

# The New Olympian *January 2009*

The Monthly Newsletter of the Olympic View Community Church of the Brethren  
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## Salvation: How We're Different from Protestants

By Student Pastor, Cabe Matthews

A lot of Protestants have heated arguments around the particular nature of salvation. Is it something God does, or is it more about what we do as individuals in response to what God has done? Some of you may have strong opinions on the topic, and others of you might roll your eyes when you see the debate I'm going to briefly interact with (I would!). But in the end I'm going to claim that as Brethren we actually think about salvation differently than either of these groups, and that I actually think our answer is superior. But I'll let you decide for yourself.

The group we know today as Calvinists claim that God alone is responsible for salvation. We are completely powerless to do anything about it because God is really big and we are really small. God picks who is in and he picks who is out. When we do 'good works' it shows that our faith is genuine. But we are completely powerless to do these good works by our own power. In fact, according to this viewpoint, we can't even have faith at all without God giving it to us. Anything good we do is from God, and only the bad stuff we do is genuinely ours.

The main groups today that would more or less claim this viewpoint (or at least a toned-down version of it) are the Presbyterians, Reformed, a lot of Southern Baptists, and most of the evan-



**Sam Edmark takes a flying ride at Snow Camp, 2008**

gelicals. One of the benefits of this viewpoint is that it is a very tight system that makes good logical sense, at least when viewed from a certain angle. That's probably why this view was so persuasive to me when I was in high school: I was looking for answers, and Calvinism supplies very neat and clear cut ones that don't demand as much from me in response. According to this standpoint, I'm a completely passive vessel; God will take care of me as God wills it, and if I live rightly it is only because God willed it.

One downside of this tradition is that it makes God seem cruel sometimes, and it makes it difficult for humans to take any responsibility for bad things that we do. If someone gets cancer, hit by a drunk driver, or murdered in the Holocaust, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that this was God's will. As you can see, this creates some pretty big problems, and so I find it less than

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convincing at this point.

The other traditional side of the debate is called Arminianism. These people tend to place the emphasis on us and on our responsibility to respond to God's actions with faith and good works of our own. The main groups that would hold this view are Methodists, Nazarenes, 'free will' Baptists and some evangelicals. It also might seem a lot closer to us as Brethren, especially with regards to its view of humanity and the idea that we have a responsibility to live a certain way in response to what God has done.

The view of God here has a much smaller tendency toward cruelty as it opens up the fact that we as humans often do bad things that we can't blame on God. But one big problem with this view is that we as humans are very aware that salvation is something we can't do on our own. We fail all the time, and this creates a bit of difficulty for Arminianism, and the potential for fear and shame in those who follow it.

Luckily, I'd like to argue, these two positions don't apply to us at all. The earliest Brethren were influenced by Pietism and Anabaptism, neither of which has a dog in this fight. I'm only introducing this debate because I know that these two viewpoints have a way of creeping into places they don't belong. For instance, I mentioned earlier that I was a pretty convinced Calvinist in high school, which was incredibly ironic because I was going to an (officially) Arminian Methodist church. As another example, a friend of mine at Seattle Mennonite Church grew up in a Calvinist Mennonite church, which is really weird.

So I'm going to propose that when we think of salvation as Brethren, we don't think of it in terms of this debate between Calvinists and Arminians. As far as I'm concerned they are both right in some ways and wrong in others. Maybe they are just asking the wrong questions. The idea that salvation must *either* be something God does *or* something that we do should be foreign to us. Rather, I think we view salvation as something that we *participate* in – it is something God has done and is doing, but it is also something we are called to get involved in. God's saving activity is much more holistic in our tradition than the Calvinist/Arminian debate, and so I think we should politely disagree with

*Happy New Year!*

both groups. For us, salvation definitely involves individuals, but it also involves communities, all the world's peoples, and the physical world/universe itself.

Last month I wrote about how in Advent we wait for God to come and save the world, but we can't forget the salvation God has already begun in his son Jesus. It is *that* salvation that we are called to participate in. Not some disembodied, abstract, individual version of salvation, but the kind of salvation that is for the whole world. Paradoxically, it has already come, but it has not yet reached its fullness. As the church we are called to live into the "already" of God's salvation while longing for the "not yet." That's why we care for the poor, love one another, and yearn for peace: because we believe God has brought and is bringing forth a new creation, and we're just trying to live in the same key as that reality.



Young Adults turn Snow Camp 2008 into a crochet party.

## Friends January Event

We had great fun introducing your young grandchildren to theater in November. Let's do it again: Come see ***The Wizard of Oz***, as adapted by Broadway Bound Children's Theater, on opening night Friday, January 9, 7:00 PM. Tickets are \$12. Performance held at the Broadway Performance Hall on Capital Hill. Amy Helmuth plays Dorothy. Meet at the church at 6:00 PM to carpool. Refreshments will be served afterwards at the Helmuth's house, 8237 2<sup>nd</sup> Ave NE.

Please call Jana for tickets. 930-9608. Note: our home phone number is 206-607-9575.

