

If A Man Is Saved By Faith Alone

With valiant courage that risked both his life and the welfare of his countrymen, Martin Luther steered away from the extremely authoritarian and works-oriented Catholic system. He emphasized justification through the principle of faith which included obedience of faith. He correctly taught that we are justified only by faith but not by faith which is alone. Through later reformers evolved the extreme and erroneous teaching that we are justified by faith alone apart from any work, thus denying the necessity of baptism in accepting the grace of God. Because that dangerous concept is taught so prevalently today, I am constrained to use this one more opportunity to direct back to the simplicity of the Biblical teaching on the matter. If my effort in this series of articles seems superfluous to you, that is all the more evident reason for the need.

Baptism has no saving power, nor is it a sacrament which imparts grace. Submission to immersion as taught in Scripture has to do with change of relationship. In dispensing his grace, God has chosen to use faith to change the heart, repentance to change the life, and baptism to change the relationship. These are conditions of acceptance of his grace rather than efforts to earn it or become worthy of it.

IF A MAN IS SAVED BY FAITH BEFORE BAPTISM, he is saved while still “out of Christ.” Paul explained, “*for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ*” (Gal. 3:26-27; also Rom. 6:3-5; please read all contexts). We believe “in” Christ but not “into” Christ. If the believer is already in Christ, how can he then be baptized into Christ? God chose baptism to change our relationship “into Christ.” Then, “*There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*” for our reconciliation is in Christ (Rom. 8:1; 2 Cor. 5:16-21).

IF A MAN IS SAVED BY FAITH WITHOUT BAPTISM, he is saved outside the body, the church, the saved group. We are baptized into one body: “*For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...*” (1 Cor. 12:13). “*There is one body*” (Eph. 4:4), so Jesus’ prayer for unity is answered and “*the unity of the Spirit*” (Eph. 4:3) is accomplished when we are baptized into the one body. That body is the church, the people saved by Christ, “*For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior*” (Eph. 5:23).

IF A MAN IS SAVED BY FAITH BEFORE BEING BAPTIZED, he is saved before his sins are forgiven. Peter urged convicted believers to “*repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins*” (Acts 2:38). And a Spirit-directed preacher told the convicted, believing Saul, “*And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name*” (Acts 22:16). Are those instructions out of date?

IF A MAN IS SAVED BY FAITH BEFORE BAPTISM, he is saved without the new birth. Though Nicodemus had been born physically into earthly Israel, Jesus told him he

must be born anew, explaining, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God”* (John 3:3-5). Both water and the Spirit were involved on Pentecost when Peter called upon them to *“repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”* (Acts 2:38). Many years later Paul alluded to this in stating, *“he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit”* (Titus 3:5). We are baptized into Christ, and *“if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation / creature”* (2 Cor. 5:17).

IF A MAN IS SAVED BEFORE BAPTISM, he is saved before dying with Christ, being buried with Christ, and rising with him in newness of life. Paul made this clear: *“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his”* (Rom. 6:3-5).

IF A MAN IS SAVED BY FAITH ALONE, he is saved without obeying the gospel. Paul definitely ruled out that possibility in pointing to the time *“when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus”* (2 Thes. 1:7-8). Paul’s mission was to bring about “obedience of faith” among the nations (Rom. 1:5) and Chapter 6 of his epistle elaborates on that extensively.

Investigation of the deeper meanings related to immersion into Christ is healthful, but studious effort to deny the necessity of it is a dangerous pursuit of questionable motivation. In the accounts of conversions in Acts, we see no hesitation to submit to baptism among those who were convinced by the gospel story. Its importance was so pressing that they were baptized immediately. There is no record of any of them later questioning or denying it as a prerequisite to their receiving forgiveness of sins. Years later, in the texts used above, Paul did offer some deeper insights to those who had already been baptized in order to enhance their understanding of their relationship with Christ and one another in one body.

In view of the simplicity of the teaching of Jesus and the apostles on this matter, is it not appalling that so few evangelists will give the instructions they gave? Would not the whole nation be shocked if the beloved Billy Graham were to exhort believers to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins? Why are answers devised by men to be preferred over that of Peter on Pentecost? To neglect or refuse to give Peter’s instruction leaves believers outside the fellowship with Christ and his redeemed.

[Other related essays: Free To Change, Ch. 27, “When Life Begins,” and Ch. 14, “Sons of God in All Ages”; FR 42, “Children of Abraham”; Free To Accept, Ch. 27, “Nicodemus in Context.”]

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