



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 7.4.2 – The Doctrine of the Way of Salvation (Soteriology)

The Object of Saving Faith

In the New Testament the Greek words *pistis* (πίστις, faith) and *pisteuō* (πιστεύω, believe) do not always refer to saving faith in Jesus Christ. In Titus 2:10 *pistis* refers to the faithfulness or “fidelity” of slaves to their masters. In Galatians 5:22 *pistis* also refers to “faithfulness” as a fruit of the Holy Spirit in a Christian’s life.

In Romans 14:22-23 *pistis* means “faith” but not saving faith in Christ. It refers to faith or confidence that the eating of a certain food is not sinful. In 1 Corinthians 13:2 “faith” refers to a special faith given to Christians at certain times that enables them to do miracles in Jesus’ name. This “faith” is not saving faith in Jesus Christ as Savior from sin, because Paul says the one having this “faith” is “nothing”.

Likewise, *pisteuō* does not always refer to believing in Jesus Christ as our Savior, but it can refer to other kinds of believing. When the apostle Paul heard about the divisions in the congregation at Corinth, he responded by saying: “**In part I believe it**” (1 Corinthians 11:18). Likewise, when Paul was describing love (*agapē*, ἀγάπη) in 1 Corinthians 13, he says love “**believes all things**” (1 Corinthians 13:7). It is clear he is not referring to faith in Christ or trust in the Gospel.

For this very reason it is important that we stress the object of faith, that is, the thing or the person in whom one believes. There is such a thing as faith in one’s self and in one’s own abilities or intellect. This kind of faith cannot save anyone, because it is not attached to the only object of saving faith, which is Jesus Christ and His work for our salvation: His life, His death, His resurrection. The world uses the term “faith” to refer to many kinds of faith that are not saving faith because they do not refer to trust in God’s promise of salvation through Christ. There is even such a thing as faith in faith, which really is faith in one’s self to keep on believing. The apostle Peter had that kind of faith when he followed Jesus from a distance after Jesus was arrested, and in his trust in his own devotion to Christ he denied that he even knew who Jesus was (Matthew 26:35, 69-74 and the parallel passages in Mark, Luke, and John).

The object of saving faith is the reconciliation established by Christ between God and sinful mankind, as proclaimed and offered to us in the Gospel. The prophet Isaiah said to the people: “**Your iniquities have separated you from your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you**” (Isaiah 59:2). To God Isaiah said: “**You have hidden Your face from us...because of our iniquities**” (Isaiah 64:7). The only solution to this problem is the coming of the Messiah “**to make reconciliation for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness**” (Daniel 9:24). All mankind needs its sins to be removed and to be replaced by righteousness, and this is what Christ accomplished by His suffering and death as the world’s Substitute.

God accomplished this for the world through Christ: “**Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him**” (2 Corinthians 5:18-21).

Jesus took the sin of the world on Himself and was fully punished for that sin on the cross. God counted the sin of the world against Christ and treated Him accordingly, cursing and forsaking and punishing Him for the sin of the world. God now offers to the world total forgiveness of all sin and the covering of Jesus' perfect righteousness. This, and this only, is the object of saving faith. This accomplished reconciliation is for Jew and Gentile, **"that He might reconcile them (Jew and Gentile) both to God in one body through the cross"** (Ephesians 2:16). **"For it pleased the Father that in Him (Christ) all the fullness (of the Godhead) should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross"** (Colossians 1:19-20).

This is the Good News (the Gospel) that God wants His believers to proclaim everywhere in the world. The Holy Spirit uses this Gospel to create saving faith in the hearts of those who hear it. **"The word of reconciliation"** is the Gospel, and **"the ministry of reconciliation"** is the proclaiming of the Gospel by those who have already been brought to faith in the Gospel. The book of Acts shows us how the apostles of Christ carried out this ministry of reconciliation: by proclaiming the word of reconciliation, as the Holy Spirit enabled them.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter and the other apostles carried on this ministry by telling the Jews in Jerusalem the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection and then saying: **"Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call"** (Acts 2:38-39). The Holy Spirit blessed their Gospel preaching that day, and **"those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them"** (Acts 2:41).

The Gospel has continued its march through the world from that time on. By the conclusion of the book of Acts, the Gospel is being proclaimed openly in Rome, the world capital at that time. The word of reconciliation continues to go out into the world, doing its work of creating faith in Christ and what He accomplished through His life, suffering, death, and resurrection.

It is always good that we specifically mention and emphasize the object of faith when we proclaim the Gospel. Remember the answer of Paul and Silas to the trembling jailer of Philippi, who asked: **"Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"** **"They said, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household'"** (Acts 16:30-31). Notice that the object of faith is mentioned: **"the Lord Jesus Christ"**, and when we use this verse in our ministry, we should not emphasize the word **"believe"** but the object of faith, **"the Lord Jesus Christ."** For it is not the act of believing that saves, but the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Savior in whom we trust. In other words, we do not want people to believe in or trust in faith or the act of believing itself; rather we want them to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, the object of saving faith.

Through faith in Christ we become children of God, for it is written: **"You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus"** (Galatians 3:26). Again, this faith in Christ is created by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel. By faith in Christ we experience the joy of knowing that the hostility between God and ourselves has been removed: **"Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ"** (Romans 5:1). John writes in his Gospel: **"As many as received Him (Christ), to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God"** (John 1:12-13). This blessing was not just for the early believers in Christ. On the night before His death Jesus spoke also of us as **"those who will believe in Me through their (Jesus' disciples') word"** (John 17:20). By faith in Christ we also become **"fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone"** (Ephesians 2:19-20). Notice that in all of these passages the object of faith is specifically mentioned. It is **"faith in Christ Jesus," "believing in His name," "believing in Me."**

Satan, however, urges sinners to trust that we are reconciled to God because of other reasons than Christ, reasons such as good deeds, gifts of money, church attendance, daily Bible reading, a rich prayer life, high morality, respect to parents and other authorities, love for children and other deeds of kindness. Such works, beneficial in themselves, become false “ Christs ” when they, instead of Jesus, become the basis of certainty that God has forgiven all sins. For this reason, the Bible does not speak of faith as something precious in itself, but, instead, God emphasizes the object of faith. **“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life”** (John 3:16).

Questions

1. What are some of the other ways in which *pistis* (faith) and *pisteuō* (believe) are used in the Bible?
2. What is meant by the object of faith?
3. What is the proper object of saving faith?
4. What is the problem that needed to be resolved before we could be saved?
5. How has God brought about reconciliation between God and sinful man?
6. How can God impute righteousness to sinful man rather than to Christ?
7. What is meant by the word of reconciliation?
8. What is meant by the ministry of reconciliation?
9. Give some examples from the book of Acts of how the apostles carried out the ministry of reconciliation.
10. What word should we emphasize when we refer to Acts 16:30-31?
11. What are believers in Christ called now that we trust in Christ?
12. What are some false “ Christs ” one might trust in instead of Christ?