

SALVATION IS BY GRACE ALONE

A letter to the editor of the *Chronicle* on 27 Dec. had the title, "Grace 'alone' not in original text." The first paragraph was, "I am sorry to disillusion S Paech (TC 20/12) but the Bible did not originally say "for it is by grace alone that you have been saved through faith." The word "alone" was added by Luther to make the text conform to his own beliefs. (Incidentally, the King James version of the Bible does not use the word "alone" in either Romans 3:23 or 3:28)" (Z Richardson, Toowoomba).

Granted! Technically, "only" does not appear in the Greek original of Rm 3:28 or Eph 2:8. However, this is an example of being right on a technicality, but grossly wrong on two major points.

The first is a failure to observe that certain languages, including the languages of the Bible, often do not use words like "only" and "other" in places where a speaker of modern English expects to find them. It is silly to pin the word "only" on Luther. Consider this sentence: "And whoever shall receive me receiveth not me" (Mk 9:37, *KJV*). A person who fastened technically on the words and ignored the context might say, "Jesus used a straight contradiction. He said that anyone who receives Him does not receive Him!" A person who is familiar with the way the biblical languages use words, particularly from a lock-step translation like the *KJV*, knows that Jesus means, "does not only receive Me, but what is also really happening to him is that he is receiving the Father."

The second and major error, however, is a failure to recognise that the context is the real bearer of meaning in any language. It is not only that we do not know precisely what a given word means unless we have a context. It is also the fact that the whole context of a discussion is decisive for its meaning.

The biblical commentator Bengel expressed the crucial point of this question delightfully. Let me translate his concise Latin comment on Rm 3:28: "A demonstration is made in this way arithmetically:

Two come into question: faith and works	2
Works are excluded	<u>1</u>
Faith remains alone	1."

Every schoolchild after grade one knows that two minus one equals one. The point here is that only two principles are theoretically possible for justification and salvation. Law was a theoretically possible principle. Paul wrote, "If a law had been given that could have made people alive, then certainly righteousness would have come by law" (Gal 3:21). The first dual principle is the Law on God's part and works on the part of human beings. The second dual principle is grace on God's part and faith on the part of human beings. The dual principle of Law and works is excluded. Therefore grace remains alone, and faith remains alone. This is in the question of justification and salvation, not about a Christian's duty to obey law, which is a very different thing. We take that up later.

It should be pointed out that the literal word for "law" in Rm 3:27 does not here mean "law", but "principle." "Therefore where is boasting? It has been excluded. On what principle? On the principle of works? No, rather, it is excluded on the principle of faith!" In the context of justification and salvation the Law and works are excluded. Therefore grace remains alone, and faith remains alone. To say "the law of faith" (*KJV*) can be misleading. Here again, the context determines the meaning of the word "*nomos*."

The whole context of Romans 1-11 makes salvation by grace alone abundantly clear. On the one side there are human sin, the wrath of God, the Law of God, Adam, Adam's disobedience, the wrath of God, condemnation, and death. On the other side are God's grace, Jesus Christ, His obedience, justification, and life. Works fit the first set. Faith receives the second set. All people are involved with both principles. A person who wants salvation through works only will get what his works deserve: condemnation, and death. A person who wants to have salvation through faith and works lacks the certainty found, for example, in Rm 8:28-39. Compare "I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him for that day" (2 Tm 1:12).

The fact that the context permits, and even requires, the word "only" is also made evident by Paul's use of what we call "exclusive particles." They are negative blocks of words, "not by the Law", "not by works", "without works", and "apart from the Law"; and the positive word "freely." The word in the Greek original for "freely" in Rm 3:24 is a noun as an adverbial accusative, meaning, "as a gift." Works would have given a person grounds for boasting. No one will boast in heaven. Grace alone and faith alone have this consequence, that all glory is given to God alone.

The writer to the *Chronicle* then makes another double error. The first error is the assumption that Paul means only the Law of Moses: "When St Paul wrote that justification did not come through the law, he was speaking of the Mosaic law. He insisted that the Mosaic law was over, but he equally insisted on the new law of Christ." It is wrong to think that Paul meant only to exclude the ceremonial Law of the Old Testament (circumcision, sacrifices, the Sabbath, and so on). It is also wrong to think that Paul meant only the Law of Moses, in distinction from other law. The laws made by parents, by employers, and by the state also have God's sanction, even when their injunctions are not included in the Law of Moses. Indeed, "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Rm 10:4). All law has been put out of commission in the question of justification and salvation. Justification and salvation cannot come through keeping any law. In Galatians 3, although Paul had the Law of Moses particularly in view, he did not write "the law" but "a law" and "law" in the second half of Gal 3:21: "Therefore is the Law opposed to the promises of God? Certainly not! For, if a law had been given that could have made people alive, then certainly righteousness would have come by law."

The second error in the writer's mind is clear in the final paragraph: "And yes, you are right: our good works should be done to God's glory and not in a self-seeking way." The writer did not distinguish between what is

necessary, as response to God's grace, and what is necessary for justification and salvation. Christians are obliged to do good works because God commands them, and also because it is as natural for Christians to want to serve God and their neighbours as it is natural for a tree that is alive to produce leaves. That is the point of what James wrote in chapter two. The apparent discrepancy between Romans 3:28 and James 3:24 has been discussed elsewhere and is available as a separate article for those who want it. However, it should be enough to say that there James is saying that a dead faith is no faith at all. We demonstrate to others that we have faith, which cannot be seen, through our works, which are seen by our fellow human beings (Jm 2:18). Where there is no response at all in good works we can conclude that there is no faith at all (although it is not our business to be judgmental whether faith is present). Even the thief on the cross responded in good works when he made his marvellous public confession of Christ in the middle of all that rejection and prayed to Him. Paul also wrote that faith expresses itself through love (Gal 5:6).

The question whether good works are necessary for justification and salvation must receive a resounding "No!" That would reintroduce paganism, Pelagianism, synergism, and work-righteousness — call it what you will! That eliminates the need for the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. It is an insult to our Lord, who said, when He died, "It is finished", to claim that something is still necessary from us for salvation. He has accomplished everything. All that remains is for poor people, beggars, to receive the kingdom (Mt 5:3). Demanding works is an insult to our Lord, who through His resurrection has brought God's verdict, "Not guilty" over the whole sinful race of human beings. So close has justification and salvation been brought to every person. God is a God who causes what had not existed to exist, and who raises the dead. "God is about to reckon righteousness to us, who believe in Him who has raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was handed over because of our offences, and was raised for the sake of our justification" (Rm 4:24-25). If people do not believe this, they will suffer eternal punishment. If people believe it, or, to say the same thing, if they receive it, they have eternal life.