

What is Salvation, Anyway?

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Saint Paul's, Batesville  
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Proper 21, Year A  
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Philippians 2:1-13

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of  
the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

One of the things I really like about being involved in local civic groups and boards of directors is that it affords me a chance to get to know people who subscribe to other expressions of the Christian faith. While, as many of you know, I am not what is called a "cradle Episcopalian", my formative years were spent in this Communion and the only consistent religious grounding I had in my youth was in Anglicanism. That being the case, I have to admit to knowing precious little about popular American religion except for what I've gleaned in church history classes and through the media. Thus, I love talking to people from other

"flavors" of Christianity, because I always learn something that would not have occurred to me about how different kinds of Christians approach the Gospel.

I was on a car trip to a training event with a couple of friends from one of the local groups I'm in, and (as often happens when I'm in the mix, for some reason) the discussion turned to religion. These two friends of mine were both Baptists, but Baptists of different sorts. One was a Southern Baptist and one was a Free-will Baptist. Having no idea what distinguished one from the other, I asked what the primary theological distinction (if any) was.

After some discussion they both agreed that it came down to different views on the permanency of a salvific experience. Whereas one group held that an experience and acceptance of God's Grace at a pivotal point in one's life assured eternal salvation (the pithy phrase used was "once saved,

always saved"), the other group held that one could reject such an experience later on and "backslide", as she put it, to a state of reprobation. This concept was new to me, and trying to inject a little humor into the conversation I admitted that I doubted Episcopalians would split over such an important theological issue, but we might do in a debate about whether one should use port or sherry for Holy Communion. In truth, I was rather impressed. If my friends' assessment were the case (and I have no reason to doubt it is), it means these two groups broke communion not over petty issues of personality conflicts or obscure matters of church governance, but over a real theological issue- an issue as central to the Gospel as the nature of salvation. While the division of the Body of Christ is always a tragedy, something about splitting over such a critical issue seems a great deal more laudable than splitting over whether there should be a new roof on the church or whether

there should be flowers on the altar. The latter reminds me of a spoof article on the web I read a few years ago titled "Forty-seven Church Splits Finally Brings Doctrinal Perfection."

Anyway, this is a rather lengthy introduction to a short sermon about something this conversation got me thinking about- namely, the issue which had caused these two types of Baptists to fall out of fellowship. After doing some research, I've discovered that the crux of the issue is found in this morning's epistle: *work out your own salvation with fear and trembling*. One way of interpreting Paul's mandate to the Philippians is to claim that we're never 100% sure of our status with regard to salvation, and we have to remain faithful to ensure it. Another interpretation holds that the "work" done with "fear and trembling" is confirmation rather than cause; it stands as assurance of salvation to the weak, though ultimately the faithful, were they to sit down and really think

about it, would find such assurance in their initial conversion experience. This, it seems to me, is the crux of the issue between my two friends' churches.

I want to offer a third way to approach this question. This is not a proposition for an expanded catechism, but rather a personal perspective which you may "take or leave", as it were, but I think it is more compelling not only for an adherent of a catholic sort of Christianity, but for any Christian who might find weighing the two alternatives above frightening or stultifying.

The two alternatives given by my friends rely on two assumptions from two different periods of church history. The first is a concern with the mechanics of "justification", which came to be seen as coterminous with the notion of "salvation" in the great debates of the sixteenth century. Put simply, both the Protestant reformers and the Catholic Counter-Reformation as it was embodied in

the Council of Trent, assumed a definition of "salvation" which was neither more nor less than the mechanics whereby one was given eternal life in heaven.

The second assumption is of a much later origin, having its nascent stage in the Great Awakenings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and finding widespread acceptance in contemporary American evangelicalism. This is the assumption that a personal, affective religious experience of some sort or another is necessary for salvation (which is still reckoned by many Christian groups to be identical to justification).

The second assumption is, to my mind, easier to reject. Its relative novelty in Christian thought would seem to reject the validity of the religion of the majority of people who at least claimed to be Christians for eighteen hundred years (and, indeed, the majority of Christians in the world today- though they may not be seen as a majority to

one living in the bible belt of America). I'm not suggesting that a personal, affective religious experience of conversion is a bad thing. It is an incredibly good thing when it happens. What I am suggesting is that claiming such an experience to be a prerequisite to one's entry into heaven is unjustified and unbiblical.

The former assumption—the one equating salvation and justification—is a bit harder to unpack. I think the best way forward is a little Greek. The Greek noun most commonly translated as "salvation" in our English New Testament (and, indeed, in our lesson from Philippians) is "*soteria*". This word, in both the biblical context and in its uses throughout Christian theology comprises several ways in which one might be saved and several things from which one is saved. One is saved from the fires of Hell and promised eternal life. That is what we called "justification" and it is one terribly important meaning of "*soteria*". One

is also saved from the influence of sin and given freedom to live righteously. One is saved from self-obsession and given freedom to live in humility, sacrificing one's own good for the good of the brethren, just as Christ is said to have done in that wonderful hymn which constitutes the first part of this morning's epistle reading. One is saved from ignorance and given freedom to pursue truth and wisdom. All these elements and more make up the biblical notion of salvation, and to suggest that justification is the only meaning misses a great deal of the Good News we are given thanks to the divine mission of Christ Jesus.

So, I think the following axiom might better reflect the mechanics of salvation (and it's a great thing to say to somebody who comes to your door or asks you on the street if you've been saved): *I was saved, I am being saved, and I will be saved. I was objectively saved, justified and given a life free from the stain of original sin,*

when I was baptized (even if that happened when I was a little baby and didn't know what was going on). *I am being saved* as I strive with fear and trembling to humble myself, to take the form of a servant, to turn daily away from the world, the flesh, and the devil toward the foundation of my greatest hope. *I will be saved* on the last day, when the graves give up their dead and we stand at last before the judgment seat of Christ and we hear him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master."

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**