

ST104, Soteriology
Dallas Theological Seminary

Faith, Repentance, and Water Baptism

We have already discussed the nature and necessity of God's initiative in conversion, and with this lesson we discuss the human response to that divine initiative. We will begin by considering the nature of saving faith before attempting to address common questions concerning repentance and water baptism.

The Nature of Faith

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary defines faith in this way: "1 **a**: allegiance to duty or a person : LOYALTY **b**: fidelity to one's promises 2 **a** (1): belief and trust in and loyalty to God (2): belief in the traditional doctrines of a religion **b** (1): firm belief in something for which there is no proof (2): complete confidence 3 : something that is believed esp. with strong conviction; *esp* : a system of religious beliefs *syn* see BELIEF *ant* doubt – **in faith** : without doubt or question"

The dictionary definition reflects common usage, but the biblical idea of faith is not restricted to religious dogma and the biblical text does not call upon us to believe in something for which there is no evidence. Instead, faith is trust (in anything) and we are called to place our trust in the very reasonable truth of the gospel.

A number of biblical examples demonstrate that "faith" is not a uniquely Christian experience. Individuals can (and do) trust in other things, and such faith is generally judged to be inappropriate. 1 Samuel 27:12 speaks of Achish "believing" David's deceptive lie (cf. Jer. 12:6). Isaiah 30:15-16 and 31:1 describe the "trust" that many Israelites were placing in the strength of Egypt's armies (cf. Ps. 20:7; 33:17). According to Paul it is possible for individuals to trust inappropriately in themselves (2 Cor. 1:9) or in their heritage and behavior (Phil. 3:3-4). Some people were persuaded to trust in false messiahs (Acts 5:36-37) and the apostles persuaded others to trust in Christ (Acts 17:4). What these and other examples suggest is that "faith" or "belief" is not something that only Christians exercise. What is distinctive about Christians is not that they *trust* in something or someone, but that they trust *in Christ*. Along these lines, Lanier Burns writes,

The dictionary reflects the scientific orientation of the modern world, assuming that faith is somehow the opposite of evidence or doubt. Most theologians define faith as if it is something to be controlled by their persuasion or tradition. However, it is best to see faith as trust in some object from ancient Pharaoh to modern business people to parents to children at school or whatever. It is the object of faith and the disposition of the people that differ so significantly. No one has ever had assurance of tomorrow. Thus, all humans have faith in something. I would submit that many scientists have far more faith in their experiments than many Christians seem to have in God and His work.

Not only is faith (in something) a universal experience, faith in Christ should not be understood to be utterly unquestioning (Mt. 28:17; Mk. 9:24; Lk. 17:5-6). How small is "as small as a mustard seed?"

It is common for evangelical definitions of saving faith to break it down into three components, using the Latin terms *notitia* (understanding), *assensus* (assent), and *fiducia* (trust). Since "faith" comes from

the same root as "trust" (*fides*), some have argued that this leads to the tautologous definition that "faith = faith." However, it is not inappropriate to define a term through the use of synonyms, and "trust" is one of the more helpful synonyms in this case. Ryrie writes, "Faith means confidence, trust, to hold to something as true. Of course, faith must have content; there must be confidence or trust about something. To have faith in Christ unto salvation means to have confidence that He can remove the guilt of sin and grant eternal life."¹ It may be appropriate to add to Ryrie's definition the words, ". . . and trust Him to do it." As believers we have understood the gospel message (*notitia*), we have believed it to be true (*assensus*) and we have trusted in Christ to save us as individuals (*fides*).

The Origin of Faith

One of the traditional debates in soteriology concerns the origin of faith. This may be seen in Packer's article at the end of this portion of the notes, where he says that "faith is a supernatural divine gift." John MacArthur agrees when he writes,

. . . faith is a supernatural gift of God. Ephesians 2:8-9 is a familiar passage: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast." What is "the gift of God" Paul speaks of? Westcott calls it "the saving energy of faith."² However, the phrase "that not of yourselves" has no clear antecedent. The Greek pronoun translated "that" is neuter and the word for "faith" is feminine. So it seems that what Paul had in mind was the entire process of grace, faith, and salvation as the gift of God. Either way, the passage teaches that faith is not something conjured up by the human will but is a sovereignly granted gift of God (cf. Philippians 1:29).

Jesus said "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life" (John 6:47). But in the same context, He also said, "No one can come to me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him" (John 6:44). God draws the sinner to Christ and also gives the ability to believe. Without that divinely generated faith, one cannot understand and approach the Savior. For example, when Peter affirmed his faith in Christ as the Son of God, Jesus told him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father who is in Heaven" (Matthew 16:17). Peter's faith was given to him by God Himself.³

MacArthur obviously desires to protect the integrity of the divine initiative in salvation, but these arguments may carry the point too far. Regarding Ephesians 2, it may be that Paul is arguing not that faith is a divine gift, but that salvation itself is by grace. The focus is not on the process, but on the product. The passage does not deny that faith could be divinely bestowed, but neither does it directly affirm it.

Two other texts may also be used to argue that faith is a divine gift. 2 Peter 1:1 reads, "Simon Peter, a bond-servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours, by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ." It may be that faith itself has been received (*TDNT* 4:2), but my understanding is that "the" faith is in view, the orthodox doctrine handed down by the church (as in Jude 3, 20; cf. *TDNT* 6:213). Romans 12:3 is another possibility, stating that "God has allotted to each a measure of faith," but the reference here seems to be to the spiritual gifts apportioned to each member of the body.

¹Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 326.

²He cites B. F. Westcott, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians* (Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1906 [reprint]), 32.

³John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan [Academie], 1988), 172-73.

MacArthur, Packer and many others who argue that faith is a divine gift seem to be reacting against the Arminian concept of sufficient (or "prevenient") grace.⁴ If faith comes from within ourselves, they reason, then there's nothing preventing anyone from coming to salvation except their own will. Emphasizing that such a determination depends only on the divine will, they reject this idea as "Arminian." Such classifications do not sufficiently respect the integrity of mediating positions. It is possible to see faith as a human response to divine initiative without regarding salvation as dependent upon human choice to the exclusion of sovereign election. At the same time, focusing on the idea that the Spirit enables people to respond to the gospel, it is not inappropriate to speak of faith as a divine gift. I prefer not to use that language in order to emphasize the fact that everyone believes in something, but only Christ is adequate.

Summary

Everybody has faith. Some people have faith in business, others in the goodness of human nature, still others in material goods or in their ability to survive in this world. The objects of faith may be as diverse as the people that make up our world, but everybody believes in something. The gospel calls us to place that trust in Jesus Christ. Rather than trusting in ourselves, or perhaps in our religious traditions, we are called to trust in Christ. This is not a new sort of experience, and it's certainly not an anti-intellectual leap. It is a reasonable expectation in light of the reliability of His person. From this perspective, faith is not thought of as a divine gift. It is something that unbelievers are already exercising (but in the wrong objects).

There is nothing preventing anyone from coming to salvation except their own will. As Jesus said in His lament over Jerusalem, "How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling" (Matt. 23:37). John 3:18 reads, "He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God."

We have already seen that unbelievers will not come to faith in Christ apart from the intervention ("effectual calling") of the Holy Spirit.⁵ Unless the Spirit intervenes, they will continue to wrongly evaluate the gospel message and will perish in unbelief. When the Spirit does intervene in efficacious grace, the individual realizes the truth of the gospel and responds in faith. As Machen writes, "Certainly, at bottom, faith is in one sense a very simple thing: it simply means that abandoning the vain effort of earning one's way into God's presence we accept the gift of salvation which Christ offers so full and free."⁶

The Meaning and Role of Repentance

And He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem." (Lk. 24:46-47)

Luke's statement of the Great Commission says nothing about "faith" or "belief" in Christ. It describes the task of evangelism as proclaiming "repentance for forgiveness of sins" in the name of Christ. A similar statement may be found in Acts 17:30, where Paul said, "God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent" (cf. Acts 3:19; 11:18; 2 Peter 3:9).

⁴Cf. the notes on the "The Holy Spirit's Role in Conversion."

⁵1 Cor. 2:14; Rom. 8:30; cf. the notes on the "Sinfulness of Humanity" and the "The Holy Spirit's Role in Conversion."

⁶J. Gresham Machen, *What is Faith?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 181.

What is meant by "repentance" in these contexts? Is it synonymous with faith? Noting that the basic meaning of the term is "to change one's mind,"⁷ Ryrie argues that individuals are here called to change their minds about Jesus Christ. He writes, "Indeed, before any of us came to Christ we had some conception of Him. Perhaps it was fuzzy, perhaps it was reasonably clear, perhaps it was wrong. But we turned from whatever conception we had and turned to Him as our Savior from sin. And that repentance brought eternal salvation."⁸

Ryrie interprets these passages as a turn from certain beliefs and a turn toward other beliefs, but several biblical examples suggest that we also regard this as a determined change in behavior.⁹ Hebrews 6:1 describes one of the basic elements of the gospel as "repentance from dead works," and 2 Corinthians 12:21 speaks of believers "repenting" over sins committed in the past. 2 Corinthians 7:10 refers to repentance as the outcome of godly reproof, resulting in salvation. In Acts 8:22, Peter urged Simon to "repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you." Within the context of Luke, repentance seems to involve turning away from sin, and only those who are conscious of their need for forgiveness are able to truly repent (Luke 5:32; 13:1-5; 15:7,10). Paul tells Agrippa in Acts 26 that he was sent to the Gentiles "that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, in order that they may receive forgiveness of sins" (v. 18). Therefore, he was continually declaring "that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance" (v. 20).

Repentance seems to involve a conscious change of one's orientation with a resultant change in one's behavior, but we should note that none of these passages place a measure on it in terms of degree. At the same time, we should also note that many references to conversion say nothing at all about repentance (John 1:12; 3:16,36; 20:30-31; Acts 16:30-31; Romans 3:22,28; 5:1; Galatians 2:16; Ephesians 2:8). John does not use the term at all.

Evidently, repentance should be regarded as one of several terms that describe *conversion* with different emphases.¹⁰ "Come," "rest," "receive," "turn," "believe," "have faith in," "trust," and "repent" are all acceptable metaphors for the gospel message, for all refer to the same experience. While different authors clearly favor particular terms, no single expression should be regarded as the technical biblical term to describe the human response at conversion.¹¹

For this reason, it would be inappropriate to regard repentance as a condition of salvation distinct from faith. The DTS doctrinal statement reads, "We believe that the new birth of the believer comes only through faith in Christ and that repentance is a vital part of believing, and is in no way, in itself, a separate and independent condition of salvation; nor are any other acts, such as confession, baptism, prayer, or faithful service, to be added to believing as a condition of salvation" (Article 7).

The Meaning and Role of Water Baptism

For a general overview of baptism in the church, see Millard Erickson's *Christian Theology*, pp. 1089-1105. What is perhaps most important for our purposes here is to note that in the New Testament baptism functions as a public conversion-initiation rite as individuals come to Christ and become a part of the church. (There are no biblical examples of infant baptism, which will be discussed briefly

⁷BAGD, 511.

⁸Ryrie, *So Great Salvation*, 96.

⁹Ryrie acknowledges that repentance always involves more than mere intellectual assent. "It also includes a resultant change, usually in actions (ibid., 92).

¹⁰Cf. TDNT, s.v. "metanoeww," by J. Behm, 4:979.

¹¹Cf. NIDNTT, s. v. "Conversion," 1:353-62.

in the lesson on "those who can't believe and those who haven't heard.") Because of its association with conversion, a reference to baptism can occasionally function as a metonymy for the whole conversion event (as in Rom. 6:3). In a similar vein, a command to be baptized may simply function as a command to be converted, to come to faith in Christ. Specifically, to "repent and be baptized" in Acts 2:38 is a call to conversion not unlike Billy Graham's "I'm going to ask you to get up out of your seat and to come forward." Marshall rightly comments on the passage that the "two" requirements of repentance and baptism are "in effect one" and that "baptism is an expression of faith."¹² Too many passages speak only of faith for us to think that a condition is actually being added here.

One text which may clarify Peter's understanding of baptism is 1 Peter 3:21: "And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you – not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience – through the resurrection of Jesus Christ." In the first part of the verse, "baptism" is a reference to the entire conversion process, a point which Peter is careful to emphasize by saying that it is not the physical act of cleansing which is important but the appeal to God for forgiveness on the basis of the death and resurrection of Christ.

New Testament baptism is a decisive act on the part of the individual that many of us may not fully appreciate. As Wells notes, even contemporary middle eastern culture regards baptism with a great deal of significance.

Baptism is the decisive step of a believer's public self-identification with Christ, a step that marks his or her self-distinction from the unbelieving community. This change is subsequently evidenced by transformed standards of ethical conduct and lifestyle.

The Muslim community interprets this self-distinction not in moral and ethical terms but as a change of status. By rejecting Islam as the final and complete source of religious truth, the Christian takes himself or herself out of the community. Baptism symbolizes acceptance and appropriation of Christ's death and resurrection as the basis of salvation. Islam's law of apostasy states that such heretical action should result in death. At the very least, the Christian is cut off from the benefits of community life – access to financial, material, legal, social, and psychological support systems. In practical terms, the person is regarded as nonexistent or 'dead.' Sometimes a funeral service is even held.¹³

Clearly baptism tends to carry more weight in some cultures than it does in the U.S., but Wells is correct in saying that even there it is more an act of identification than an act of dedication.

Many questions regarding baptism are being raised by the International Churches of Christ, also known as the "The Boston Movement" or "Church of Christ, Boston." We will discuss this group further in the upcoming session on alternative religious groups, but it should be noted here that they call upon members to be "rebaptized" as *disciples* of Christ, and develop from that a very exclusionary ecclesiology. Neither practice seems to be biblically defensible (Eph. 4:5).

Preview

Many of the issues raised in this lesson, particularly the nature of faith, repentance, and, with regard to the Boston Movement, the nature of discipleship, are central to the issue of "Lordship Salvation." The notes which follow attempt to analyze that debate.

¹²I. Howard Marshall, *Acts* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980]), 80-81.

¹³David Wells, *Turning to God: Biblical Conversion in the Modern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 105.

