

St. Andrew's UMC
January 11th, 2009
Mark 1:4-11
"You Are My Son"

How does one get saved?

Depending on the denomination you belong to, you will hear varying emphases on the doctrine of salvation. Just to sample three obvious examples: in some groups of Christian churches, the emphasis is on the act of confession: unless you confess your sins, and confess Jesus Christ as your Lord, you cannot be saved.

In some other congregations, the emphasis is on the *visible* phenomenon of speaking in tongue, besides the confession: it is the evidence that you are anointed (baptized) by the Holy Spirit, and the baptism of the Holy Spirit is the special experience following salvation.

Then one particular denomination insists that, in order to be saved, one must be baptized according to the manner of full immersion, besides the confession aforementioned. So, one might ask, facetiously, if your body was 90% immersed,

are you 90% saved, or not saved at all, because of that dry 10%? Or, can you round it up and consider 100% saved?

Well, then, how about our own denomination's position on how one is saved? I thought about it, and I could not remember seeing a written document that spelled out how one is saved. Suddenly, I felt, "Oh my, what kind of a minister am I?" I have been in the ordained ministry for almost 20 years, and I do not even know what my own denomination says about how one is saved.

Do you know what our denomination's official dogma is on how one is saved? I didn't think so. So what is the United Methodists' position on salvation?

Well, the United Methodists are rather a strange bunch—they do not seem to need the solid, dogmatic foundation in writing that is distinctly found in other belief systems, in order to feel the assurance of salvation. We

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do have, however, the written dogmas of sort in the book, called, The Book of Discipline.

To be sure, our denomination clearly states that our salvation is through Jesus. I checked with the Book of Discipline, but nowhere in it is said anything about *how* one is saved. The Book of Discipline says, however, in the Part II, Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task (also known as the Articles of Religion), Paragraph 101, Section 1:

"United Methodists profess the historic Christian faith in God, incarnate in Jesus Christ for our salvation and ever at work in human history in the Holy Spirit."

I thought, I'd better check the official website of the United Methodist Church. So I went to www.umc.org. After a few clicks, I found the glossary section that supplies the definition of theological terms. So I typed in the word,

"salvation." Guess what: it returned, instead, "gospel." The website did not have a definition for salvation. Can you believe that?

So I knew I was in the United Methodist theological limbo. By luck, after clicking through a few links, a webpage said that "Ask Julian" provided the best answer to the question of what it means to be saved, and provided the link. So I clicked on it, although I felt that this was not an authoritative way of sharing the denominational dogma.

"Ask Julian" belonged to Upper Room Ministries' website, and it had a list of answers to the questions people asked. To put it simply, and to the point, being saved means "turning away from life without God and the destructive patterns of life; and turning to life that is exact opposite"—"Such a life says that the will of God and living this faith daily is a greater priority than our own will, that being the people of God is

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more important than anything, that giving and sharing are better than taking and accumulating."

Well, it does explain the meaning of being saved but it still does not specifically say how one is saved. I was getting a little confused. Why isn't there any mention of precisely how one is saved in the official United Methodist website? Other denominations come up with the scriptural proof of how one is saved. Why doesn't the United Methodist Church follow that suit?

Then I caught the wording in the same Part II, Paragraph 101, Section 1 of the Discipline, under the heading of Basic Christian Affirmation:

"We hold in common with all Christians a faith in the *mystery* of salvation and through Jesus Christ [*italic mine*]."

There. The United Methodists regard salvation as a "*mystery*." A mystery is, by its nature, unknowable. Hence, it follows that the exact how is also unknowable.

We, the United Methodists, are easy to please, I guess. We just know that we are saved through Jesus Christ our Lord, and that is all one needs to know, in order to be saved. We treat the act of salvation as the mystery that is wrought in the hands of God. We just put our faith in God's hands, and let God take care of our salvation. How much more complicated should it be? For a people who are usually theologically meticulous, the United Methodists are remarkably simplistic on this particular point.

When you think about it, isn't it what putting a faith in another person is like? You bring your car to the mechanic your friend recommended to have the car serviced. You do not know exactly "how" the mechanic is

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going to fix your car. You do not ask the mechanic exactly how he is going to fix your car. You just tell the mechanic that you have this and that problems with your car. Then the mechanic takes your car, tells you how much it will cost you and the date to pick up your car. When you show up on that date, the mechanic tells you he worked on this and that, and you pay the money, and you drive off with your car.

When you need a surgery, you consult with different doctors for different opinions. Do you also ask exactly how they are going to perform the surgery? For that kind of knowledge, I am sure the doctors had to pay tuition to study at the medical school.

When your children are hurt, they run to you crying. They know to whom they are supposed to come. They just know you are going to take care of them. Did they ever ask you, before you put your hands on them "Hold it, Mom, just exactly how do you intend to go about *procedurally*

taking care of my cuts and scrapes? I want that clearly stated, double spaced, in three pages. "

So the mom pulled out of the diaper bag the manual, Taking Care of Cuts and Scrapes, the Twenty-Sixth Edition, and showed it to you. "Here, chapter 2, section 4, paragraph 41, see? Now kindly pull your pants down, and let me see your knee, please."

Well, when we think about it, how is that practice—not the pulling-down-the-pants part, but the proof-texting part—any different from what we see it done with the Bible nowadays, as in "The Bible says so here in Romans 10:13, so you can believe you are saved now"? Do we need scriptural proof, in order to believe that God loves us and saves us? I do believe all that happened, before the Bible was even written down.

We, the United Methodists, put our trust in God and believe that

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God will take care of our salvation through Jesus. How God does it is a mystery to us. It shall remain, therefore, a mystery. We are not interested in knowing the technical aspect of it. We just know God can, through Jesus Christ. Why is it not enough for anyone?

The Gospel writer, Mark, records the scene of the baptism of Jesus. Jesus went through the exactly the same routine as any other sinners of his time. We do not know what words of prayer Jesus lifted up, when he was being baptized. Whatever he might have said or intended or committed himself to, this we know as God's response to it, when he walked out of the water: "You are my Son, my beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Is there in the act of baptism some kind of magical power that summons God's Spirit to declare the special favor and protection? Does the act of baptism save infants and professing members of the church? Is the person

saved at the moment of entry into the water, during the immersion, or at the moment the baptized person steps on the dry land? Is the person saved by confessing that Jesus Christ is the personal savior and Lord? Is there any probationary period? Just exactly when and by which means a person is saved?

Our Discipline says of the baptism: "Baptism is not only a sign of profession and mark of difference whereby Christians are distinguished from others that are not baptized; but it is also a sign of regeneration or the new birth. The baptism of young children is to be retained in the Church."

It tells us what baptism is: baptism is a sign that sets Christians apart from others, and it is a sign of regeneration or a new birth. But it does not tell us exactly when and how a person is saved. I am pretty sure there are denominations that would gladly fill the blank for the inquiring minds, however.

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When Jesus walked out of the water, the heavens opened, and a voice declared: You are my Son, my beloved; with you I am well pleased. This divine affirmation of who Jesus is was God's response to the human act that the baptism represented: it was the divine response to the total commitment of Jesus to God's calling.

When we commit an infant to God's calling at the infant baptism, the parents and the witnesses in the congregation are making the covenant with God that they will raise the child together, so that the child might grow to the point of making the conscientious choice to commit one's self to God's calling at a later date. Each time a person commits oneself to God's calling through the visible sign of baptism, that same affirmation follows: *You are my child, my beloved; with you I am well pleased.*

The act of baptism is the visible and public sign of that commitment to loving fellowship between God and God's children. And the act of baptism is the opportunity by which God verbally commits God's love to us, and receives us as God's own children. It is a beautiful moment, when a new member is added to God's family. God is thrilled to cradle the baby, to hug the adopted child in the mighty arms, just as the new, human parent would be.

We are all God's children, and God loves us all, and we are commanded to love one another. That is the essence of our faith through Jesus Christ in God.