

## "GOD'S DON'T DO IT YOURSELF KIT"

(Romans 4:1-15)

(Chuck Swindoll)

To illustrate the principle that justification—being declared righteous by God—has always been a matter of faith, Paul drew upon the example of Abraham, the undisputed model of Hebrew belief and practice. Because of Abraham's faith, God adjusted the man's account to reflect complete righteousness (4:1-3). The patriarch's salvation had nothing to do with good behavior. On the contrary, Paul used Abraham's faith to demonstrate a key spiritual principle: Working earns a wage (4:4), while trust in God's grace brings a gift (4:5-8).

To further illustrate the role of faith in salvation, Paul examined the of circumcision and noted three things:

- Abraham's salvation occurred before God instituted the ritual (4:9-10).
- God never implied that this rite (or any other activity) did anything to change the person within. Instead, circumcision was intended to be an outward indicator of a boy's inward belief in God's grace (4:11). Moreover, the rite was given in trust. That is, the outward symbol of inward faith was performed on an infant boy with the expectation that he would one day place his trust in God's grace.
- The rite of circumcision and the covenant it symbolized was given with the expectation that Abraham's example (and that of his offspring) would bring the rest of the world to faith in God's grace (4:12).

These principles also apply to the roles of activity, ritual, and tradition in the church. Nothing can substitute for God's grace, which can be received only by faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus commanded His followers to be baptized as an external symbol of their inner transformation. Like circumcision for the Jew, baptism is a seal of authenticity, marking the individual as a recipient of God's grace. It neither guarantees salvation nor does anything to change the heart of the person submitting to the rite.

Jesus also commanded His followers to partake of Communion as a means of remembering the grace they received through His own sacrificial death on their behalf. The bread is merely bread; the wine is merely wine. These elements are natural symbols of a supernatural reality. A nonbeliever remains unchanged if he or she participates in this ordinance of the church, and a believer is no more and no less a child of God after the ceremony is complete.

This is, of course, not new information to the mature believer; however, on a less conscious level, we can become guilty of placing significance on other rituals and traditions. Without daily reminders of God's grace, we unconsciously suppose that



attending church, giving money, studying or memorizing Scripture, working in the community, and other worthy activities add to our righteousness when we do them. This inevitably leads to judgment on those who do not. I wholeheartedly encourage activities and rituals that deepen our intimacy with the Almighty, but these healthy expressions of faith must never become the tools of do-it-yourself righteousness. We cannot make ourselves cleaner on the inside. God alone must do that for us. So why should we devote ourselves to spiritual disciplines? For one reason: They are a means by which we come to know the Son of God intimately and experientially.

As you take part in the rituals or customs of the church, as you take up the spiritual disciplines, as you put your energies into doing good work, refocus your expectations by offering the following prayer:

Father, help me to understand more about Your Son and to become more sensitive to the teaching of Your Holy Spirit as a result of what I am doing. Amen.

God's gift of righteousness is based on the principles He has established. Think of them as the tools of His don't-do-it-yourself kit. And the label on that kit? Grace.