



CHRISTIANS & SUPERSTITION

CHRISTIANS ARE NOT IMMUNE FROM SUPERSTITION. WE ARE AFRAID—AND SO WE DO THINGS THAT WE THINK WILL GIVE US PROTECTION AND CONTROL—AND THEN WE BECOME ADDICTED TO DOING THOSE THINGS. THE FOLLOWING THREE ARTICLES CAN HELP YOU RECOGNIZE THE SUPERSTITIONS IN YOUR LIFE—AND REPLACE THEM WITH REAL FAITH IN GOD.

ANYTHING...

ANYTHING...

AT ALL TO...



CATCH A FISH

BY RON BENSON

Fishermen—fisherwomen, too—are a desperate, superstitious lot. We'll try anything, anything at all, to catch a fish.

As I write I am fishing. It's true. It's summertime, and I am sitting on the shore of Lake Gogebic in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. I have a pole sitting in a canoe just off shore. I have my laptop in my...lap.

I know in my head I will not catch fish. My wormed hook is sitting about five feet away, in about three feet of water, my line slack, my bobber still. But even though I know that I will not catch anything, I look up about every paragraph and stare at my pole to see if there is a nod, a jerk, anything that might indicate some really dumb fish has forgotten all the rules of fish culture and decided—what the hey, I think I'll try to eat whatever this is sitting here in three feet of water, five feet from shore.

[Checking pole—still nothing.]

I am desperate to catch a fish. For the first time in many years I have a fishing license. We all got licenses for our family vacation. All six Bensons. It's been more than a week, and we have very little to show for it.

My kids ask me what to use, how to tie a line, how to cast. I tell them these things as if I'm a seasoned pro, as if I catch huge, monster fish everyday and know exactly what I am doing. I do not. They know I don't know, but they don't let on that they know I don't know. You know.

I've been around fishermen. There is a fish-lust which drives us to do desperate things, come up with amazing ideas that we are convinced will help us succeed. My tackle box offers gooey orange balls that are supposed to lure fish

to bite a hook. Some secret juice I bought at a Walmart insists it will attract bass if I squirt some of it onto bait. A brochure emphasized three-pound test line for leaders, the fish having held a meeting and determined that they will only bite on hooks that are tied with this particular line. So I've attached the gooey orange balls onto three-pound test line and squirted it with the bass-attracting juice.

[Checking pole...still nothing.]

The guy at the ranger station told me that leaches are working. Leaches! The thought occurred to me that maybe I did not want to eat something that had leaches for lunch—that whole *you-are-what-you-eat thing* going on. But look, if leaches are what's working, that's what I will use.

I'VE BEEN AROUND FISHERMEN. THERE IS A **FISH-LUST WHICH DRIVES US TO DO DESPERATE THINGS, COME UP WITH AMAZING IDEAS THAT WE ARE CONVINCED WILL HELP US SUCCEED.**

One of my teenage kids suggests I let the leach suck a little of my blood first so he'll be good and fat. If it works, fine. That's what I'll do. If the guy at the ranger station told me that jumping up and down five times while singing "Some Enchanted Evening" worked, I'd spin and jump and sing. I'm desperate. *It's called superstition.*

Human beings are desperate beings. We will try anything to succeed, to alleviate pain and suffering, to provide for our needs, to be blessed. A knack for superstition is something we're born with. If we think that something we do results in success, we will repeat it no matter how ridiculous it is. If we find, once in a while, that it works again, we will become obsessed about doing it and tell our friends to do it and we will perhaps write how to do it in a book and sell it at success conventions.

Christians and Superstition

Christians are not immune from superstition. We are prone to attach certain religious behavior to positive or negative outcomes hoping to please God and make him happy with us. We want his blessing, and in our desperation for it we will do just about anything.

In Sarsina, a small town in Italy, believers make long journeys in order to have a metal shackle locked around their necks. It seems St. Vicinus in 300 AD used the collar when he prayed—no pain, no gain—and he was famous for casting out demons. So people began to attach power to the collar. Now, tens of thousands come every year with a plethora of life problems and wear the shackle for a few minutes in the hope it will alleviate their pain.

OK. That's extreme. North American Christianity has walked away from such "dark-ages" behavior. But consider the following. Are any of these important to you? Why? What would happen if you didn't do them?

- Observing Communion on the first Sunday of every month.

- Having an "altar call" at the end of every church service.
- Saying "In Jesus' name, Amen" after every prayer.
- Speaking in an unknown language.
- Repeating the handy-dandy Jabez prayer every day.
- Saying grace before each meal.
- Giving offerings so that they will be returned to you ten-fold.

(I wonder about that ten-fold thing. Does it apply to *Junk Cars for Jesus*? Does it apply to organ donation? How about fishing? If I lay a smallish Northern Pike in the offering plate, can I expect to catch one ten times the size?)

Superstition baits God. It is putting control in our hands so that we can get God to protect us, bless us, forgive us, heal us or make us successful.

[Checking pole.]

The guy down the beach caught another big fish, his second. He's got some secret bait thing. I don't know what it is, but I've got to have it.

Wait! Is he dancing? He jumped up, spun around five times, sang "Some Enchanted Evening" and cast his bait into the lake.

[I look over my shoulder to see if anyone is watching...did he spin clockwise or counterclockwise?]

Pulpit Superstition

Superstition is rampant in North American church leadership. Being a pastor, I have been sorely tempted to indulge in church growth and success superstition. Consider some hypothetical situations:

- Pastor A north of Chicago does something that works. He's pulling in thousands, and lots of people, too.
- Pastor B in California organizes his church, his ministry, his life, on a set of purposeful principles and has managed to sell lots of books and pack out his church.
- Pastor C in South Carolina is seeing fantastic results by erecting

a circus tent and giving out dollar bills to visitors.

- The church down the street got hundreds of kids in their Vacation Bible School because they offered a trip to Disney Galaxy for the child who brought the most friends.

Since I've been called to be successful, I look down the shore at the other guy who seems to be doing things right and getting results, and I begin the same dance so that I can catch the same big haul of fish as he.

I also want people to respond to my preaching. In droves. My church board has proved, not with words but with actions, that the more distraught, penitent folks I lure to "the altar" every week, the bigger my bonus at the end of the year. Last week I discovered that singing an extra verse of "Just As I Am" resulted in three more people kneeling there in deep contrition. I've written a few extra verses for this week.

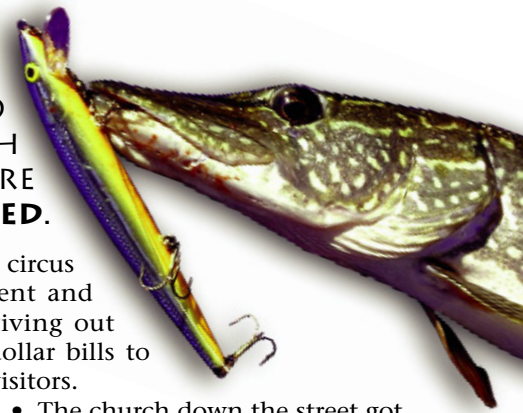
The Power Game

We all want it to work, just like pastors. We want to think that something we do will force a blessing. We are desperate for an economy of superstition.

So we do things to force God to perform for us, to do our bidding like a cosmic Genie. So if I put a fish sign on my car, God will protect me. If I go to church "every time the doors are open," I will force God's hand of blessing. If I strap my neck into the shackle, God will have to listen up and jump through my hoop.

Superstition places the power in *my* hands. And power is something we all want. Consider the motivations of superstition:

- **Fear and Guilt.** Cindy was a good friend who wanted to please God. But she'd heard on Christian TV that eating anything



I WONDER ABOUT THAT TEN-FOLD THING. HOW ABOUT FISHING? IF I LAY A SMALLISH NORTHERN PIKE IN THE OFFERING PLATE, CAN I EXPECT TO CATCH ONE TEN TIMES THE SIZE?



My brother, Gene, was diagnosed with cerebral palsy at age two. My father, a pastor himself, wanted to make sure he had done everything possible for Gene.

Dad invited some leaders in the church to come pray for Gene. They anointed him with oil. They organized prayer vigils. Gene was not healed. My dad, who had a small, rural radio ministry at the time, put a call out for prayer. No healing. Desperate to try anything, Dad took my brother—twice—to visit faith healer Oral Roberts. Dad was not a follower of revivalists of Roberts' ilk. But he was willing to try anything that might work. The great evangelist laid hands on Gene and spoke in tongues and "healed" him. But Gene came home with cerebral palsy just the same.

Dad eventually stopped trying to win God's favor and decided to trust that God knew what he was doing. Gene lived to the age of twenty-six. He died of complications from CP. But I could write a book on how Gene's presence in our family enriched our lives and the lives of countless others. Faith and trust in a loving God provided more than superstition could ever achieve.

The opposite of superstition is faith. Although some people clump them together, they really couldn't be further apart. Where superstition attempts to force God's hand to do our will, faith rests in God's hands and waits for him. Superstition plies God with "spiritual activity," backing him into a corner and muscling him to come through for us. Faith surrenders to God's actions, whatever they may be, and trusts that his love and grace will always be sufficient, no matter how dark and painful life may be. □

Ron Benson continues to write (knock on wood!) from Royal Oak, Michigan—not always while fishing. He would relish your tips on how to lure the really big ones or even your feedback about this article via email at ronbenson@ronbenson.net.

with refined sugar was a sin. She grew up in a church culture that taught her that any sin disqualified you from heaven. Overnight, Cindy became superstitious. She carefully analyzed everything she ate. She set up a strict food regimen for her family. She studied and sweated over food labels, fearing she would miss the sugar listing and thereby condemn herself and her kin to hell forever. She came to see me when the temptation of a chocolate bar overwhelmed her. She ate it in secret, and she was scared to death she had committed the final, unpardonable sin.

• **Need of Protection.** On a stretch of Interstate 75 just north of Cincinnati, Ohio, a church has erected a very large bust of

Jesus. He sits on the church lawn facing the freeway, his huge arms outstretched as if in prayer, his face looking upward. My kids call him, with all due respect, "Big Jesus." Some of the citizens around that area of Ohio claim that since the statue was erected, accidents along that dangerous corridor of highway have

gone way down. Is it "Big Jesus," offering his hand of protection from the side of the road, or is it the slow down in traffic as people crane their necks to look at the object coming up out of the ground?

• **Control.** Ultimately our superstitions come to this: we want to be in control. When I "pray a prayer of positive confession," I

like the guarantee that it will be answered. When I "release a blessing," I get to have the last word on what's going to happen. I want to be healed of my disease, so I have some people put a little "God-Oil" on my forehead to make it all go away.

We want it to work just like the law of gravity. Drop an apple, it will fall. It's the law. It's the way it works all the time. We want God to work the same way—*by law*. We want to hem God in—make him do what we want him to do.

We want to put God in a box so he will always be available for our every need *and* desire. So we do something ourselves that will prompt his actions on our behalf. *If I do this, he's going to do that. It's the law—it's the way it works.*

It's legalism.

Superstition is another powerful tool in the enemy's arsenal to get us to fall back on the old habits of legalism. That makes superstition something to watch out for and avoid. In our desperation, it's not always easy.

[Checking pole.]

I caught one! It's just one, but it's a start. My kids watch me reel it in. I yell for the net. "It's a big one!" It's not really. I know it's not. They know I know it's not. You know.

I take it off the hook, bait up, jump up and down, turn around five times, clockwise, while singing "Some Enchanted Evening" and cast my line out to catch another. Fish will not be able to resist.

The Antidote to Superstition

Superstition is unnecessary when faith is firmly planted in God.



JESUS JUNK

by Phil Cooke

My alarm goes off at 5:50 sharp every morning, so I drag myself out of bed and head to the garage where I keep my exercise equipment and treadmill. While working out, I often turn on various TV channels to keep track of the early morning round of TV evangelists. I've been producing Christian television programming for thirty years now, and I'm still amazed—and often shocked—at the junk some evangelists pitch on television.

Vials of anointing oil and “miracle water” are still big, as well as prayer cloths, miracle seeds and gimmicks of all kinds—I prefer to call it “Jesus Junk.” One TV prophet will even give you a “personal prophecy” (once you call and give him your credit card number of course).

How did we come to this? How has the historic Christian faith that defeated the Roman empire, changed nations and transformed the Western world disintegrated to cheap trinkets and religious trash? We can always criticize the TV evangelists who pitch this stuff (and we should), but the fact is, there's an even bigger culprit—us.

The truth is, we've created a generation of Christians looking for a magic bullet. That's why people

refused to exercise or eat right. He was waiting on a miracle drug to solve his health problems. He died soon after, still waiting.

That's why it's no wonder that in such a marvelous era “miracle ministries” were born. Men and women like Oral Roberts, William Branham, Kathryn Kuhlman, Jack Coe and more exploded on the scene with amazing success. They ignited a new passion for the supernatural and the gifts of the Spirit, and re-energized the church.

But now, fifty or more years later, the pendulum has swung so far we've become addicted to the feeling. We've forgotten how difficult living the Christian life can be—and in our pursuit of prosperity and a nice Mercedes, we've lost touch with the years Paul rotted in prison, Peter's horrific upside-down crucifixion and William Tyndale being strangled and burned at the stake for giving us the remarkable gift of the English Bible.

Yes, God calls us to live in victory, but real triumph comes from doing battle in the difficult trenches of life. And frankly, in this post-Christian culture it's not going to get easier. But research indicates that millions profess Christianity and yet know

remarkably little about even the basic principles of our faith. As a result, we think *The Da Vinci Code* is true, wonder if the “gospel” of Judas should be included in the Scripture and look like fools when we feebly attempt to share our faith with others.

Do I believe in miracles? Absolutely. I also believe Acts when it says handkerchiefs that touched Paul were taken to the sick and they were healed. But Paul didn't have them mass-marketed and used for a fundraising scheme. I even believe God prospers people. But I also believe the Christian faith isn't about chasing a blessing or getting a word. It's about taking up our cross. It's about making the

time to study to show ourselves approved. And it's about, as the apostle Paul said, “Knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead” (Philippians 3:10-11).

The next time that TV evangelist pitches his miracle water, prayer cloth or other trinkets, put back your credit card, turn off the TV, pick up your cross and follow Jesus. □

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travel thousands of miles from conference to conference just to “get a word,” find “fresh oil,” “get the glory” or “catch their blessing.” The truth is, they're looking for the easy way out.

It's interesting that after World II, we experienced an age of real miracles in this country. We had amazing pre-fab housing, miracle drugs, fast food, space age appliances and instant satisfaction was everywhere. And it changed everyone. I had an uncle who experienced three heart attacks, but



A Cause for

Every Effect

BY MONTE WOLVERTON

It was sometime in 1965. My friend Jim Brown and I were driving home from school in my dad's 1963 Chrysler 300. We were speeding along an empty stretch of road that went past the abandoned World War II Kaiser shipyards near our home town of Vancouver, Washington. The speed limit was 35, but my speedometer was hovering around 70.

Up ahead I saw a dip in the pavement where a railroad siding crossed the road. Not wishing to hit the tracks at 70, I hit the brakes. Unfortunately, the brakes were in need of adjustment—and the right front brake grabbed, causing the bulky vehicle to fishtail to the left. Being only 16 and not knowing how to steer into a skid to regain

control, I hit the brakes harder and turned right, causing the car to turn completely sideways as it crossed the railroad tracks, which raised the two right wheels up into the air as we hurtled down the road on the other two.

I remember looking out my window and seeing only pavement and a hubcap rolling away. Just as I was sure we were going to roll over, the force of gravity overcame the force of inertia and the two right wheels slammed back down on the pavement. The car continued to skid and rotate until we were rolling backwards down the road.

When we finally came to rest—still on the pavement—the tilt of the car had caused Jim to slide down the bench seat next to me

(we weren't wearing seat belts). We sat there for a while with our mouths open—then got out to survey the damage. Aside from some gravel on the roof of the car and a dislodged hubcap, nothing seemed amiss. We took snapshots of the spectacular skid marks to share with our friends later.

I dropped Jim off at his house and went home. Of course, I said nothing to my father. A week or two afterward, in a routine maintenance, a mechanic discovered that one of the steering tie rods was cracked. Being a typical teenager, wishing to stay out of deep do-do, I still said nothing. At the end of the day I was left to consider *causes and effects*.

Why?

What was the cause of our near mishap? Was it the road? Was it the railroad track? Was it the maladjusted brakes? Was it the size of the car? Was it my lack of experience in stunt driving? Or was there some deeper spiritual

cause? Was God sending me a message—giving me a wakeup call—warning me that I needed to repent of my wild and crazy, 16-year-old lifestyle?

But wait. Actually we had escaped major damage. It seemed to be a miracle that we hadn't rolled the car and got ourselves killed or injured. Maybe that meant God was pleased with me.

Maybe it wasn't even me to whom God was sending the message. Maybe it was Jim, and I was just along for the ride—wild though it was. Here's a comforting justification—maybe God was sending Jim a message—something to "wake him up"—and he used my reckless immaturity. So that would absolve me of my responsibility!

Or, could it simply have been my reckless driving and speeding? And the only reason we didn't die was that that I wasn't going fast enough to completely roll the car?

It took me a while to sort it all out. The upshot was that I wisely decided to slow down, wear my seat belt and drive more carefully—and Jim decided not to ride with me anymore.

“WHAT? ME SUPERSTITIOUS?”

Was God sending me a message—giving me a wakeup call—warning me that I needed to repent of my wild and crazy, 16-year-old lifestyle?

It took me a while to sort it all out. The upshot was that I wisely decided to slow down, wear my seat belt and drive more carefully—and Jim decided not to ride with me anymore. Partially as a result of our decisions, we’re both still alive. Jim is a dedicated school teacher and, though my driving habits at age 16 would not have indicated my future profession, I serve in the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Actions and Reactions

No sane person questions whether causes have effects or effects have causes. It’s one of the most fundamental actions in the physical universe—something happens, which causes something else to happen.

As long as we are living in a physical universe, we are subject to physical cause and effect. Our actions or inactions yield results—good or bad. While this should be fairly obvious, many Christians misunderstand cause and effect in the spiritual realm.

Here are three ways Christians confuse cause and effect and wind up distorting the relationship God offers them:

1) We imagine that it’s all up to us. We believe that every outcome in our lives is caused by what we do. And so we attempt to micro manage and control everything and everyone around us in order to achieve the outcomes we want. We worry, work and plan compulsively, causing ourselves and others unnecessary stress.

Most everyone would agree that throwing salt over your shoulder, knocking on wood and avoiding ladders is superstitious. But we may be practicing more harmful superstitions without knowing it.

One dictionary defines superstition as *a widely held but unjustified belief in supernatural causation leading to certain consequences of an action or event, or a practice based on such a belief.*

Here are just a few silly beliefs and practices maintained by well-meaning Christians that are 1) widely held, 2) unjustified, 3) attributed to God, 4) perceived as leading to consequences. Okay, some aren’t widely held, but we’ve added a few for fun.

- **Be rapture-ready** or be left behind. You may think you are saved, but unless you are fully prepared for the rapture, you stand to go through the Great Tribulation with unsaved sinners and backsliders.

- **Cross yourself**—frequently. This has deeply symbolic meaning in some liturgical traditions. Some believe God’s protection is increased the more often it is done. By contrast, if you are part of certain other religious traditions, you may believe you need to avoid the sign of the cross.

- **Be sure to always attend church** whenever there is a meeting, or something bad will happen to you.

- **Answer a sneeze with “God bless you.”** In the middle ages, a symptom of the plague was violent sneezing. The Pope ruled that people should bless the sneezer, as death was imminent. Another story has it that some believed that the sneeze expelled evil spirits from the body, and therefore the sneezer should be congratulated.

- **Display a fish insignia** on your car to be protected from accidents and mishaps. The fish was a sign used by early Christians to identify each other. Some believe failure to display the symbol on your car means you’re ashamed of Jesus. If you just don’t like fish, a plastic Jesus on the dashboard will also do the trick.

- **Go to a faith healer** to be cured of sickness. Merely asking God for healing yourself isn’t good enough. You have to attend a “miracle healing crusade” or at the very least request an “anointed prayer cloth.” Of course, seeking help from a medical doctor means you have little or no faith.

- **Get in your quiet time.** Prayer and Bible study should not be something you do because you want to or even because you feel a need to. It should be perfunctory and by the clock—an absolute daily minimum of 15 minutes of each—or 30 minutes of each if you want to achieve any spiritual growth. Then you can feel good because you have fulfilled that obligation. Otherwise, you will have a bad day. And don’t forget regular fasting.

There are hundreds of others, but you get the point: It’s usually not the action itself that is superstitious, but the motivation for doing so.

If we do bring God into the picture, it is to get him behind our agenda. When outcomes and events do not turn out according to our expectations, we become frustrated, even angry. Somehow we have forgotten that there are too

many variables in the world to guarantee a good outcome every time. We can’t be in complete control. No matter how confident we are or how hard we try, and how many of the right things we do, we may fail miserably. These





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are optimal times for learning to trust God.

2) ***We imagine that it's all up to God.*** So we wait. We don't take reasonable precautions. We don't plan ahead. We lack direction or goals, and we are always wondering what God's will is for our lives (and why doesn't he let us know?). And then nothing happens, and we don't realize that God is waiting for us to use the resources he has already given us to make decisions and take action.

We walk through "open doors," following a vague intuition that we imagine might be God leading us. Then we justify the less-than-satisfactory outcome as being "God's will." Remember the test that you didn't prepare for in school and you ended up praying for God to give you a good grade anyway? Remember a bad decision you made because you were careless—and you ended up asking God to clean up the mess for you? I can certainly recall several such instances in my life, and I'm sure you can, too. More often than we realize, God, in his mercy, fixes these messes for us, yet sometimes he lets us suffer the effects of our actions or inactions so we can learn to live in a cause-and-effect world.

3) ***We imagine spiritual causes for physical outcomes.*** We believe that prosperity or adversity in our lives is caused by God either blessing us or cursing us for our actions and attitudes. When we fall sick or have an accident, we believe God must be causing it because he is unhappy with us. When we hear of others who have fallen prey to the onslaught of some dreadful catastrophe like hurricane Katrina, we think God must be punishing them.

When we read these spiritual causes into physical effects, we are constantly wondering if God is trying to tell us something. We look for signs. We may even fear that we are under some kind of curse. Our faith in God becomes perverted into nothing more than fear and superstition (or pride, if things happen to be going well).

This third way in which Christians confuse cause and effect is probably the most dangerous. Thousands of Christians have fallen for the health-wealth gospel and the word-faith movement. One of the basic tenets of these movements is the doctrine of positive or negative confession—which suggests that simply by thinking or saying what you want—"name it and claim it"—your faith will make it so. Many Christians don't realize this is closely related to the New Age teaching of *responsibility assumption*—a mystical idea that each individual has substantial or total responsibility for the events and circumstances that befall them. According to this teaching, what happens to you, whether it's good or bad, is caused by what you secretly wanted to happen—you wished it on yourself. Your reality is a direct result of your "projected" thought or your inner will.

Each of these three concepts is a gross distortion of God's reality. When we believe in these illusions, we live our lives in a flurry of anxiety, misplaced faith and misplaced activity—or inactivity. In contrast to these popular myths, the New Testament offers a realistic perspective, as illustrated by the following three passages:

"Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business

and to work with your hands, just as we told you so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody" (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12).

"He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need" (Ephesians 4:28).

"Now listen, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.' Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that'" (James 4:13-15).

In these passages Christians are simply and directly encouraged to work (cause) so that they can support themselves and others and maintain a good reputation in the community (effect)—subject to God's sovereign will. Our physical circumstances are not entirely up to us, nor are they mystically driven by spiritual forces of our own making. The practical, realistic, cause-and-effect truth is, if we don't work and apply ourselves diligently, we can expect little material success in this life. If we do work hard, we may expect some material reward. If we take unreasonable risks and drive recklessly, we will probably have an accident.

Or not.

Because while causes have effects, and effects have causes, there are just too many variables in this life to give us any guarantees.

That's why our hope must lie in the *One Sure Cause*. Our actions or inactions are not the cause of our salvation. God is the cause of our salvation—what he has done and is doing. Even our ability to believe him and accept his offer comes from him. It is all because of his grace. Jesus puts it this way: *"I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life"* (John 5:24). □

