

Mod 6: GRACE VS. GALATIANISM

Does a sinner *become* saved by grace, but *stay* saved by works?

In lesson five I said that many Christians lack assurance of salvation because they do not understand how “justification by faith” relates to STAYING saved, once one has become a Christian. It is important to distinguish between these two questions: (1) How does a sinner BECOME saved? and (2) How does a Christian STAY saved?

Many Christians, especially in the Restoration Movement, know how to answer the first question; but many are seriously confused about the second one. A common but faulty approach to this issue is often called *Galatianism*. It is called this because it is the false view of salvation that Paul is refuting in his letter to the Galatians. This false view—Galatianism—is summarized thus: a sinner *becomes* saved by grace, but *stays* saved by works.

An example of this view is someone whom many of us admire for many reasons, namely, Alexander Campbell. In a letter to “Paulinus” in 1827 he specifically said, “Sinners are justified by faith, and Christians by works.” He explained that in the final judgment, faith will not be accounted to anyone for righteousness; “every Christian will be justified by his works. Nothing else comes in review on the day of judgment” (*The Christian Baptist*, IV:10).

Such a view, like all versions of Galatianism, must be rejected as a denial of the Biblical teaching on justification by faith and thus as a denial of grace. To say we are justified by faith is not just a one-time event occurring at the beginning of our Christian life, but is an on-going state that keeps us saved in spite of our sins.

Unfortunately this Galatianist view has been accepted by many, especially in the Restoration Movement. Why have we been so vulnerable to it? Because several other of our favorite doctrines—also questionable—contribute to it. I will briefly explain three of them.

I. THE “FIVE-FINGER” SALVATION PLAN.

The Restoration Movement has had many versions of the five-point “plan of salvation,” some more Galatianist than others. A common one is that a person is saved by believing, repenting, confessing, being baptized, and living the Christian life. The problem with this is that it is usually presented as if all five of these actions are equally significant in “achieving” salvation. For example, we often see them illustrated as five equal steps in a staircase leading to eternal life.

Where we go wrong here is in the implication that the fifth step, “living the Christian life,” has the same significance for salvation as the other four. This is simply not the case; it is a perfect example of Galatianism. As often presented, in the first four steps we describe the way to

BECOME saved, and the fifth step (living the Christian life) is explained as the way to STAY saved. We stay saved, then, by our works. Thus in our presentation of the plan we switch gears, changing from grace to law after the fourth step; and we thereby implant the notion of works-salvation in the convert's heart from the very beginning of his or her Christian life.

If we are still going to use this five-step plan, the fifth step must be explained as qualitatively different from the others. Steps one through four are the essence of obeying the gospel, whereas "living the Christian life" is the essence of obeying our law code (i.e., it is "works of law). We should still stress faith, repentance, confession, and baptism as gospel or grace commands, and as the Biblical conditions for *becoming* saved (justified and born again). But we should stress that ongoing faith, repentance, and confession are the continuing conditions for *staying* saved. We should also make it clear that living the Christian life is the expected and consistent result of these things (a la Romans 6).

II. BAPTISM FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF PAST SINS ONLY.

Another false doctrine that opens the door to Galatianism is an old one, having arisen in the second century A.D. It is the belief that baptism does bring forgiveness of sins, but ONLY for the sins one has committed up to that point. This is a serious error, and it leads to all kinds of works-oriented attempts to deal with sins committed after the baptismal moment.

The earliest approach (later second century) was that there simply is NO forgiveness for post-baptismal sins. At the beginning of the third century, some (e.g., Tertullian) began to teach that God will accept *one more* episode of repentance, but it must be quite a sensational display. Ultimately the Roman Catholic Church, still believing that only past sins are forgiven in baptism, created the sacrament of penance (today, called reconciliation) as the way of dealing with post-baptismal sins.

This concept has not died out. The idea that in baptism one receives forgiveness only for sins previously committed is still present, especially in the Restoration Movement. A recent testimony in one of our Christian magazines, by a Restoration stalwart, said: "When I accepted and obeyed Christ, I was saved from my past sins." My farming background has led me to call this "sheep-dip baptism." For non-farmers we can call it "car-wash baptism." All the dirt from the past is washed away. Now what do we do if (or rather, *when*) we sin again? Trying to answer this question almost always leads to a form of Galatianism. (See the next point.)

We can avoid this problem by seeing that baptism is for the forgiveness of sins, *period*. In baptism we enter a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. This relationship keeps us in the forgiven state. In baptism we are covered with the robe of Christ's righteousness (Isaiah 61:10), which covers our filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). Even though we are still sinners, we are *forgiven* sinners.

III. A WRONG UNDERSTANDING OF 1 JOHN 1:9.

In the Restoration Movement one of the most common roadblocks to assurance, and a common cause of Galatianism, is a faulty understanding of 1 John 1:9, which says, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Assuming that baptism is for the forgiveness of past sins only, many have taken this verse to be the key to obtaining forgiveness for sins committed after baptism.

The result is a ritualized mini-penance. It goes like this: after having our slate wiped clean in baptism, it is assumed that every time we sin we literally fall from grace and become lost again. The only way to be forgiven of that sin and to become saved again is to repent for and confess that specific sin, and pray for its forgiveness. Thus a person is trapped in a revolving door, an endless cycle of saved/sin/lost/confession/saved/sin/lost/confession/saved, etc. This causes a person to live in fear that he or she will die while in the “lost” phase of the cycle. This is clearly an example of “staying saved by works.”

The error here is a failure to understand what it means to be justified by faith, apart from works of law (Rom. 3:28). It means we stay under the forgiving blood of Christ by continuing to trust in his redemptive works, not by how well we keep our law code (sinning or not). We wear his righteousness to cover up our unrighteousness. We live in a forgiven (justified) state, as long as we are sincerely trusting in Jesus as our Savior.

So what does 1 John 1:9 mean? It is not talking about the specific confession of specific sins as the condition for the forgiveness of those sins. The context (vv. 8, 10) shows that John is saying that we must have a constant realization and ongoing confession *THAT we are sinners*. We must never get to the point where we think that we are no longer sinners, like the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable (Luke 18:9-14). We must be like the tax collector, who confessed no specific sins, but simply acknowledged *THAT* he was a sinner in need of God’s mercy. This is the man who went home forgiven, said Jesus.

(Confession of specific sins is part of the sanctification process, rather than a condition for justification.)

In conclusion, we must see that to continually trust in Jesus’ blood is to REST the burden of our sin and guilt upon him, as many of our old hymns say. E.g., “Resting in my Savior as my all in all, I’m standing on the promises of God.” This is a rest from *worry*, not a rest from *work* (see Rom. 6:1ff.; Gal. 5:6; Jas. 2:18ff.). When we are under Christ’s blood, it is not just our sins that are forgiven, but **WE OURSELVES** are **FORGIVEN PERSONS**.

Assurance of salvation depends on being free from the GUILT of sin, even though we are not yet free from sin itself. We want to be, and some day will be, free from both; but while we are working on the sin, God has already taken away the guilt and punishment through Jesus’ blood. We are not yet 100% good, but we are 100% forgiven. The latter is the basis of our assurance.