

Baptism and Salvation "by faith only [or alone]"

Written by Calvin Fox

Wednesday, 04 August 2010 18:07 - Last Updated Wednesday, 04 August 2010 18:08

This phrase "by faith only [or alone]" appears only once in the NT, where it says people are not saved by faith only (James 2:24) ! But the concept of "salvation by faith only" is foundational to the Gospel. It is essential and non-negotiable, but what exactly does this concept mean?

In his translation of Rom 3:28 from Greek (the "textus receptus") into German, M. Luther added the modifier "only" to make the phrase, "faith only". The word is not in the original Greek. Luther knew that, but He inserted it, he said, because, it fit the context and conveyed the meaning of Paul. (Actually, Theologians before Luther had also used the phrase.) Luther was doing what is done in many translations. What he correctly took to be the meaning of Paul has been lost by most Evangelicals. Paul (and Luther) rightly insisted that there is nothing a sinner can do to merit, earn or deserve salvation. Those last words are critical. No "works" of his own can save a sinner. A sinner must be saved by the work of God alone. This is absolutely true.

Many have taken this phrase, "faith plus nothing", to the extreme by saying the "nothing" includes even repentance and obedience. They mean that faith alone is simply trust in Jesus to save. Period. Later, the saved person will hopefully accept Jesus as Lord, too. Savior and Lord, faith and obedience (or discipleship), are inseparable from each other and inseparable from saving faith. This contradicts the popular meaning of "Salvation by faith alone".

Note: Advocates of the common concept of "faith only" insist "Lordship Salvation", as they call it, is Salvation by works. Like many Preachers, I used to end my sermon with two invitations: for sinners to accept Jesus as Savior and then for those who had accepted Him as Savior to accept Him as Lord of their life (two different invitations). Much of this confusion would be cleared up if people looked at what John says is the content of saving faith: sinners are to believe that "Jesus is the Christ". By believing that, John wrote, sinners will have Life. (Jn 20:31, 1 Jn 2:22, 5:1 cf Acts 17:3; Matt 16:16; Acts 5:42, 9:22, 17:3, 18:5, 18:28 etc) Those of us who have done evangelistic work have been remiss and done much harm by not preaching that Jesus is God's Prophet, Priest and King (the Christ) with all that those roles entail. "Jesus is the Christ" is the content of the faith that saves. There would be no separation between Savior and Lord if we preached this content and sinners believed it.

To say that sinners are saved by faith only is Scriptural, but that does not have to mean that Baptism is unnecessary to Salvation. Baptism is not included among "works of the law" or "works of the flesh" or anything else a sinner might do to try to earn or merit salvation. And that is the case, because Baptism is a work of God, not of [Man]. This truth is what most evangelicals miss. Grasping this truth about Baptism changed my entire view of the subject. Baptism is something God does, something that He uses as an instrument, to save sinners who have faith. (God also uses the preaching of the Gospel as an instrument by which He

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saves. The Gospel must be heard by the sinner. Through it the Holy Spirit convicts the sinner about sin and creates faith in that sinner. If God uses one external instrument (preaching) to save sinners, we must allow that He can use another. That other instrument is Baptism [and the Eucharist] The Believer simply, passively, submits in obedient faith to that instrument as a patient does to a surgeon's scapel. To insist Baptism is a meritorious work by which a sinner earns or deserves Salvation is unscriptural and absolutely unwarranted and simply arbitrary. (This does not preclude the possibility that some people may misuse Baptism and see it as the act by which they will earn salvation.)

By means of Baptism, God brings the believing sinner into union with Christ (the believing sinner, justifies [him] and adopts [him] as His child and as a member of His Family (the Church).

This, I now believe, is Scriptural and what the phrase,"faith alone, actually means. As a Baptist, I interpreted all these verses symbolically according to my Theology. Now I take them at their face value, realistically. What I am saying here agrees with the teaching of the Reformers.