

Formula Salvation?

Tom and I had never met before, but a rainstorm was holding us hostage in an old garage. All I knew was that Tom was only visiting in the community (same as I was) and that he had come from non-Mennonite background. He was now a member in one of the Mennonite churches. Thinking we may as well fill in the time with spiritual discussion I plunged in. “Tom, why don’t you tell me how you became a Christian?” I asked.

“Well, I was raised in a Christian home, and we always were Christians,” was his response. I waited, but it became obvious he had nothing else to share.

I had expected him to tell me of his conversion experience, but I suddenly realized he might have thought I was wondering why he was Christian instead of something like Muslim. So I tried again.

“Tell me how God called you, how you made a decision for the Lord,” I said. “Well, we were homeschooled from little up,” he said, “And it seems like I always knew about the Lord. There came a time when we didn’t feel like our group of house churches was strict enough, and then we found the conservative Mennonites and joined them.” I decided to persist. “Well, when did you realize you were a sinner? That you needed salvation?”

Tom answered that question with a long pause, in fact, I wondered if he even was going to answer. But finally he responded quietly, “I guess we’re all sinners.” Contrast this true story to another that happened to me more recently. Charlie called me again the other evening after a long absence. He was asking for a place to live, or as he said it, “a place to get away from all these crazy people who live here.” He made it sound so bad that I wondered about his safety.

“Charlie,” I asked, “Is everything right with your soul if you would be killed or suddenly died in your situation?” I knew Charlie had practiced a lot of deception in his life and had often been caught up in the drug and alcohol scene. He had once lived in one of our Mennonite communities but had destroyed any trust he had through dishonesty and deceit.

“Oh yes, I’m all right with the man upstairs,” he said, “We talk every day and even several times a day.”

With his confident testimony, I had an instant flashback to Charlie’s account from earlier days of how he had been saved. He had “walked the aisle and prayed the prayer” as a boy and

had given his heart to the Lord. He knew from that moment on that whatever happened to him his salvation was secure.

Each of these accounts fills a place in a subject I have been thinking much about lately. We are going to call it “formula salvation,” because it focuses on fulfilling the New Testament formula or recipe for finding peace with God. In formula salvation, a person is given verses that give conditions for him to meet to be saved. When those conditions are met, he is then assured of his salvation.

Why we should require, search for, and trust in “formula” salvation.

There are several reasons to believe in formula salvation. One is the simple fact that God means what He says. He has no reason to say one thing and mean something else. The Bible asserts, “... Let God be true, but every man a liar...” (Rom 3:4).

Another reason to trust in formula salvation is that it is not feelings based. As emotional beings, we run into trouble when we base evaluations on our feelings because one day our feelings may soar and the next they may tumble. Formula salvation is based on facts good, solid, unchangeable verses that have been around for thousands of years and we are assured will last for eternity.¹

Before Tom was received into church membership, someone should have walked with him through the many verses in the New Testament that call for a personal response and helped Tom see he personally needed to make the choice to repent of his sins,² call upon the name of the Lord for salvation,³ believe in the Lord Jesus Christ,⁴ confess his sins,⁵ and confess his belief and trust in Christ for salvation.⁶

What is the snare in formula salvation? Did formula salvation bring my friend Charlie to the place where he is at rest living outside a life of discipleship to Christ?

There is a snare when we “cherry pick” special verses (and pass over others). It is very true that some verses promise salvation by simply believing in God’s offer of salvation through faith.⁷ But there are other verses which insist salvation comes only by continuing to listen to Jesus’ voice and to continue in obedience to Him until the very end of our lives.⁸ Formula salvation is dangerous when we use only some of the ingredients of the formula (or qualifications) and overlook others.

There is a snare when we overlook warnings. The New Testament abounds in warnings about falling away. Space does not permit us to give all these, so we give only one. “For when they speak great swelling words of vanity, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through much wantonness, those that were clean escaped from them who live in error. While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage. For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again

entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them. But it is happened unto them according to the true proverb; The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire” (2 Pe 2:18-22).

There is a snare when we misinterpret verses. It is very common for “free grace” people to find a way to make verses take on an entirely different meaning than the common understanding would give it. For examples, when David asks in Psalm 51 that God would restore to him the joy of salvation, they will tell you that David only lost his joy through his adultery, he did not lose his salvation.⁹ Another is when they make a difference between being saved and being a disciple. They claim the promise of John 3:16 based on the promise of faith alone. When Jesus says unless we forsake all that we have we cannot be His disciple, they falsely claim a believer may be saved without being a disciple.¹⁰

Discipleship salvation. What Tom and Charlie (and all of us for that matter) need to grasp is that salvation is only obtained by carefully gathering all the conditional verses and teachings of the New Testament. This then is built into a way of life of obedience to Christ in daily following Him. Tom needs to realize he cannot be a Christian unless he makes the choice to come to the cross for forgiveness of his sins and chooses to let his self-righteousness behind. What Charlie needs to understand is that a few magic words will not guarantee him salvation in spite of a life of iniquity.

Mennonite formula salvation? Not long ago I gazed upon the face of an old friend in the casket; one who had been a member of the Mennonite church. Henry was in the order of the church. Had he ever gotten victory over the filthy habits he had picked up in his youth? We never heard him speak of a relationship with the Lord. There were bitter relationship issues in his life. While I did not know him as a bad sinner, neither did I see the fruit of the Spirit in his life. Henry had a Mennonite formula salvation, but did he have a saving faith in Christ?

So that raises more questions. As conservative Mennonites, we have been taught obedience to church applications all our lives. When these applications are based on principles of the New Testament, they are legitimate. But what about if/when they have no New Testament basis? What about when expected practices are looked at as a formula, a checklist?

In some of our churches, we are taught the importance of keeping a good relationship with the church. It is emphasized that we show respect for the leaders and for the church rules. But is the keeping of rules sufficient to take us to heaven?

Are we sure we have salvation if we have lost our passion for hearing Jesus’ voice through Bible reading and prayer and then for following in His footsteps? To love each other the way He loved His disciples and the way He loves us? To share this salvation with others?

I deeply value conservative Biblical applications to New Testament teachings, yet I also carry a burden that we know what it means when Jesus said, "Follow me." It is the ones who hear Jesus' voice that He has promised will never perish.¹¹

Let us pray for each other in the journey of life. We do not need to achieve worldly success; in fact, it is even all right if we are thought of as a failure in the world's eyes. On the salvation issue, let us make sure we have both the formula and the discipleship relationship where it is supposed to be.

~Stephen Ebersole

1. "For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you." (1Pe 1:24-25)
2. "Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost." (Acts 2:38)
3. "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Rom 10:13)
4. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." (John 3:16) "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ:" (Rom 5:1)
5. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1Jo 1:9)
6. "That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved." (Rom 10:9)
7. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." (John 3:16) "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand." (John 10:27-28)
8. "And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake: but he that endureth to the end shall be saved." (Matt 10:22)
9. Psa 51:12
10. Luke 14:25-33
11. John 10:28