



# Salvation Through Faith Alone and the Sinner's Prayer?

By Andy Erwin

## Summary

*The cardinal doctrine of evangelical churches is salvation by faith alone through grace alone.<sup>1</sup> The doctrine came into existence through the reformative works of Martin Luther. It was Luther who added the word "alone" to his German translation of Romans 3:28. Luther hoped to provide a clear contrast for his idea of salvation through faith, and the Roman Catholic doctrine of salvation through works.<sup>2</sup>*

## Salvation by Grace through Faith

Let us begin with a look at Ephesians 2:8-10. Paul's beautiful statement on salvation which comes by grace through faith has been much maligned by advocates of the evangelical doctrine. Paul states:

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."

Calvinists believe this passage teaches faith is the gift of God. This interpretation is in keeping with their theory that man is depraved and then regenerated through the direct operation of the Holy Spirit. Faith, for them, is part of the direct operation of the Spirit. Faith itself is the gift of God. Without God granting faith, man would remain without it. If this were the case, we would not be commanded to believe the gospel, and we would not be condemned for not believing and obeying the gospel (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9; 2:10-12). Biblically speaking, however, faith is developed by hearing the word of God (Romans 10:17).

Evangelicals would like for this passage in Ephesians to read, "you are saved through faith only." Paul clearly teaches that we are children of God by faith in Christ (Galatians 3:26). He does not teach that we become children of God at the point of faith/belief (mental assent) in Christ. For Paul, having faith in God meant having a trusting obedience and submission to the will of God.

Faith, repentance, and obedience have always been required from man in response to the word of God. Paul understood and taught this. "Faith" without repentance and obedience is truly not faith at all. Does obeying God constitute salvation by works? Paul taught that faith and obedience are coupled together in the plan of salvation. Accord-

ing to him, one becomes a child of God by faith in Christ Jesus when he is baptized into Christ and clothed with Christ (Galatians 3:26-27). Paul wrote of having faith in the working of God, i.e., the removal of sin at baptism (Colossians 2:11-13). Note how Paul said that the forgiveness associated with baptism was due to “the operation of God” (Colossians 2:12-13) not the work of man. We mention these two passages specifically so that we might explain what is meant by the “works” mentioned in Paul’s statement. We are not arguing that man is saved by works nor do we affirm that man can earn salvation. However, we do not believe that baptism, for instance, is any more a work to merit salvation than repentance or confession, as all three are necessary for salvation, and each constitutes true biblical faith in Christ. Jesus even said that believing is a work (John 6:28-29).

The glaring contradiction in evangelical teaching is they deny the importance of scriptural baptism in the plan of salvation based on it being deemed a work while allowing the act of an extra-biblical “sinner’s prayer” in their plan of salvation while affirming it is not a work. We ask for them to explain, how is prayer any less a work than baptism?

As we consider the passage in Ephesians 2:8-10, let us also recall how the church in Ephesus began. In Acts 18:24ff., we read of Apollos coming to Ephesus teaching and preaching the things of the Lord. However, he knew only the baptism of John (v. 25). Paul later came to Ephesus, and upon finding out that they had been baptized with John’s baptism, which had been superseded by the baptism of the Great Commission, he baptized twelve men in the name of the Lord (Acts 19:1-7). If ever a church existed that understood “there is one baptism” (Ephesians 4:5), it was the church in Ephesus in the First Century. The church had been sanctified and cleansed with the washing of water by the word (Ephesians 5:26). The New Testament teaches only one “washing” connected with sanctification and cleansing and that is baptism (see also Titus 3:3-7).

We should also consider Paul’s own conversion to Christ. Did he teach something contrary to what he experienced and was commanded to do? Saul of Tarsus (Paul) believed in Christ while he was on the road to Damascus, and yet he was told to go to Damascus and wait to be told what he must do. For three days in Damascus, he prayed and fasted (proof of repentance) (Acts 9:9, 11). When Ananias came to him, he told Saul of God’s plan for him, laid his hands on him so that he could receive his sight, and commanded him to arise and be baptized and wash away his sins while calling on the name of the Lord (Acts 22:16). Saul was not commanded to believe or repent, for it was evident that he was already a penitent, believing man. Rather, he was told to do that which he had not done so that he might be forgiven and become a child of God. If a sinner’s prayer is necessary to receive the forgiveness of sin, why did it not work for Saul? He prayed for three days and was told to be baptized to wash away his sin. Are we to believe that Paul taught a plan of salvation which he personally did not follow? If so, his very words would condemn him (Galatians 1:6-9).

## The Sinner's Prayer

Let us also offer a few candid remarks about the practice of the sinner's prayer. The sinner's prayer is not only contradictory in theory and practice and contrary to the word of God, but also insulting to those who would obey God truly. Those who submit to the will of God and are baptized for the forgiveness of sin are usually derided by those advocating the sinner's prayer for believing in salvation by works. But how is prayer not a work according to their reasoning? The advocates of the practice have merely replaced baptism with the sinner's prayer. The act of baptism is a work, according to them, but the act of prayer is an act of faith. Why can't we allow baptism to be the act of faith—as it is taught in the Scriptures—and do away with the sinner's prayer that is not in the Scriptures?

Jesus has said, "He who believes and is baptized shall be saved..." (Mark 16:16). Evangelicals teach, "He who believes and says the sinner's prayer shall be saved..." Only one can be right. Is Christ right or is the evangelical movement right?

By inspiration, Peter taught, "Repent and every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sin..." Evangelicals teach, "Repent and every one of you say the sinner's prayer for the forgiveness of sin..." Again, only one can be right. Is it the Holy-Spirit-inspired apostle or is it your favorite evangelical preacher—who is right?

Our Lord placed baptism in the Great Commission. The Holy Spirit placed baptism in the first gospel sermon on the day the church began. Who placed the sinner's prayer in the conversation? It was not recited on Pentecost, for the sinner's prayer is hardly a century old.<sup>3</sup> The practice began during the evangelical revivals of the early Twentieth Century not during the First Century or the book of Acts. A systemized plan of salvation was needed to calculate how many people were being "saved" at these gatherings. The Lord provided baptism as a means of knowing when a person is saved and added to the church. But the people responsible for the sinner's prayer had vociferously argued against baptism being necessary for salvation. Instead of using the biblical plan of salvation which includes baptism, they replaced baptism with a prayer.

Prayer became the line of demarcation. Baptism was relegated to something a person did because he had already been saved, rather than to be saved. While a few books were written containing various forms of the prayer in the first half of the Twentieth Century,<sup>4</sup> it was not until the 1950s that the prayer began to appear in the literature published by the American Tract Society (ATS).<sup>5</sup> From that time onward it was popularized by such events as the Billy Graham Crusades and Campus Crusades for Christ, International.<sup>6</sup> Instead of extending an invitation mirroring Peter's on Pentecost, evangelicals began to appeal to their audiences to "welcome Jesus into your hearts" and "pray this prayer with me." As a result, untold millions have been led astray by a doctrine and a practice clearly invented by men as a substitute for baptism in the Lord's plan of salvation.

The sinner's prayer is one of the worst shams ever perpetrated in the Christian dispensation. It was invented and is propagated by those who had a prejudice against baptism. Yet, every argument falsely alleged against baptism can be turned forcefully and convincingly against the sinner's prayer. The doctrine of salvation at the point of faith (faith being mental assent) is never taught in Scripture. The doctrine of the sinner's prayer contradicts their doctrine of salvation at the point of faith. If one is saved at the point of faith, why is the prayer necessary? The practice of the sinner's prayer was invented so that records of conversions could be kept. However, records of conversion were kept in the book of Acts before and without the sinner's prayer. Those records were accumulated based on the number of baptisms (Acts 2:41).

## Footnotes & References

1. An example of this doctrine being so stated is found in the United Methodist Member's Handbook, Revised by George Koehler (Discipleship Resources, 2006), 78-79.
2. However, Luther remained convinced that baptism was for the remission of sin, although he was mistaken as to the form of baptism.
3. The following information came from a doctoral dissertation approved in 2001 at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. The author of the dissertation is Paul Harrison Chitwood. The title of the work is "The Sinner's Prayer: An Historical and Theological Analysis." [Editor's note: this dissertation can be downloaded from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary site, <https://digital.library.sbts.edu/>]
4. L.R. Scarborough. *A Search for Souls: A Study in the Finest of the Fine Arts – Winning the Lost to Christ* (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. 1925). 122. See also: Faris D. Whitesell, *Sixty-Five Ways to Give an Evangelistic Invitation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1945), 88.
5. Paul Harrison Chitwood, 48–55.
6. Chitwood, 55–63.