

What Happened to the Word Believe

A review of the book by Donald H. Bunge
Gerald McKibben

This book is a 54 page paperback published in 1985. It is unfortunately out of print, but its message is as relevant today as when it was first published. The Author went to be with the Lord a few years ago.

Donald and Mary Bunge became the first AWANA missionaries in 1966, responding to an urgent need to reach boys and girls with the Gospel message. Before that they had spent 18 years in the pastorate. This book was written in response to inconsistencies commonly expressed in the gospel presentations, particularly presentations to young people. This was obvious to the Author as his work with young people made him aware of the “confusion that plagues boys and girls (and many adults too) about salvation.” He observed that “Christian workers can become careless in their presentations” of the gospel to the lost. Chapter two is titled “Clichés that confuse”, and includes four common clichés used in the presentation of the gospel. Such clichés obscure the simple essence of the good news that Jesus died on the cross to save lost sinners and that God saves those who believe in Him (John 3:16).

Cliché no. 1 – Give your heart to Christ

This frequently used phrase suggests the action of giving, which is more consistent with our natural inclination that nothing worth anything is really free. Bunge suggests that many who use the phrase admit that they mean to accept Jesus as Savior and believe that He died for their sins. But if that is true, why not just say that to begin with and simply eliminate the cliché? This would certainly be more consistent with the Biblical teaching on what one must do to be saved.

The phrase “give your heart to Christ” is especially confusing to children, who tend to take things literally. It is difficult to see how its use could be an improvement of the clear Biblical emphasis on the word “believe”. “Give your heart to Christ” was never used by Jesus himself nor is it found in any of the writings of the Apostles.

Cliché no. 2 – Surrender to Christ or Surrender all

This cliché is perhaps not as common now as it was, according to the Author, between 1930 and the 1960's. Like the previous cliché discussed, it also suggests an act of merit on our part, that of being willing to give up something in exchange for eternal life. Certainly surrendering one's will to His is part of obedience that should characterize the believer, but nowhere do the Scriptures state that God ever accepts any meritorious act or intent as a requirement for salvation. In fact, the very opposite is true – salvation is explicitly presented as a “free” gift, without cost and without any merit being present by the sinner who believes the gospel message.

Cliché no. 3 – Make a commitment to Christ

This was more prevalent in the 1960's. This appeal is found nowhere in the Biblical writings, except in the call for personal commitment and obedience in the lives of those who already possess eternal life. But to apply this to a lost sinner is “getting the cart before the horse.”

Cliché no. 4 – He found Christ, or you need to find Christ

The Author states that “God is more anxious to save a sinner than sinners are to be saved.” And “...He is seeking the sinner. The shepherd sought for the lost sheep...” It was never the other way around.

Chapter three – Which Prayer Saves from Sin?

This chapter is in response to the oft-repeated appeal to pray to receive Christ. It takes several forms, such as “confess your sins”, “ask God to forgive you”, “ask God to save you”, “ask Jesus to come into your heart”, and to “call on the name of the Lord for Salvation”.

Confession – Regarding confessing your sins, the Author points out that the origin of this is usually I John 1:9: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” But as a careful reading clearly shows, the context here is for the believer to confess his or her sins to remain in fellowship with the Father. John stated his purpose for writing the book: “And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.” (1:4).

All the examples of prayers sometimes used as an invitation for the lost to be saved show a remarkable departure from the simple Biblical teaching to “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ” to have eternal life. Mr. Bunge devoted quite a bit of space to the last prayer mentioned above, “Call on the name of the Lord for Salvation.” The origin of this approach is Romans 10:13. While it seems to give a clear formula for being saved if verse 13 is read out of context with the rest of the passage, a careful reading reveals that a much broader concept is being explained. This broader concept involves the Nation Israel. And if there’s any doubt that the “calling on the Lord” is a substitution for believing, then the next verse (which is rarely quoted in the context of salvation) should clear up any misconceptions about the role of believing in salvation: “How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed?...”. In Chapter four the Author points out that the Word of God is the only reliable source for correct terminology with respect to salvation. Words and terms used by the Bible in connection with salvation are “believe”, “faith”, “receive”, “born again”, and “trust”. The word “trust” is used in the Bible in referring to the salvation experience at least eight times. But the word that is most often used in the Word of God in connection to what one must do to have eternal life is “believe”. This word and its variant forms are used 98 times in the Book of John alone. It occurs 25 times in Romans and the noun form of the word “faith” is used 38 times.

Mr. Bunge noticed strong hostility expressed by some Christian workers toward those who opposed unbiblical phrases and prayers, especially in leading children to Christ. That caused him to ask the question that formed the book title “Whatever happened to the word ‘Believe?’”

Final points – The present review will not go into the points expressed in the final three chapters. The Author answers commonly expressed objections to using the word “believe” in salvation. He addresses the confusion caused by a distinction sometimes made between “Head belief” and “Heart belief”. He also covers the issues of “Lordship salvation”, and the charges of “Easy Believism”.

This book is a wonderful testimony to a Christian worker who understood salvation as it is presented in the Bible, and one who has a burden to see that the Gospel message is presented clearly. It is to be hoped that some publisher will decide to reprint *What Happened to the Word Believe*.