

Condition and Consequence: A Key to Correct Interpretation

By Bob Wilkin

Pay Attention to Both Cs

While misinterpreting Scripture is always bad, the worst problems come when someone misunderstands what God says about what we must do to have everlasting life. If a person misunderstands what we might call *the saving message*, then he remains lost and is bound for eternal separation from God.

The biblical message is that once someone believes in Jesus, he is born again and justified forever. However, while everlasting life is irrevocable, one's understanding of the saving message is not. It is sadly possible for a believer to change his understanding of the saving message and become confused either about the condition (faith alone in Jesus Christ) or the consequence (irrevocable life). Such a person does not lose eternal life; he just loses his understanding of how to get eternal life. This will, of course, negatively affect that person's evangelism and discipleship efforts.

So in order to keep the saving message straight, it is helpful to know where such confusion comes from, and how to avoid it. Most of this kind of confusion about the saving message comes when people take a discipleship passage and think it is an evangelistic passage. This happens because the reader fails to carefully observe two things in a given context: what is the *condition*, stated or implied, and what is the *consequence*?

We must pay attention to both in order to understand what is being said in a given passage. But before these two Cs are considered, there is a cardinal rule of Bible study that must first be remembered.

Scripture Doesn't Contradict Scripture: The Analogy of Faith

In order for condition and consequence to guide you to the correct interpretation, you must remember what is called *the analogy of faith*. This is the interpretive principle that Scripture never contradicts Scripture.

So, if one passage unequivocally establishes a truth, another passage cannot contradict it. This will often eliminate one or more possible interpretations of a particular text. If your understanding of one text contradicts your understanding of another, you have misunderstood one or both of the passages. One guideline of *the analogy of faith* is to let the simple texts shed light on the difficult texts.

For example, John 10:30 and 20:28, as well as host of other texts, clearly establish that Jesus is God. These are simple and straight-forward texts. Therefore, if some passage seems to imply that Jesus is not God, we know that such an interpretation of that text is wrong. Though we may not yet know what the passage in question does mean, progress is still made because we know what it cannot mean.

This is particularly helpful when it comes to looking at passages that deal with the saving message and determining the conditions and consequences in those passages.

Believing in Christ Is the Condition and Everlasting Life Is the Consequence

Christianity 101 starts with the saving message. Until a person grasps this simple truth, he is not born again and cannot progress in the Christian life. Thankfully, passages that contain the saving message are some of the clearest in Scripture.

Jesus said in John 6:47, "He who believes in Me [the condition] has everlasting life [the consequence]." When we believe that, we know we have life that can never be lost.

This basic truth can and should guide us in all condition and consequence passages. If a passage lists a different condition than faith alone in Christ alone, it isn't an evangelistic text. If a passage lists a different consequence, then it isn't dealing with the message of everlasting life.

Note that I'm not speaking of different *wording* that has the same meaning. For instance, the condition to be born again in John's Gospel is stated by Jesus variously as "believing," "drinking," "eating," "receiving," and "coming." And Jesus variously states the consequence as "everlasting life," "shall never thirst," "shall never

hunger,” “shall not perish,” “shall never die,” “shall not come into judgment [or condemnation],” and “has passed from death into life.”

Furthermore, Paul spoke of “the promise of life” (2 Tim 1:1), “believing on [Jesus] for everlasting life” (1 Tim 1:16), being “made alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)” (Eph 2:5), “the washing of regeneration” (Titus 3:5), “the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:7), and “having been justified by faith” (Rom 5:1), all of which are either synonymous or closely related concepts.

In light of such straight-forward texts on the condition and consequence, if a text provides the condition of enduring in good works (2 Tim 2:12; Rev 2:26), then we know that text isn’t an evangelistic text! Similarly, if a text states that the consequence is reward in heaven, or ruling with Christ in the kingdom (e.g., Matt 6:19-21; 2 Tim 2:12), then it also is not an evangelistic text. It really is that simple.

Test Time: You Decide

Colossians 1:21-23. Paul says that if we hold fast to the faith, then we will be presented by Christ as holy, blameless, and beyond reproach. The consequence is a bit ambiguous for the neophyte interpreter. It could be a synonym for everlasting life. But this is a future and not a present presentation, whereas eternal life is a present possession (John 6:47).

The clincher is the condition. Holding fast to Christian teaching is not the same as believing in Jesus for eternal life. Thus, this passage is not an evangelistic text. It concerns the Judgment Seat of Christ, and eternal rewards. However, even if you don’t see that, you know the saving message isn’t on display here.

James 2:14. James says that faith without works will not save. For the novice who is unaware of how the NT word *save* is used, the consequence sounds like the same consequence as John 3:16-17. However, the condition is obviously not the same as in John 3:16-17. Indeed, James says that faith is insufficient for the salvation he is thinking of. He is stating the direct opposite of what Paul says in Eph 2:8-9.

Thus, whatever it means, Jas 2:14 isn’t talking about the free gift of eternal life. With further study of the five uses of the verb *save* in James (1:21; 2:14; 4:12; 5:15, 20), one discovers James is speaking of *deliverance* from the terrible deadly consequences of sin. When one sins by failing to do what he knows he should, he will not be delivered from the temporal consequences of that sin.

Luke 18:22. The condition Jesus gave the rich young ruler was to give away all of his riches! That isn’t the same as believing in Jesus. And the consequence wasn’t everlasting life. Instead, the promised consequence was treasure in heaven. This isn’t the message of John 3:16. For some reason Jesus told this unbeliever about eternal rewards truth. While it may take a new believer a few years before he discovers what this verse and passage actually means, he can know right away it isn’t teaching that we buy eternal life by giving away all we have.

Other Passages - Space doesn’t permit a discussion of texts like Matt 10:32-33, Matt 24:13, Gal 5:19-21, Heb 6:4-8, and a host of other passages. You can find explanations for all these passages and many more at our website: www.faithalone.org. Just click on “Search Website” and then put in the name of a passage. If we observe condition and consequence and then apply the analogy of faith, we can separate passages dealing with the saving message from ones dealing with something else.

It Really Is Simple

This *condition and consequence* idea is intuitively obvious. It is a simple principle of interpretation. And best of all, it helps keep the saving message straight.

The next time you hit a tough passage, ask yourself, “What is the condition and what is the consequence?” That will cause you to think carefully about the context. Then compare that condition and consequence with John 3:16. If both don’t match up, then you aren’t dealing with evangelism truth.

Justification and the new birth are closely related, but not synonymous. The new birth is a work of the Spirit whereby He regenerates us. Justification is a work of God the Father whereby He declares us righteous in His sight. Both occur simultaneously. Both are irrevocable.