

SALVATION

WHAT THE EVANGELICAL CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH BELIEVES

The word "Salvation," as used in Scripture, has the idea of rescue from any danger or distress, and the granting of wholeness or soundness. Basic to the concept, is rescue from the power and effects of sin. Since *"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* (Romans 3:23), everyone needs God's provision for Salvation.

This Salvation has a past, a present, and a future aspect. Believers have *"been saved"* (Titus 3:5) by receiving Christ as savior (John 1:12). They *"are being transformed into his likeness"* (2 Corinthians 3:18) under the influence of the Holy Spirit. And they *"will inherit salvation"* (Hebrews 1:14) at the future resurrection and experience eternal life in the Kingdom of God. Following the teaching of the New Testament, we believe that Salvation in all of its parts is by God's grace alone and that it is received by faith alone. *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast"* (Ephesians 2:8-9).

While the experience of Salvation is a unity which cannot be broken, there are several aspects of Salvation which must be distinguished if we are to have a full biblical understanding of it. These include Repentance, Faith, Justification, and Regeneration.

In the words of the creed of the Evangelical Congregational Church, **Repentance** is "sorrow for sin, wrought in the heart by the power of the Holy Spirit." [Article 7, *Of Repentance*] Sorrow, however, is by now means the whole of Repentance. The New Testament word translated "repent" means literally "a change of mind". Another closely related term, translated "turn" or "return", describes a turning *"from idols to serve the living and true God"* (1 Thessalonians 1:9). In line with this, our Article further describes Repentance as that by which we "recognize the holiness of God, the righteousness of His law and the guilt and shame of our own perverse nature." This recognition will, in true Repentance, bring with it a determination to forsake sin and live a holy life.

In the biblical plan of Salvation, **Faith** is closely tied to Repentance. We must *"turn to god in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus"* (Acts 20:21). True Faith is always a penitent Faith (I recognize my sin and my need for a savior). True Repentance is always a believing Repentance (I admit my guilt before a holy God, believing that He is also merciful).

The basis of this Salvation is the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the Cross. Our statement of faith says, "He gave His life a ransom for all, and by His death on the cross made a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world." [Article 2, *Of Jesus Christ*] Through this sacrifice *"for the sins of the whole world"* (1 John 2:2) anyone who repents and believes will receive God's gift of Salvation.

Saving Faith is not a vague inner feeling. It is always directed toward the person of Jesus Christ and the truth of the Gospel. This may be seen in the ways the New Testament speaks of saving Faith.

First, there is Faith in the sense of "believing that" the Gospel message of Salvation is true. The Christian believes *"that God raised Jesus from the dead"* (Romans 10:9) and *"that Jesus is the Christ"* (1 John 5:1).

Next, and closely related to the first, is the idea of believing a person. This means that we believe what the persons **says** is true. *"Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life"*

John 5:24). Of the Old Testament patriarch Abraham, it is said that he *"believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness"* (Romans 4:3).

Finally, there is the idea of believing **in** or **on** a person. The most familiar verse in the Bible says "*whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life*" (John 3:16). This concept does not cancel out the other two. Rather it adds the idea of complete and total trust in Jesus Christ. I may believe a total stranger when he gives me directions to the post office, but I would not necessarily trust him with my credit card or my children. In saving Faith, however, we believe the truth of the Gospel and exercise total trust in Jesus Christ for all things in this world and in the world to come.

One of the consequences of saving Faith in **Justification**, "that act of God by which, when we yield ourselves in full confidence to our Savior, Jesus Christ, we are freely acquitted from the guilt of sin and accounted righteous in His sight. We are accordingly justified, not by works which we perform, but by faith in Him who died for us." [Article 8, *Of Justification*]

This rather "theological" sentence answers a very practical and basic question about Salvation: How can a sinner stand in the presence of a holy God? Certainly it is not because of our own goodness. As we noted earlier, "*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*" (Romans 3:23). It is not even because of the good that, by God's grace, we might do as Christians. Our spiritual attainments in this life are never high enough to meet God's requirements. The good news of the Gospel is that, by faith in Jesus Christ, our sins are forgiven and we receive the free gift of his perfect righteousness. And it is this alone that makes us children of God and heirs of God's Kingdom. "*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that **in him** we might become the righteousness of God*" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

This truth of the Gospel is often the most difficult for many to grasp. We seem to be conditioned to believe that somehow we must work to earn our salvation. There is the nagging fear that if we do not **do** something to get saved or at least to keep saved, the result will be to live in unrepentant sin "*so that grace may increase*" (Romans 6:1). Concern for godly living is certainly important. But it must not mislead us to deny the heart of the Gospel: we are saved by God's grace and not by our works. We must continually remind ourselves and others that "*it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast*" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

This does not mean that the Gospel (or the E.C. Church) advocates or condones a sinful lifestyle for the believer. As noted above, biblical Salvation has other sides to it. Along with Justification there is always **Regeneration**, "that work of the Holy Spirit wrought in us whereby we are made partakers of the divine nature and experience newness of life in Christ Jesus. By this new birth the believer becomes a child of God, receives the spirit of adoption and is made an heir of the kingdom of heaven." [Article 9, *Of Regeneration*]

It is this "newness of life in Christ Jesus" that motivates and empowers the believer to live a Christian life. The Bible uses a variety of terms to describe this life-changing transformation. Through the "*washing of regeneration*" (Titus 3:5) the believer is "*born of God*" (John 1:13), "*born from above*" (John 3:3, 7), and "*born again*" (1 Peter 1:3, 23); he is "*renewed*" (Romans 12:2), "*a new creation*" (2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 6:15), "*a new man*" (Ephesians 2:15, 4:24), who has been "*made alive*" (Ephesians 2:5, Colossians 2:13). "he can now be described as a new man who seeks, finds, and follows God in Christ" (New Bible Dictionary).

The believer is urged, even commanded to follow after righteousness. The process whereby we grow in the Christian life is called Sanctification. [See Article 11 *Of Sanctification*, and the pamphlet on "Sanctification" published by the E.C. Church.] However, it must be borne in mind that no matter how far we progress in living the Christian life, our acceptance before God is based not on our own righteous living, but on the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ which God graciously attributes to all who believe. They share Paul's desire to "*be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ - the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith*" (Philippians 3:9).

This biblical Salvation is available to all who turn to God in repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. "*To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become*

children of God" (John 1:12).

The Articles of Faith mentioned are found in the **Discipline** of the E.C. Church, paragraphs 101-125.