

Too Much Emphasis on One Thing

By Kent Heaton

The Bible is a book of words. According to the New Clarified Reference Edition Bible (Royal Publishers, Inc. 1966), there are about 592,439 words in the Old Testament and about 181,253 words in the New Testament. The word “and” occurs 35,543 times in the Old Testament and 10,684 times in the New Testament. Paul shows the conduit of information from the mind of God to the will of man carried forth by the written word - “How that by revelation He made known to me the mystery - as I have briefly written already, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ” (Eph. 3:3-4). This process is through the “finger of God” (Luke 11:20) as explained by Peter in 2Peter 1:21 - “For prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.”

As “faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17) we learn from a study of God’s word what we must do to be saved. This knowledge is not based upon how many times it is recorded in scripture but the emphasis placed by the Lord on obedience. The word “faith” is found over two hundred times in the New Testament but the words for “sin” appear nearly three hundred times in the New Testament. It would seem obvious the need for faith outweighs the practice of sin regardless of the number of times one is found in the writing of the New Testament.

Salvation through baptism can be viewed in a similar manner where a charge of too much emphasis on baptism overshadows the need for faith. Suggesting the oft times reference to faith compared to less than eighty times of baptism would conclude that baptism is not necessary for salvation, playing only a minor role in the scheme of things. Yet the place of baptism in the plan of salvation is just as prevalent as other things emphasized by the religious world today. One should never be placed in significance over the other or to the exclusion of the other but placed in the proper role as directed by God.

One clear teaching of the Lord from the beginning is that salvation is never accomplished by the emphasis of one thing. In the story of Noah and the flood (Gen. 6-9) we see the grace of God telling Noah what was coming and how to avert destruction; the mercy of God by saving Noah and his family; the love of God to deliver the family in the ark; Noah’s faith in doing all the Lord commanded (Gen. 6:22; Heb. 11:7); and the fear of God that moved Noah to be obedient (Heb. 11:7). There is hope in his deliverance as Noah looked for the promise of God. Building the altar after the flood expresses the thanksgiving of Noah’s heart for salvation.

Was Noah saved by faith alone? Did grace by itself deliver Noah? How did works play into his salvation? Could Noah have emphasized one means of salvation over the other? The joy of Noah’s story is not rooted in emphasis of one thing but the compilation of all the things that brought him to the other side of God’s judgment. And yet Peter says of Noah, “When once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. There is also an antitype which now saves us--baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1Peter 3:20-21). Is Peter guilty of over-emphasizing the point of salvation through water neglecting the grace, mercy and love of God? His conclusion is clear: there was a time when deliverance came and all the elements of salvation pinnacled at the moment the rain began and the ark lifted high above the earth. A change took place.

Paul shows that without the grace of God there is no salvation. “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” (Eph. 2:8-9). Are we saved by grace alone? Does Paul suggest that salvation cannot be through works? The grace expressed by Paul in this passage is the grace found with Noah. Noah could not have known the flood was coming apart from God and with that knowledge would not know how to save himself. The grace of God told him the flood was coming and how to save himself and Noah could not boast he knew any of those things. Was Noah saved apart from works? God instructed him to build an ark (height, width, length, material, decks, windows, doors, etc) and Noah was saved through works when he did what God said.

James outlines the role of works and faith in James 2. “Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? ... You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by

faith only ... For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also” (James 2:21-26). Salvation never comes by ONE thing unless it is ONE heart agreed to do ALL that is commanded of the Lord.

Did Jesus overemphasize baptism? He told Nicodemus he had to be born of the water and the spirit (John 3). Matthew records the commission of Jesus to His disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:19-20). Mark also tells of this commission when Jesus said, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:15-16). Luke tells Theophilus Jesus said, “that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46-47). Jesus told the disciples to teach and baptize those who believed and to spread the message of repentance and “remission of sins” (which Peter calls baptism – Acts 2:38).

The reason that baptism is vital to salvation (not to exclude anything else) is only in the waters of baptism are sins washed away. The removal of sinful flesh does not take place only in belief (James 2:19). Grace does not bring this upon a man alone nor the love of God alone. When someone in faith, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moves with godly fear, obeys the will of God in washing away their sins (Acts 22:16); dying in Christ by crucifying the old man and rising in newness of life (Rom. 6:3-6) – salvation occurs. Noah was saved by water and Peter’s argument is that we are saved by water! It is important to remember that EVERY case of conversion in the book of Acts involves the washing away of sins through baptism – showing its necessity.

Can baptism be overstated as the only thing I need to do to be saved? This also is a false representation of God’s will. It is easy to think the only thing I need is to “get baptized” and I am good for eternity. Often we give more emphasis on baptizing a person rather than saving a person. There are not “five steps to salvation” and never have been. A medley of blessings from God moves a person to obedience when their heart learns of Jesus Christ. The need for a ‘simplistic’ gospel is to frame the eternal truths within a convenient fast-food drive through and send them on their way. First Century disciples never believed in such theology. Phillip “preached Jesus” to the man from Ethiopia. Paul preached the “divine nature” to idol worshipers in Acts 17. The Lord gave us sixty-six books to learn of His will and we must embrace all the character of God in this message.

Baptism is essential to salvation (Gal. 3:26-27) but so is everything else given to us by God. An honest student of scripture will recognize the balance of truth needed to paint the complete tapestry of God’s love for man in Jesus Christ. We should not present the truth less than what is found in scripture either (like faith only salvation). Paul exhorts all to preach the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). Anything less is the counsel of men.

A Moments Wisdom

--One generation’s innovation becomes the next one’s tradition which in turn becomes the next one’s sacred cow.

--On the Internet you can be anything you want. It’s strange that so many people choose to be stupid.

--Don’t tell me what others said about me; tell me instead why they felt comfortable enough to say it to you.

--I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it.

--The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.

--Take a deep breath. It’s just a bad day, not a bad life.

--A bad attitude is like a flat tire, you can’t go anywhere until you change it.

--A smooth sea never made a skilled sailor.

--Mostly it is loss that teaches us the worth of things.

--Consider how hard it is to change yourself, and you will understand how difficult it will be to change others.