

DAILY DOSE OF DOCTRINE

April 21-25, 2008



April 21, 2008

Faith as Right Belief

“When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because people do not believe in me”;¹

The Holy Spirit ‘prepares the ground’ of faith by working in the lives of those who are not yet believers. He orders circumstances to create curiosity about spiritual things, a quest for deeper meaning, a desire for ‘something more’ in life or other attitudes of heart and mind that cause the person to be receptive to the good news.

The Holy Spirit also nurtures faith by inspiring Christians to share the gospel powerfully and effectively. This sharing of the good news, by word and deed, ‘sows’ the seed of new spiritual life. The germination of that seed is saving faith, which is also an active, life-giving work of the Spirit.

There are a number of facets to saving faith, but the starting point must be some kind of assent to the truth about Christ. We are not talking about believing numerous, complicated doctrines. Simple childlike faith in the truthfulness of Jesus’ claims about himself is all that is required: that God the Son was born on earth to reveal the reality of God to us, that he died on the cross for our sins, that God raised him from the dead, etc.

One could argue that even that much detail is not necessarily required. The thief on the cross simply confessed that he believed in Jesus as Messiah and asked to be remembered by him. That was apparently sufficient. The point is that our belief is focused on Christ and that we are putting our trust in him. He was not a liar or lunatic. We believe the claim that he is Lord.

¹ John 16:8-9 (TNIV)

April 22, 2008

The Object of our Faith

“Therefore I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, ‘Jesus be cursed,’ and no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.”¹

The Holy Spirit leads us to believe in the truthfulness of the gospel’s claims about Christ. That intellectual trust or assent is important because it is the object of our faith – Jesus Christ – which brings salvation, not the faith itself.

Some people think that faith of any sort is all that God requires. If one has faith in the essential goodness of humanity and tries to live a good life, that will be enough. Or if one’s good works outweigh the bad, that will give one a passing grade into heaven. Or if one takes a pass on Jesus, but puts one’s trust in some other religious figure, God will grade ‘on the curve’ and let them in. The old saw that ‘all religions are different pathways up the same mountain’ is essentially a statement of faith in faith.

However, faith can be sincerely wrong. If you board a train absolutely convinced that it is heading for Halifax when in fact it is heading for Vancouver, your faith will do you no good. No amount of arguing with the conductor about the extent of your conviction will change the situation. Your faith was misplaced and you will not end up at the desired destination.

Saving faith begins as we set aside the other options and focus our trust in Jesus. The seed germinates and the new life pokes its head above the ground as God hears, “I think I do believe these claims about Christ.” This is evidence of the redeeming work of the Spirit.

¹ 1 Corinthians 12:3 (TNIV)

April 23, 2008

From Head to Heart

"If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."¹

Saving faith involves the mind assenting to the truthfulness of the gospel. Christ is the object of our faith. But saving faith is not *mere* intellectual assent.

One aberration of Christian spirituality is to confuse belief *about* Christ with belief *in* Christ. Many raised in the Church have been taught the truths of the faith. We know the Bible or we have memorized a catechism or we have gone through a course which teaches what Christians believe about God. Such exposure to truth is good, but it is not saving faith. Declaring 'I believe this or that about Christ' may be mere intellectual opinion. Saving faith springs from the heart as well as the head.

When Christians talk about 'giving their heart to Christ', they are speaking metaphorically about a step of trust: we not only believe certain truths about Jesus, but we are taking sides with him.

You might look at a footbridge across a deep river and believe that it is safe to use. You might even say so. But you put your heart into it when you step out onto the bridge. That 'leap of faith' is a leap from thinking to trusting.

The dying thief on the cross not only believed in the truthfulness of Jesus' claims, he allied himself with Jesus. By defending Jesus and asking to be remembered, he took a leap of faith into Jesus' Kingdom.² In effect his head declared, "I believe" and his heart confessed, "I am willing to be yours!"

¹ Romans 10:9 (TNIV)

² Luke 23:40-42

April 24, 2008

Conviction of Sin

“When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’”¹

In the past the Church has overplayed the guilt card. Castigating people for their sins, parsing the various stages of true contrition, examinations into the level of remorse to determine if a person has truly repented, etc. may leave people spiritually ‘stuck’. Some, like the young Martin Luther, become obsessed with their own unworthiness. Others, like the Puritans of Massachusetts who were raised in the faith, are unable to provide a dramatic conversion experience to convince themselves or others that they are truly saved.

In reaction, the significance of sin and our genuine guilt before a holy God is now often downplayed in the presentation of the gospel. The Holy Spirit is seen as nurturing faith, enlightening, blessing with assurance, giving power for new life. This modern ‘empowering’ gospel avoids false guilt, but often leads to spiritual shallowness.

A significant part of the Spirit’s work in conversion is to bring about true contrition for sin. This is not just a matter of knowing that we have been caught and are pleading guilty to avoid a stiff penalty. True contrition means that we are struck by the significance of our sin. We have offended God. We are truly guilty and unworthy of his love. To use the old metaphors, we really are poor, wretched, filthy, blind, naked and corrupt. We truly do deserve to be despised by God and condemned for our rebellion against Him. We need the Spirit, as surgeon, to ‘cut us to the heart’, that he might bring about new life.

¹ Acts 2:37 (TNIV)

April 25, 2008 **Conviction of Sin (contd.)**

"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'"¹

Feeling genuinely remorseful for our sin is important, but it may be experienced in different ways by different people. For some it may be a gradual awareness. Others may be suddenly overwhelmed.

It may also occur at various stages in the process of conversion. A person who is drawn to seek God because he or she has made a mess of things and is dealing with guilt will probably come under conviction of sin by the Spirit early in the process.

Another person, who is, for example, looking for meaning and purpose in life may come to the problem of sin later in the process. She or he may come to believe and trust in Jesus and then wrestle with the sin issue later. Sin may first be understood in an abstract way as the cause of evil in the world and estrangement from God. Later it may hit them with force that **THEY** are part of the problem and that they too desperately need a Saviour!

While the intensity of feeling and the order of experience may vary, conviction of sin must be part of the process of coming to new life in Christ. It is also an important work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the maturing Christian. God wants to do a work of transformation in us. We cannot embrace new life if we are still dragging the old life around with us.

¹ Luke 18:13 (TNIV)