem me, in love the Spirit applied that redemption to me and opened my eyes so that I could love the one who first loved me, so that I could love God more than I love my sin, so that I can love Christ and his redeeming work, so that I can be folded into this beautiful all-encompassing eternal reality that is the love of God, to the glory of God, through the salvation of the elect." Why, why me? I have no idea. Maybe God will answer that some day but I don't have to have an answer to that. I don't need to know why he did it, just that he did.

God did it. God did it. God did it. God did it. "So that we just go on and just live any way we want to?" Yes, because when you are his, he'll even change your "want to." Amen? The true Christian is not the one who lives a way he doesn't want to, the true Christian is the one who has his "want to" changed. Amen, somebody. We're transformed and conformed to the very image of Christ so that even our desires are different. Do you see the difference in those two things? And this is why people don't want Christianity. You

ask somebody out there, "What's a Christian?" "Well, a Christian is a person who no longer does stuff that's pleasant or pleasing. A Christian is the one who, you know, they put their head down and they march on slowly through this life with all pleasure removed." "Hey, man, do you want to go and do so-and-so?" "Ah, no." "Why?" "It sounds enjoyable, it must not be Christian." That's not Christianity, people. This is a transforming reality and when we become a part of this transforming reality, it transforms us and we now live to the glory of God because we now want to live to the glory of God. Amen? That's the beauty of the covenant of redemption.

So I ask you the question again: are you a Christian? But I want to ask you another question, the question number two but I'll ask it differently: would you answer question two the same way now that you would've answered it when we began? Or have you come to recognize that your answer was the wrong answer and that you would locate yourself anywhere in this narrative? Because if that's the case, then I plead with you: repent. Believe. Turn from your self-reliance, shatter the image of your world where you exist at the center for your own glory and instead see the beauty and majesty of this truth. Flee from your sin and flee to Christ. Cling to him. Cling to him and beg him with everything that is in you to save you for his glory because it is indeed your only hope.

Let us pray.

O God, how we rejoice in your salvation. O God, how we so desperately need you. And not only do we need your salvation but we need to understand what it means, not because salvation requires a complete understanding but because the more we know and the more we understand, the more we are called and motivated to worship you rightly for who you are and for what you've done. Grant by your grace that we might continue to be overwhelmed by the beauty and majesty of Christ and with gratitude for his saving work. Father, may those in this room under the sound of my voice who have not come to a saving knowledge of Christ have their eyes opened, their hearts changed, and may they rest in Christ and in Christ alone. For the rest of us, grant that we might understand the doctrine of salvation so that we might proclaim the doctrine of salvation and not some polluted or perverted version of it that leads people astray. Grant that we might proclaim the Gospel rightly so that Christ might indeed have the fullness of the reward for which he died. This is our prayer, this is our earnest desire and we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.