

CHAPTER EXCERPT OF BOOK “THE CHURCH OF CHRIST”

The Three Tenses To Salvation

God’s gifts may be summarized in terms of three great promises of the gospel: forgiveness of sins, gift of the Holy Spirit, and eternal life. These promises apply salvation to the past, present, and future of the human condition. The Christian receives from God salvation from past sins, a present life of salvation, and the hope of future salvation.

The forgiveness of sins is promised in Acts 2:38 to penitent believers who are baptized. God’s forgiveness removes the barrier between himself and his creatures. It changes the human condition from a state of guilt and alienation to a state of being justified and reconciled. The forgiveness of sins in Acts 2:38 is equivalent to the salvation in 2:40—Peter “exhorted them saying, ‘Save yourselves from this corrupt generation’.” Salvation is not ultimately in human beings, but in accepting God’s gifts and meeting his conditions. There is a part human beings have in their salvation; in this case repenting and being baptized for the forgiveness of sins is the means of saving themselves.

It may be thought that at baptism all past sins are forgiven, and then persons have to do the rest for themselves. Not so. Forgiveness applies not only to past sins. The conditions that brought forgiveness at baptism — God’s grace in the blood of Christ received in faith and repentance — continue to bring forgiveness after baptism. Baptism continues to be effective in washing away sins (Acts 22:16), if the conditions that made baptism something more than washing in water (1 Pet. 3:21) still obtain, namely faith in the resurrected Christ and penitent attitude before God.

Conversely, if one loses faith, baptism loses its saving significance. The continuing benefit of baptism leads to the present gift of God.

God gives help in living out one's salvation (Phil. 2:12) in the Christian way of life. The Holy Spirit provides the link between baptism and the Christian life. The Holy Spirit not only sanctifies (1 Cor. 6:11; 1 Pet. 1:2) but also gives new life in baptism (John 3:5) and takes up residence in the one converted (Acts 2:38; 5:30; Rom 8:9; 1 Cor. 6:19). The Holy Spirit provides continuing present benefits of God's one-time action in the cross and the one-time commitment in baptism (there is "one baptism"—Eph. 4:5). God not only gives "gifts," but he also gives himself, his very own Spirit. It is the Spirit of Christ that makes the church the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). People often want to psychologize the presence of the Spirit and to identify the coming of the Spirit with some feeling. This isn't true of the baptismal gift of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. Hence, some want to rationalize the presence of the Spirit and try to explain how the Spirit comes to dwell in persons (usually through the words of scripture). The proper perspective is to view the gift of the Spirit in the same way as the forgiveness of sins. Both rest on the promises of God, and God cannot lie. We may not be able to explain how God forgives sins or how the Spirit dwells in us, and we may not be able to point to some experience as a personal guarantee. Just as we trust in God for the forgiveness of sins, so we trust in him that the Spirit dwells in us.

The third great promise of the gospel is eternal life (John 3:15-16, 36; Rom. 6:22-23). Eternal life is sometimes spoken of as a present possession, especially in the Johannine writings (John 5:24; 6:47; 17:3); sometimes as a future hope (Matt. 19:29; Rom. 2:7; Titus 1:2). Eternal life is a quality of life. Its present possession does not mean that it cannot be lost (Gal. 5:4; Heb. 10:26, 36-39). The future life will be in continuity with the present life (1 Thess. 5:4-9). Those who do not have eternal life now will not receive it in the future.¹

¹ Ferguson, E. (1996). *The church of Christ: a biblical ecclesiology for today* (pp. 203–204). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.

