

Text: Rm 10.5-13

A few weeks ago, one of our young people asked me a question. It went along these lines, "If the Pope was teaching people false doctrine before the Reformation, could people be truly saved in those days?"

I'm paraphrasing the question, as I didn't write it down! But the question is a good one, because it points us to a look at what it means to be saved at any time and any place. And it also lets me talk about church history, which is a favorite topic.

To start with, let's go to Romans 10.5-13

This passage is very important in understanding the very essence of salvation.

We will come back to it at the end of the message, but next we'll need to talk about church history.

Note: as we do this, please be aware that I will be really oversimplifying! We can't give you a full explanation of a thousand years of church history and doctrine in half an hour.

Proposition: Salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone, plus nothing, minus nothing.

I. Twin threads of impersonal religion

By "impersonal religion" I mean the growth of a Christian name without requiring a personal conversion experience. I don't mean everyone in these days had no personal conversion experience.

A. Common, cultural Christianity

1. Prior to Constantine: church on the outside, sometimes persecuted
 - a. Many, if not most, genuine Christians
 - b. Growing group and culture (always danger of "formalistic Christianity")

"A 'Christian' culture develops with its own way of dressing, its own way of talking, its own art, its own music, its own everything. Over time, unfortunately, conforming to the 'Christian' culture becomes confused with Christian conversion. If one becomes a member of

the culture, practicing the distinctives of the group, one is acknowledged as converted, even if there has been no supernatural intervention of the Holy Spirit.”¹

- This is a problem in any age of the church.

2. After Christianity made legal, empire crumbled

a. Invasion by various outside people (who were nominally Christian)

- 1) Missionaries made contact with tribes, nations
- 2) Kings or chiefs “converted”
- 3) Forced conversion of all their people (“We’re all Christians now”)

“Apparent conversions sometimes looked like that of Clovis, king of the Franks. In the midst of a battle that he was losing, Clovis cried out, ‘Christ Jesus.... I have invoked my own gods, and they have withdrawn from me.... Thee ... I [now] invoke; if Thou give me victory ... if I find in Thee power.... I will believe in Thee, and will be baptized in Thy name.’ Victory and material prosperity were seen as indicators of supernatural power.”²

b. Movement of people all over the empire led to widespread political Christianity (“we are Christian tribes”)

- 1) Christian worship compulsory
- 2) Many of the people illiterate, only know what they are told in church
- 3) Forms taught and became familiar
- 4) Morals taught
- 5) Outward conformity created a cultural Christianity

¹ D. Jeffrey Bingham, *Pocket History of the Church*, The IVP Pocket Reference Series (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 65–66.

² Bingham, 65.

This is oversimplified, but it touches on one aspect of the problem.

B. Clerical, scholarly, theological Christianity

1. Theology in this era seen as the province of the “experts” — clergy, monks, scholars
2. As church became official and formalism arose, many broke away into sects, calling for a more spiritual and holy Christianity
 - a. Middle 2nd century: Montanism (dangerous cultic ideas)
 - b. Middle 3rd c. – Novatianism
 - c. Beginning 4th c. – Donatists [personal favorite, name only]

Each group called for personal religion, but had serious errors

3. Breakaway groups pressured church leaders to define theology more carefully

“The rise of heresies made it imperative to name some characteristics by which the *true* catholic Church could be known.”³

- a. The leaders of the church seen as the orthodox defenders of the faith (mostly were)
- b. They formed the “college of Bishops”
- c. People taught to accept the teaching of the Bishops or forfeit salvation
- d. Church becomes (over time) source of salvation by distributing sacraments
- e. During Middle Ages, very little further development, but a tightening of church structure and hierarchy
 - 1) Bishops top officials
 - 2) Various levels of clergy in a descending hierarchy

³ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1938), 558.

- 3) Rise of one official bishop to rule them all
4. Union of state (kings/chieftains) with church (bishops/hierarchy)
- Political necessity to stabilize Europe
 - Pope/church over many kings because cared for the souls of all men

“Hugo of St. Victor speaks of the Church and the State as the two powers instituted by God for the government of the people. Both are monarchical in constitution, but the Church is the higher power, because she ministers to the salvation of men, while the State only provides for their temporal welfare. The king or emperor is the head of the state, but the Pope is the head of the Church.”⁴

- Thus, church becomes (or tried to become) dominant power over many kings

“This identification of the visible and organized Church with the Kingdom of God had far-reaching consequences: (1) It required that everything be brought under the control of the Church: the home and the school, science and art, commerce and industry, and so on. (2) It involved the idea that all the blessings of salvation come to man only through the ordinances of the Church, particularly through the sacraments. (3) It led to the gradual secularization of the Church, since the Church began to pay more attention to politics than to the salvation of sinners, and the Popes finally claimed dominion also over secular rulers.”⁵

We still remain with our question, could anyone be saved in a situation like this? (Remember, the Middle Ages lasted 1000 years.)

⁴ Berkhof, referring to Hugo of St. Victor, Berkhof, 559.

⁵ Berkhof, 560.

II. Personal piety led by individual preachers

A. Individuals still found ways to study the Bible

1. Sometimes within the church
2. Sometimes in groups outside the official church

“The Bible was the most studied book of the Middle Ages. Bible study represented the highest branch of learning.”⁶

“Medieval devotion to God was based on the Latin Bible, the Sacred Scriptures, heard, read, or seen.”⁷

B. Courageous preachers led their people in true religion

1. Often among the monks, true piety seen
2. Other preachers and leaders in local churches

Bernard of Clairvaux in our hymnal

Aelred of Rievaulx, “Brothers, however cast down we may be by harassment or heartache, the consolations of Scripture will lift us up again, for all the things that were written in former days were written for our instruction so that we, through the steadfastness and encouragement the Scriptures give us, might have hope. I tell you, brothers, no misfortune can touch us, no situation so galling or distressing can arise that does not as soon as Holy Writ seizes hold of us, either fade into nothingness or become bearable.”⁸

Thus, the first answer to our question is, Yes, people could be saved despite growing apostasy in church and state.

⁶ Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), p. xi, quoted in Bingham, *Pocket History of the Church*, 67.

⁷ Benedicta Ward, “Mysticism and Devotion on the Middle Ages,” in *Companion Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. P. Byrne and L. Houlden (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 558, quoted in Bingham, 67.

⁸ Aelred of Rievaulx, “The Consolations of Scripture,” in *The Cistercian World*, trans. and ed. P. Matarasso (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 193, quoted in Bingham, 67.

III. Present day continuation

A. Salvation, according to Romans 10

1. Righteousness based on law requires living out a perfectly righteous life yourself (5)
2. Righteousness based on faith is a different matter (6ff.)
 - a. We can do nothing to bring Christ down (in our physical body) (6)
 - b. We can do nothing to raise Christ up (in our physical body) (7)
 - c. Where is salvation: in our spirit, by prayer of faith (8-13)

B. Salvation according to Rome

1. Yes, one must believe in Christ
2. AND be baptized
3. AND receive Communion and other sacraments
4. AND obey the decrees of the Popel and Church
5. AND perform meritorious works
6. AND not commit any mortal sins

“If a person believes what the Catholic Church officially teaches, he/she will not be saved. Any claim that works or rituals must be added to faith in order for salvation to be achieved is a claim that Jesus’ death was not sufficient to fully purchase our salvation.”⁹

C. Nevertheless

1. People in churches who preach the Bible *can* turn their religion into mere forms (baptism, church attendance, rituals)

⁹ Is Catholicism a false religion? Are Catholics saved? Got Questions Ministries, *Got Questions? Bible Questions Answered* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2002).

2. People in churches who preach the Bible plus works can personally call on Jesus to save them — what does our passage say?

Rm 10.13 for “WHOEVER WILL CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED.”

Conclusion:

Proposition: Salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone, plus nothing, minus nothing.

Now it is a terrible thing when leaders teach false things. Many are confused and don't see the truth.

But anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.