



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Chapter 7 The Doctrine of the Way of Salvation (Soteriology)



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 7.1 – The Doctrine of the Way of Salvation (Soteriology)

Introduction

After studying the person, the office, and the work of the Christ, we now discuss the doctrine of the way of salvation. Central to this study is the doctrine of justification. This is the doctrine which, above all, separated Martin Luther and his adherents from the Roman church of his time. In this chapter we shall see that the teaching of “justification by faith alone”, as confessed by Lutherans, is the clear teaching of the Bible itself.

It is customary to consider the doctrine of justification together with a number of related teachings under the general heading of *soteriology*. The word “soteriology” comes from the Greek word *soteria* (σωτηρία), which means “salvation”. It is the study of what the Bible teaches about the way of salvation. In this chapter we shall consider not only justification, but also conversion and faith. As always, it is important that we ask God the Holy Spirit to enlighten us by means of the Scriptures so that what we say agrees fully with the Bible and that we not go beyond what the Bible says.

It is a fact of history that the early Christians did not long continue in the pure teaching of the way of salvation. Already in the first century the doctrine of justification was obscured and adulterated. The people did not fully understand that our salvation was fully accomplished by the work of Christ on the cross, and that forgiveness of sins was won thereby for the whole world. Faith does not add anything to our salvation, but it is simply trusting in what Christ has already accomplished. Gradually the early Christians lost sight of this pure Gospel and began to teach and believe that justification by faith alone was not enough. They thought that works were needed in addition to faith in order for our sins to be forgiven.

Questions

1. Why is it so important that we know what God says about justification?
2. What is meant by the term “soteriology”?
3. What happened already in the early centuries of church history?
4. What is faith?
5. Why doesn't faith add anything to our salvation?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 7.2.1 – The Doctrine of the Way of Salvation (Soteriology)

Justification: The Meaning of the Word

The Hebrew word that is translated “justification” is generally used in a forensic or judicial sense. Thus, to justify means to declare or pronounce someone righteous (not guilty) as a judge would do. For example, God through Moses says to His Old Testament people: **“You shall not pervert the judgment of your poor in his dispute. Keep yourself far from a false matter; do not kill the innocent and righteous. For I will not justify the wicked”** (Exodus 23:6-7). God was instructing the Israelite judges to determine on the basis of the evidence whether a person is guilty or innocent. If the evidence indicates guilt, then the judge must not justify the person but condemn him, that is, he must declare the person guilty; he must make that judgment. On the other hand, if the evidence indicates that the person is innocent, the judge must pronounce the person “just” or innocent; he must declare the person righteous, that is, he must justify the innocent. Faithful judges are to **“justify the righteous and condemn the wicked”** (Deuteronomy 25:1).

King Solomon asked God to carry out the same kind of righteous judgment: **“When anyone sins against his neighbor, and is forced to take an oath, and comes and takes an oath before Your altar in this temple, then hear in heaven, and act, and judge Your servants, condemning the wicked, bringing his way on his head, and justifying the righteous by giving him according to his righteousness”** (1 Kings 8:31-32). So, the opposite of “justify” is “condemn” or “find guilty.” Other words that mean about the same as “justify” are “acquit” and “pardon.”

Solomon recognized that perversion of justice is a serious crime in the eyes of God. He wrote: **“He who justifies the wicked, and he who condemns the just, both of them alike are an abomination to the LORD”** (Proverbs 17:15). The prophet Isaiah agreed, saying: **“Woe to men...who justify the wicked for a bribe, and take away justice from the righteous man!”** (Isaiah 5:21, 23).

The Greek word that is translated “justification” is also generally used in a forensic or judicial sense. For example, Jesus said: **“By your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned”** (Matthew 12:37). Jesus is speaking about the day of judgment, when the Judge will pronounce a person either “not guilty” or “guilty”, “justified” or “condemned.” We read: **“Even the tax collectors justified God, having been baptized with the baptism of John”** (Luke 7:29). It is clear here that “to justify” does not mean “to make righteous”: the tax collectors did not make God just, but they pronounced Him just, or declared Him to be just, by being baptized with the baptism of repentance by John the Baptist. They agreed with God that they were sinners who needed to have their sins washed away in baptism. Jesus accused the Pharisees of declaring themselves righteous when He said to them: **“You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts”** (Luke 16:15).

Most often in the New Testament the word “justify” (together with its related Greek words) is used with reference to God’s action of declaring sinners righteous. Earthly judges are called to judge innocent people righteous. But God declares *sinners* righteous. For example, in Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, it is the sinful tax collector that goes home “justified” (Luke 18:14) rather than the proud Pharisee. It is especially in Paul’s letters to the Galatians and the Romans that he uses the concept of justification to explain the Gospel. For example, we read in Romans 3:23-24: **“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”**

It is important that we remember that justification is not a process by which God makes us gradually better and better until we are just and righteous, as though God were giving us some kind of medicine to improve our spiritual health. No, justification is complete in an instant – God simply declares a person to be righteous. It is the act of a judge who, after investigation or examination, acquits a defendant and declares them totally pardoned.

The only One who can pronounce sinners righteous is God Himself, for all sins are in reality sins against God, and He is the supreme Judge. King David in the Old Testament was guilty of the gross sins of adultery and murder. Nevertheless, he recognized that he was declared forgiven by God Himself. David wrote: **“Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity”** (Psalm 32:1-2). Notice that it is the Lord Jehovah (YHWH) who has pardoned him by not counting his sin against him. The apostle Paul quoted this psalm of David in speaking of God as the One **“who justifies the ungodly”** (Romans 4:5). If an earthly judge would justify a guilty person, this would be wrong, even **“an abomination”** (Proverbs 17:15), but the righteous God is altogether **“just”** in acquitting sinners (Romans 3:26), as we shall see in the following lessons.

To be justified (or to be declared righteous) is the same thing as being forgiven. When my sins are forgiven, I am just and righteous in the sight of God. The sin that separated me from God has been taken away and is not counted against me. Forgiveness of sins is the negative expression of the same thing that is expressed by the positive term: justification. Forgiveness takes away the bad stuff; justification is receiving the good stuff in its place. In one of his sermons recorded in the book of Acts the apostle Paul declared to his audience: **“Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man (Jesus) is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses”** (Acts 13:38-39).

The official Roman Catholic teaching defines justification in a way that is contrary to Bible teaching. The Council of Trent, which met around the time of Martin Luther’s death, defined justification in this way: “Justification...is not only the remission of sins but also the sanctification and renewal of the inner man through voluntary acceptance of grace and of the gifts by which an unjust person becomes a just one and an enemy becomes a friend, that he may be an heir according to the hope of eternal life” (Session 6, chapter 7). Notice that the Roman definition of justification makes it a gradual process of improvement by which the sinner is not simply declared just but actually becomes just in his life. This is a dangerous teaching, as we shall see in the following lessons.

Questions

1. What is the Old Testament meaning of the word “justify”?
2. What is the New Testament meaning of the word “justify”?
3. What is meant when we say that “justify” is used in a forensic sense?
4. What was the duty of earthly judges in the Old Testament?
5. How did the tax collectors justify God?
6. How did God justify the tax collector in Jesus’ parable?
7. Why is it important that we don’t think of justification as a gradual process?
8. What is so unusual about the fact that God justifies sinners?
9. What is the relationship between justification and forgiveness?
10. What is wrong with the Roman Catholic definition of justification?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)
Lesson 7.2.2 – The Doctrine of the Way of Salvation (Soteriology)

Universal or Objective Justification

As we saw in the last chapter¹, the Bible clearly teaches universal justification, that is, that God has declared the whole world righteous because of the atoning death of Jesus Christ for the sin of the world. Because this truth is rejected by so many, we review this truth again as part of our study of justification.

In Paul’s grand comparison between Adam and Jesus Christ, the word “all” is used: **“Therefore, as through one man’s offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man’s righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life”** (Romans 5:18). This sentence is difficult to put into good English, and the above translation adds a few words to clarify the meaning. Literally it can be translated like this:

<p>As through one man’s trespass to all persons condemnation</p>	<p>So also through one man’s righteous act to all persons justification of life.</p>
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The meaning is clear. Adam’s sin brought about condemnation for all men. Christ’s righteousness brought about acquittal or justification of life for all men. God says to each and every sinner: “I acquit you, I pronounce you not guilty, because Christ took your place. I forgive you your sins.” The Judge carefully investigates the defendants and sees that their sins have been fully covered by Jesus. In church language this teaching is called universal justification. Another term that is sometimes used is objective justification. This means that justification for all is a true objective fact, whether or not it is accepted or believed. It is independent of any person’s opinion. Forgiveness of sins has been won for all, and it is available and offered to all as a free gift.

Paul teaches the same truth in Romans 3:23-25. Notice again the word “all”: **“All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God has set forth as a propitiation.”** The word “all” applies not only to “sinned” but also to “justified”. As many as have sinned, have been declared righteous by God because of the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ that has redeemed the whole world.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is God’s declaration to the whole world that the sins of all, which were laid on Christ in His suffering and death, have all been removed. Jesus, the Lamb of God, has succeeded in taking away the sin of the world. For God **“raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification”** (Romans 4:24-25). Jesus went to the cross and suffered and died because our offenses were laid on Him, and He rose from the dead because God has now declared us all righteous and forgiven on the basis of His sacrifice.

“God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them” (2 Corinthians 5:19). The whole world of sinners has been reconciled to God. God does not impute the world’s sins to the world, because He imputed those sins to Christ, and Christ paid the full price to

¹ see Lesson 6.7.2.6 – Universal Atonement and Universal Justification

atone for all of them. There is pardon for all, because, as Paul wrote: **“If One died for all, then all died”** (2 Corinthians 5:14). On the other hand, **“if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins”** (1 Corinthians 15:17). Since Christ did rise from the dead, our faith is not futile; we are not still in our sins. They have been fully paid for by Christ. There is forgiveness for all.

When the apostle Paul went on his missionary journeys, he proclaimed the true Gospel (Good News) of forgiveness of sins for all, justification for all. These are his words in the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia at the close of his address: **“Let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins”** (Acts 13:38).

Consider carefully what God has done for us through the sacrifice of Christ. In earthly affairs a just judge condemns the guilty and acquits the innocent. Isaiah the prophet says: **“Woe to men...who justify the wicked for a bribe, and take away justice from the righteous man!”** (Isaiah 5:22-23). Yet, miracle of miracles, what God condemns in earthly judges He Himself does! And it is a just act, for He has done it. On the cross of Calvary God condemned the Innocent (Jesus) and justified the wicked (all mankind), as Paul says in Romans 4:5: **“Him who justifies the ungodly.”** God justifies the ungodly because He condemned the Innocent. He acquits the sinner because He punished the Sinless. Jesus was our Substitute. This is the amazing truth of the Gospel. How else could we be saved?

One of our old Lutheran hymns puts it like this:

The sinless Son of God must die in sadness;
The sinful child of man may live in gladness;
Man forfeited his life and is acquitted, --
God is committed. (*The Lutheran Hymnal*, #143:5)

Questions

1. How many persons were condemned because of Adam’s sin?
2. How many persons are declared righteous because of what Christ did?
3. Prove that universal justification is the teaching of the Bible.
4. What is meant by objective justification?
5. How did God announce to the world that all sins have been forgiven?
6. In what way is God’s forgiveness of sinners different from the way earthly judges make their judgments?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 7.2.3 – The Doctrine of the Way of Salvation (Soteriology)

Justification by Grace

In his letter to the Romans the apostle Paul specifically says that all persons are **“justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus”** (Romans 3:24). The term **“grace”** in this context means that our justification and the forgiveness we receive from God has not been earned, merited, or deserved by us in any way, but that it is a free gift from God that has been won for us by the sacrificial suffering and death of our Lord Jesus. It is because of Christ’s redemption that God can freely forgive us. It costs us nothing; it cost Jesus His life. **“In Him (Christ) we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace”** (Ephesians 1:7).

The contrast between grace and our efforts is stated plainly by the apostle Paul: **“If by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work”** (Romans 11:6). Paul makes the same claim in his letter to the Ephesians: **“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast”** (Ephesians 2:8-9). Forgiveness of sins (justification) is not something God owes us because of some quality in us. It is not payment from God for our works or even for our faith. It is a matter of grace, a free gift. As Paul says: **“To him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt”** (Romans 4:4). Our God is not paying us something He owes us as wages, but it is by grace that we are forgiven.

It is important that we recognize that grace is not something God pours into us, so that it becomes a quality of ours. Grace is the favorable disposition of God’s heart toward us because of the work of Christ for us, not His work in us; it is outside of us and apart from us, but it is for our benefit. We should not look inside ourselves to determine whether we have been forgiven and justified. But we should look to Jesus and trust God’s Word to us that He has by grace forgiven all our sins because of the sacrifice of Christ.

A proper understanding of grace is especially important because the Roman Catholic Church has a different definition of grace that contradicts the clear teaching of Scripture. In October of 1999 the Lutheran World Federation worked out a so-called agreement with the Roman Catholic Church by using the word **“grace”** without defining it. This allows both parties to interpret the word as they please. We, however, want to understand correctly what God means when He uses the word **“grace”**.

Questions

1. What does the word **“grace”** mean in Romans 3:24?
2. On what basis can God freely forgive us as His gift to us?
3. What is the difference between grace and debt?
4. How should we become certain that we are justified and forgiven?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 7.2.4 – The Doctrine of the Way of Salvation (Soteriology)

Justification by Faith, Not by Works

Just as the apostle Paul makes a big contrast between grace and works, so also he makes a big contrast between faith and works. If our justification is by works, then it is not by faith. If it is by faith, then it is not by works. This is stated most clearly by Paul in his letter to the Christians in Galatia: **“Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified”** (Galatians 2:16). Paul makes the same point in Romans 3:28: **“We conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.”**

The majority of the Jewish people made the mistake of thinking that they could earn the favor of God by their works, that is, by their obedience to the law. Because of this fatal mistake they witnessed many Gentiles (non-Jews) receiving the righteousness of God by faith in Christ, while they themselves failed to attain it because they were trusting in their works. Paul explained: **“Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith; but Israel (the Jews), pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law”** (Romans 9:30-32).

Is it possible to be justified partly by faith, and partly by works? Paul answers that question with a definite “no”. To the Galatians he wrote: **“You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace”** (Galatians 5:4). It is an either/or proposition. Either we hope to earn God’s favor by our works, or we trust in Christ for forgiveness. If we put our trust in our own works for salvation, we are lost; we have no benefit from Christ at all; we have fallen from grace, and this means that we are facing God’s anger and condemnation. Faith in Christ is the only way to receive the forgiveness and justification that Jesus has won for the whole world by His suffering and death for all.

We should keep the contrast between faith and works in mind whenever we hear or read that we are justified by faith. Paul repeats this truth many times in his letters. For example, he says that the righteousness of God becomes ours **“through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe”** (Romans 3:22). We hear **“through faith”** again in Romans 3:25. God is **“the Justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus”** (Romans 3:26). In the Greek language, the words for “faith” and “believe” are related words. The apostle John prefers to use the verb form, which is translated “believe”. **“He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him”** (John 3:36).

Since faith is contrasted with works, we should not think of faith itself as a work by which we save ourselves. Faith in Christ means that we give up trusting in ourselves or our own efforts – our own prayers, our own faith – and put our trust in Christ alone and what He has done to save us. Faith is not the *cause* of our justification, but faith is the way we receive the justification that is already there as a free gift from God because of the work of Jesus Christ. Our faith is counted by God as righteousness, not because our faith is so great, but because of the object of our faith: Jesus Christ, our Savior.

That is why we should always think “faith in Christ” whenever the Bible speaks of saving faith. Jesus said to His disciples: **“He who believes and is baptized will be saved”** (Mark 16:16). Does this mean

any kind of believing will save us? No, not at all! We must look at the context. Jesus said: **“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned”** (Mark 16:15-16). It is clear that Jesus is saying that everyone who believes the Gospel (the Good News) of Jesus will be saved; those who reject that Good News will be condemned.

The word “faith” is used very loosely in our day-to-day language. We talk of faith in our leaders, faith in oneself, faith in our country, faith in our pastor, faith in our church, or even faith in our faith. Faith in anything other than Christ does not save anyone from sin or death. Faith in itself does not save. Only faith *in Christ* saves. What counts is what you have faith in. It doesn’t matter if that faith is weak or strong. As long as it is faith in Christ, it received forgiveness. Thus, faith is not a *cause* of justification. It is what receives justification. The Bible does not say we are justified because of faith; it says we are justified through faith.

It is natural for human beings to think that they themselves need to do something in order to be saved. All the man-made religions of the world focus on man’s own efforts – his own thinking, doing, or feeling – as the only way to gain the favor of God and receive any kind of reward or blessing from Him. This idea is so ingrained in us that it easily sneaks into our Christian teaching. But the Bible absolutely excludes our works as the cause or even a partial cause of our justification. **“A man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law”** (Romans 3:28). Again, Paul speaks about being **“justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law”** (Galatians 2:16). The way of works is ruled out, and the way of faith is ruled in. That is why it is correct for us to say that we are saved by faith alone.

This means that the so-called good works that we do before coming to faith in Jesus do not contribute in any way to our being justified. The Pharisee in Jesus’ parable in Luke 18:9-14 followed the opinion of the world and was in his own opinion a very good man. He boasted: **“I am not like other men – extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.”** But these “good” works did not lead to his justification, for the tax collector was the one who went home justified, not the Pharisee.

The apostle Paul himself was such a Pharisee at one time in his life. He had been such a strict Pharisee, intent on obeying God’s law, that if anyone could be justified by his works, it would have been Paul. But after Paul came to believe in Christ and His work, he realized that his former so-called good works were worthless and contributed nothing at all to his justification. These are his words to the Christians in Philippi: **“If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith”** (Philippians 3:4-9). At one time Paul had trusted in his obedience to the law and his admirable life as a Pharisee, but later he regarded that obedience as worthless garbage, rubbish, because now he had the real thing: the righteousness of God in Christ, which was his, not by works, but by faith.

The real good works that a believer in Christ does after coming to faith do not contribute to their justification either. We are not saved by the good we do as Christians, but only by faith in Christ. Paul writes: **“If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness’”** (Romans 4:2-3). If we could contribute to our own justification by the good things we do as believers in Christ, then we would have something to brag about and it would no longer be true that we are saved by Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone, as the Bible teaches.

The apostle Paul as a believer in Christ speaks like this: **“The life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain”** (Galatians 2:20-21). If we credit our justification to our own obedience and good works in any way at all, we are telling Christ that He did not complete the work of our atonement by His suffering and death. But Christ alone is our Savior, and we need to cling to Him, and Him alone, for righteousness and forgiveness from God. We need to **“rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh”** (Philippians 3:3)

This is the Gospel (the Good News) that Paul proclaimed, and no one should dare to alter it in any way. Paul used strong language in condemning the false teachers in Galatia who were misleading his converts: **“I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed”** (Galatians 1:6-9).

Questions

1. Which way of justification is ruled out, and which way is ruled in as the only right way?
2. Why did the majority of the Jewish people fail to attain righteousness?
3. What is the result if a person depends partly on Christ and partly on his own obedience to God as a way of being saved?
4. Why is it important that we stress faith in Christ, rather than simply faith?
5. Since faith is not the cause of our justification, what is the cause of our justification?
6. What role or part does faith play in our justification?
7. What did Paul think of his former life as a Pharisee after he became a believer in Jesus?
8. Why should we not trust in the good things we do as Christians for salvation?
9. How many ways of salvation are there?
10. What is generally believed by the people in your locale about the right way to God or to a better hereafter?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 7.2.5 – The Doctrine of the Way of Salvation (Soteriology)

Justification by Grace, for Christ's Sake, through Faith

We have seen that Scripture teaches justification by grace alone, not merit. Scripture teaches justification by faith alone, not works. Scripture also teaches justification through Christ alone, not through any other Savior. We are **"justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus"** (Romans 3:24). It is **"by His blood"** that God declares us righteous in His sight (Romans 3:25). Paul repeats this same thought in Romans 5:9, when he says that we have **"been justified by His blood."** If Jesus had not taken the punishment for our sin in our place, there could be no justification for ungodly sinners. Jesus is certainly speaking the truth when He says of those who believe in Him: **"I give them eternal life"** (John 10:28). No one else could do what He did.

Since justification is by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, and apart from all human merits or works, it rests on an absolutely solid foundation. Paul says: **"Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed"** (Romans 4:16). If justification were partly by grace and partly by our merit, it would be unsure because it would depend partly on fallible man. If justification were partly by faith and partly by our own works, the certain failure in our works would make our justification unsure. If justification depended on the work of anyone other than Jesus, the Son of God, it would not be sufficient. Paul says that in Christ **"we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him"** (Ephesians 3:12).

Paul concludes his discussion of justification with these bold and confident words: **"I am persuaded (convinced) that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord"** (Romans 8:38-39).

The Roman Catholic Church, as well as others, have taught that it is wrong for Christians to be absolutely sure of their salvation. They want Christians to remain in constant uncertainty as to whether they will be saved or not. But this is a horrible teaching that Martin Luther called monstrous. He had been brought up in this uncertainty, and he had tried every possible way of being assured of his salvation – by becoming a monk, by doing good works, by praying, by punishing himself, by obeying his superiors, by trying to keep God's laws perfectly, by confessing every single sin he could think of – but all of this did not bring him the certainty of salvation he longed for. But then the Holy Spirit led him to the Scripture teaching that our salvation is assured by what Christ did perfectly, not by anything we can do. Our salvation is sure because it is by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith. God wants us to be sure of our salvation. The Apostle John said: **"These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life"** (1 John 5:13).

The teaching of justification by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, gives all glory to God for our salvation. Three times the apostle Paul repeats the same phrase in speaking of God's plan of salvation: **"to the praise of the glory of His grace"** (Ephesians 1:6), **"to the praise of His glory"** (Ephesians 1:12), **"to the praise of His glory"** (Ephesians 1:14). He emphasizes the same point in Ephesians 2 when he twice says: **"By grace you have been saved"** (Ephesians 2:5, 8). There is nothing that brings greater glory to God than the salvation of mankind brought about by God's working alone, through His Son and Holy Spirit. For this reason, as the final hour drew near for Jesus to carry out His work of redemption, He said: **"Now the Son of Man is glorified, and God is glorified in Him"** (John 13:31).

Because of our sinful flesh, God has to keep reminding us of His Law that condemns us, and warning us of the dangers that threaten us, but the doctrine of justification by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith is the purest Gospel. That is, it is Good News through and through, a promise and a guarantee from God that He wants us to cling to through thick and thin, something we can depend on absolutely, no matter what experiences we are undergoing or how we feel at the moment. When the jailer of Philippi came trembling to Paul and Silas and asked them: **"Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"**, what was their answer? **"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved"** (Acts 16:30-31). When we use these words in dealing with troubled sinners like the jailer, we should be sure to stress the Lord Jesus Christ, not the act of believing. Remember: faith or believing is not the cause of our justification, but only the way we receive it. Other words may be substituted for "faith" and "believing", words such as "depend on", "rely on", "trust in". We are not justified because of our believing, but because of Christ and His work, and that is what we should rely on.

The justification that Christ won for us and for the world comes to us (and to the world) through the means of grace: the preaching and teaching of the Good News (the Gospel) and the use of the Gospel sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. We do not have to go up to heaven to bring Christ down, and we do not have to go down to the abyss to bring Christ up, because Christ comes to us in His Word. Paul calls it **"the word of faith which we preach"** (Romans 10:8) He explains it like this: **"How shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? ... So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God"** (Romans 10:14-17). It is for this reason that Christ has made those who believe in Him His **"ambassadors"** and **"has given us the ministry of reconciliation"** and **"has committed to us the word of reconciliation"** so that **"we implore"** people **"on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God"** **"as though God were pleading through us"** (2 Corinthians 5:18-20). We shall discuss the means of grace in greater detail later on.

It is clear from what Scripture itself says that the doctrine of justification is the central doctrine of Scripture. The apostle Peter said to the Gentile Cornelius and all those gathered in his home: **"To Him (Christ) all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins"** (Acts 10:43). The apostle Paul said that the ministry that he received from the Lord Jesus was **"to testify to the gospel of the grace of God"** (Acts 20:24). More concisely he said: **"We preach Christ crucified"** (1 Corinthians 1:23), and again: **"I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified"** (1 Corinthians 2:2). All the other teachings of Scripture are related to this central theme.

All true Christians agree on the doctrine of justification by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith. Otherwise they would not be Christians. Rejection of this doctrine condemns to hell, for Jesus said: **"He who does not believe (the gospel) will be condemned"** (Mark 16:16). The prophet Habakkuk said it long before the apostle Paul: **"The just shall live by his faith"** (Habakkuk 2:4). The apostle Paul introduced his long discussion of justification in his letter to the Romans by saying: **"I am ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also. For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'The just shall live by faith'"** (Romans 1:15-17). It is widely recognized that justification by faith is the theme of Paul's letter to the Romans. He quotes Habakkuk also in his letter to the Galatians, saying: **"That no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for 'the just shall live by faith'"** (Galatians 3:11). And remember, if anyone attempts to attain justification in any other way, they lose Christ, their only Savior: **"You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace"** (Galatians 5:4).

Questions

1. Prove from the Bible that we are justified for Christ's sake.
2. What is it that makes our justification sure and certain?
3. What kind of teaching would make our salvation unsure and uncertain?
4. Why is the Roman Catholic teaching of uncertainty a horrible doctrine?
5. What is it that brings the greatest glory to our God?
6. Which words should we stress when we say: "Believe in the Lord Jesus" and why?
7. How does the justification Jesus won for all reach the individual?
8. What do we call these ways by which the Gospel reaches us?
9. What does it mean to be an ambassador for Christ?
10. Why is the doctrine of justification such an important doctrine?
11. What is the theme of Paul's letter to the Romans?
12. Why do we say that all Christians agree on how we are justified?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 7.2.6 – The Doctrine of the Way of Salvation (Soteriology)

The Blessings of Justification

The person who knows his sins are forgiven because of Christ's sacrifice is a blessed person. David describes such a person in Psalm 32: **"Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity"** (Psalm 32:1-2). Such a person knows that God does not count his sins against him. No, God declares that person just in His sight, declared righteous, justified.

After calling attention to David's words in the fourth chapter of his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul goes on in the following chapters to spell out the blessed results of justification. He writes, for example: **"Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations"** (Romans 5:1-3). Because of our sins our natural state is not peace with God at all, rather we are under God's wrath. But when God pardons us because of Christ's work, we are at peace with God. Because we are at peace with God, we can freely speak to Him in prayer; we have access to Him by faith. We are not excluded from His presence. This means that our natural fear of death is overcome by the prospect of eternal life. We rejoice in hope of the glory of God. The hope of heaven cheers our spirits.

It is also true that since we know that our sins are forgiven and that we are regarded as God's holy children through faith in Jesus, we are able to persevere more easily through the various tribulations that come our way. Since our sins are forgiven, we know that whatever we have to endure in this life, is not an indication of God's hatred or that He has forsaken us. What God did for us in Christ in taking away our sins and declaring us righteous and forgiven in His sight remains as an impregnable fact in our lives. Regardless of what happens to us and no matter how we feel or how much we suffer, this fact remains true: Jesus died for our sins and rose again, and therefore God counts us as righteous in His sight. We are His beloved children for whom Jesus died. Apart from Jesus' work we would be wretched, but because of what Christ did, we are blessed.

In chapters 5-8 of his letter to the Christians in Rome the apostle Paul pictures the blessings of justification as freedom from God's wrath or anger (chapter 5), freedom from the slavery and power of sin (chapter 6), freedom from the law (chapter 7), and freedom from death (chapter 8). Each chapter ends with a reference to the work of Jesus Christ in our behalf that has established this freedom for us. Chapter 5 ends with the phrase: **"eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord"** (Romans 5:21). The last sentence of chapter 6 is: **"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"** (Romans 6:23). At the end of chapter 7 Paul cries out: **"O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!"** (Romans 7:24-25). Finally, in chapter 8, we find Paul exulting in the fact that nothing, not even death, **"shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord"** (Romans 8:39).

What a great blessing it is to be free from the wrath of God! **"Having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him"** for **"we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son"** (Romans 5:9-10).

What a great blessing it is to be free from the power and slavery of sin! Jesus said: **“Whoever commits sin is a slave of sin... If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed”** (John 8:34-36). **“You were slaves of sin,”** Paul says, but now, **“having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness... But now, having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life”** (Romans 6:17-18, 22).

What a great blessing it is to be free from bondage to God’s holy Law! God’s law is good, but we are doomed if we try to keep God’s law in order to attain righteousness as we cannot perfectly keep God’s law. **“But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter”** (Romans 7:6). No longer must we strive to keep the law in order to become holy in God’s sight. Now, because of what Christ has done, we are enabled to do what the law says in a joyful spirit, because we know God has already forgiven our sins for Christ’s sake.

What a great blessing it is to be free from death itself! **“It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? ... I am persuaded that neither death nor life...nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord”** (Romans 8:33-39).

Because we retain our sinful flesh until death, we need to be on guard against abusing the freedom that we have in Christ. Since we have been set free from sin, we must be on guard lest we live in sin. **“How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?”** (Romans 6:2) **“For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another”** (Galatians 5:13). We are to live **“as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God”** (1 Peter 2:16).

Another blessing that results from our justification is that we can consider ourselves sons and daughters of God – members of His holy family. The apostle John tells us: **“Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God... Beloved, now we are children of God”** (1 John 3:1-2). It was our sin that made us enemies of God. But now Christ has taken away our sin. **“You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus”** (Galatians 3:26). Christ came into the world and carried out His work of redemption **“that we might receive the adoption as sons”** (Galatians 4:5).

The prophet Isaiah told the people of his day: **“Your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear”** (Isaiah 59:2). But since God pardons our sins for Christ’s sake, we are no longer separate from God, but we have peace with God and a good conscience. **“The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus”** (Philippians 4:7). **“Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”** (Romans 5:1).

The Bible speaks of living **“under law”** and living **“under grace”** (Romans 6:14). Life lived under law is not a blessed, joyful life. It is a life that is plagued by fear that we have not measured up to God’s standard of perfection. We may try to lower God’s standards so that we can live up to them. If we think we have lived up to them, we become proud of ourselves. But even then, in the face of death we become uncertain as to whether we have done enough. Or we may realize our case is hopeless and so we are driven to despair and hopelessness.

But life lived under grace is a joyful life, because we know that our sins are forgiven because of Christ and that we are the beloved children of God by faith in Jesus. God works all things together for our good. Because He has shown such love to us, we love Him in return and cheerfully think, speak, and work according to His will, albeit in great weakness because of our sinful flesh. We walk **“in newness of life”** (Romans 6:4). We **“serve in the newness of the Spirit”** (Romans 7:6). We **“delight in the law**

of God according to the inward man” (Romans 7:22). We present “our bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God” (Romans 12:1). We are enabled to “do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works” (Titus 2:11-14).

Our growth in appreciating the blessings of justification and living accordingly may be gradual, but justification itself is not gradual; justification is instantaneous. Because of Jesus’ death for all sins of every sinner and because of His resurrection from the dead, forgiveness of sins is a ready blessing offered to all persons everywhere. The whole world has been declared righteous in the sight of God. The only way we receive this universal justification is by faith in Jesus. The tiniest faith in Jesus receives the total blessing: total forgiveness of sins, total justification.

Thus the present world is divided into two classes and only two classes: those who are justified without knowing it or trusting in it, and those who have received justification and all of its blessings by faith. The unbelievers, by their rejection of God’s gift of justification, forfeit the gift of justification and lose its blessings as long as they reject it. In Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, the tax collector went home justified, totally justified, 100% righteous in God’s eyes, whereas the proud Pharisee went home unjustified, with 0% righteousness in God’s eyes (Luke 8:9-14). And so it is with us. We either believe in Jesus and receive the total package, 100% forgiveness, or we do not believe in Jesus and reject His gift of forgiveness and are 0% righteous in His sight. But as long as they are alive in this world, there remains an opportunity for unbelievers to become believers in Christ through the Gospel. That is why we are to go into all the world and preach the Gospel of Jesus to every creature (Mark 16:15-16).

Questions

1. Which person is blessed, according to Psalm 32?
2. Which blessings of justification are spelled out in Romans 5:1-5?
3. How is it possible for a Christian to rejoice in time of tribulation?
4. Name the four things from which we are free, according to Romans 5-8.
5. What is meant by the wrath of God?
6. What is the difference between being under law and under grace?
7. Why can the Christian live a joyful life under grace?
8. Why do we say justification is instantaneous rather than gradual?
9. Can a person with weak faith be saved? Explain your answer.



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 7.2.7 – The Doctrine of the Way of Salvation (Soteriology)

Justification by Works in the Sight of Man

In a few cases the term “justification” is not used to refer to God’s declaration that a person righteous for Christ’s sake, but refers to man’s declaration that another person is righteousness. In this case, one person declares another person righteous on the basis of that person’s works, that is, on the basis of their deeds and their actions. In other words, the faith in a person’s heart is shown by what that person does, and on this basis, they are declared righteous by those who see what that person is doing. Jesus’ brother James, in particular, uses this language when he says that **“faith without works is dead”** (James 2:20) and is no faith at all.

James was concerned with his readers who claimed to have faith but did not give evidence of this faith in their actions. So he asked: **“What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?”** (James 2:14). **“Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead”** (James 2:17). In other words, true faith always brings forth fruit; if there is no fruit, there is no faith. It is in this context that James makes the statement: **“Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? ... You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only”** (James 2:21-24). Abraham’s actions demonstrated the that he had faith in his heart.

This statement of James seems to be contrary to what Paul wrote. But there is no conflict when we realize that James was concerned about us giving evidence of faith in the sight of others. The apostle Paul agreed that faith without works is dead, for he wrote about **“faith working through love”** (Galatians 5:6). Someone has formulated this slogan: “We are saved by faith alone, but true faith is never alone.” The branches that are attached by faith to Christ, the Vine, will invariably bring forth fruit. Jesus said: **“A tree is known by its fruit”** (Matthew 12:33). **“By your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned”** (Matthew 12:37). On the Last Day it will become evident to all that Jesus’ sheep (those who trust in Him) have brought forth good fruit in their attitudes and actions. Jesus said: **“By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another”** (John 13:35). Love is the evidence and proof of faith.

In his first letter the apostle John shows how one can use his own actions to prove to himself that his faith is genuine: **“If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin”** (1 John 1:6-7). Walking in the darkness of sin and shame is sure proof that we do not have faith in Christ, even though we say we have fellowship with Him. But walking in the light is evidence that our faith is genuine, and we can be sure that we have cleansing from sin. John’s first letter contains many such self-tests that show the genuineness of faith. See 1 John 2:3-6, 9-11 and 1 John 3:10-15, 18-21. **“My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth”** (1 John 3:18).

Nevertheless, we need to be very careful in judging our faith by our own actions. For there are also hypocrites who seem to be able to imitate the actions of true Christians without being believers in Christ. Also, a genuine Christian may look at their own actions and give up hope that they are really a Christian. In the case of doubt, one must be persuaded to look away from one’s own actions and concentrate on Christ and His love as demonstrated on the cross.

The Christian congregation cannot see into the hearts of its members to determine whether they are genuine believers in Christ. The congregation must use the actions it sees to judge the faith of its members. Our faith in Christ is like an internal light that shines into the world by its good works and thus brings glory to our God (Matthew 5:14-16). Congregational discipline is possible only on the basis of actions that can be observed, not on the basis of faith within the heart. This does not mean we condemn others for not doing a certain amount of good works, but rather we confront those who demonstrate a lack of faith by sinful actions and lack of repentance. The congregation in Corinth was instructed by Paul to put out of their fellowship one man who was openly guilty of the sin of adultery. He was judged to be an unbeliever on the basis of his sinful actions (1 Corinthians 5:1-13).

In summary, we can conclude that justification before God is by grace alone, but works, as the fruits of faith, show this justification before men. For example, the woman who washed Jesus' feet in Simon's house showed her faith in Christ's forgiveness by showering Him with her love (Luke 7:36-50).

One of our Lutheran fathers, George Stoeckhardt, summed up the doctrine of justification by writing: "The only way we men since Adam's fall can stand before God and be saved is that we who are destitute of and free from all righteousness, who have as our sole possession transgression and sin, clothe ourselves with a foreign righteousness, with Christ's blood and righteousness." By "foreign" righteousness he meant we are saved by the righteousness of someone else – a righteousness that is not our own. This "someone else" is Jesus Christ.

Article IV of the *Augsburg Confession* says: "Furthermore, it is taught (among us) that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for His sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness in His sight, as St. Paul says in Romans 3:21-26 and 4:5)" (*Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, pp. 38-40).

Article IV is a short article, but it is the key article that separated Martin Luther and his associates from the Roman Catholic teaching of his time. This article still separates genuine Lutherans from the adherents of the papacy. The Biblical basis for Article IV is presented at great length in the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Article IV (*Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, pp. 120-173).

Questions

1. How does a person show that he has faith in Christ?
2. What concern did James, the brother of our Lord, have with his readers?
3. What was the evidence of Abraham's faith that showed him to be righteous before men?
4. What is true of every branch that is attached to the true Vine, Christ?
5. How are people able to tell which persons are Jesus' disciples?
6. How can Christians look at their own actions to assure themselves that they are believers in Christ?
7. Why must we be very careful in judging ourselves in this way?
8. On what basis do Christian congregations make judgments concerning their members?
9. What is the main point and purpose of Article IV of the *Augsburg Confession*, quoted above?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 7.3.1 – The Doctrine of the Way of Salvation (Soteriology)

Conversion as Calling

Up to now we have considered mostly the work of God the Father and God the Son. But the work of the Holy Spirit is also necessary for our salvation. Martin Luther wrote in his *Large Catechism*: “Neither you nor I could ever know anything about Christ, or believe in Him and receive Him as Lord, unless these were offered to us and bestowed on our hearts through the preaching of the Gospel by the Holy Spirit. The work is finished and completed; Christ has acquired and won the treasure for us by His sufferings, death, and resurrection, etc. But if the work remained hidden so that no one knew of it, it would have been all in vain, all lost. In order that this treasure might not remain buried but be put to use and enjoyed, God has caused the Word to be published and proclaimed, in which He has given the Holy Spirit to offer and apply to us this treasure, this redemption” (*Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 436).

The work of the Holy Spirit in bringing sinners to faith in Jesus Christ can be called conversion, which is the transition of a person from the state of unbelief into the state of faith in Christ. Other terms for the Holy Spirit’s work of conversion are calling, regenerating, vivifying, quickening, illuminating, enlightening, and awaking. The Bible and our Lutheran confessions use all of these terms. The Holy Spirit works through Law and Gospel to bring sinners to repentance.

The terms “call” and “calling” sometimes refer to the Holy Spirit’s invitation to turn to Christ and trust in Him for salvation. The Holy Spirit’s invitation is always a serious invitation. In other words, the Holy Spirit is extending to us the gift of forgiveness because of Christ’s work and seriously and earnestly wants us to accept this invitation. **“The Lord...is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance”** (2 Peter 3:9). **“God our Savior...desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”** (1 Timothy 2:3-4). Just as God the Father sent His Son to be the Savior of the world, and just as God the Son suffered and died for all sinners on the cross, so the Holy Spirit invites all sinners to believe in Him and strives earnestly to bring all sinners to faith in Christ through the Gospel.

Followers of John Calvin generally teach that even though the invitation goes out to all, the Holy Spirit actually intends to bring only some to faith, even as they teach that Jesus did not die for all sinners, but only for some whom He intended to bring to faith. In that case, however, God would be deceiving us, pretending to invite all, but secretly intending only to save some. But listen to Isaiah’s invitation: **“Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat... Incline your ear, and come to Me. Hear, and your soul shall live”** (Isaiah 55:1-3). The prophet Ezekiel likewise calls out: **“As I live,’ says the Lord GOD, ‘I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways!”** (Ezekiel 33:11). Surely Jesus Himself was serious in His invitation to all: **“Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest”** (Matthew 11:28). **“If anyone thirsts, let Him come to Me and drink”** (John 7:37).

The reason that some do not accept the invitation has nothing to do with God’s call or the Lord’s desire to save all, but with those who reject the call. Listen to Jesus again: **“How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!”** (Matthew 23:37). In Jesus’ parables of the wedding dinner and the great supper, the reason that some

did not enjoy these meals was not the desire of the hosts nor their invitations, but the refusal on the part of those invited. **“They all with one accord began to make excuses”** (Luke 14:18). **“Those who were invited to the wedding...were not willing to come”** (Matthew 22:3).

In the letters of the apostles Paul and Peter, the words “call” and “calling” include both the invitation and the persuasion needed to bring about an acceptance of the invitation. When we say that the Holy Spirit has “called” us by the Gospel, we mean that He has brought the Gospel to us so that we know what it is and accept it. That is, we were formerly unbelievers, but now by the Holy Spirit’s work in us through the Gospel, we are believers in Christ. Paul writes to the Christians in Thessalonica: **“He called you by our Gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ”** (2 Thessalonians 2:14). The Holy Spirit uses the truth of the Gospel to bring about **“belief in the truth”** (2 Thessalonians 2:13). Paul wrote to his young associate Timothy: **“God...saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace”** (2 Timothy 1:8-9). The apostle Peter wrote to his readers: He **“called you out of darkness into His marvelous light”** (1 Peter 2:9).

Questions

1. In what way is the work of the Holy Spirit necessary for our salvation?
2. What is the meaning of the word “conversion”?
3. How many persons does God want to bring to faith in Jesus?
4. What false teaching is taught by Calvinists concerning God’s invitation?
5. Give Bible proof that God wants all people to be saved.
6. Whose fault is it that some people hear the truth but reject it?
7. What do Jesus’ two parables of the wedding dinner and the great supper teach us about God’s invitation?
8. What meaning is included in the word “call” when it is used by Peter and John?
9. What does it mean that the Holy Spirit calls us by the Gospel?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 7.3.2 – The Doctrine of the Way of Salvation (Soteriology)

Repentance

The words “repentance” and “repent” are sometimes used in the Bible in a broad sense, sometimes in a narrow sense. In the narrow sense repentance refers to sorrow and regret over former sins. This is also called contrition. When God appeared to Job after those many days of intense suffering in which Job had frequently complained of how God had treated him, Job expressed regret over what he had said. **“Behold, I am vile,”** he said, **“What shall I answer You”** (Job 40:4). **“I have uttered what I did not understand... I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes”** (Job 42:3, 6).

In His ministry Jesus Himself repeated the message of John the Baptist, saying to the people: **“Repent, and believe in the gospel”** (Mark 1:15). Before the gospel would be good news for them, the people needed to acknowledge and confess their sins. After Jesus completed His work of atoning for the sins of the world and rose from the dead in victory, He instructed His disciples **“that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations”** (Luke 24:47). Notice that in all these references repentance *precedes* the preaching of the Gospel of Christ’s forgiveness.

When Simon, the sorcerer, thought he could buy the skill or art of imparting the Holy Spirit, the apostle Peter said to him: **“Your heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this your wickedness”** (Acts 8:21-22). The apostle Paul was fearful lest, when he came to Corinth, his opponents would not have **“repented of the uncleanness, fornication, and lewdness which they have practiced”** (2 Corinthians 12:21).

Thus repentance (in this narrow sense, also called contrition) is a feeling of terror or fright that arises in a person when they realize that they have done something against the will of a holy God who threatens to punish them for their sin. This feeling is generally created by the preaching of God’s stern law that denounces all sin.

When the words “repent” and “repentance” are used in the broad sense, they include not only the contrition for sin, but also a trust in Jesus and His work for the forgiveness of sins. In this sense repentance is a synonym for conversion. For example, when Jesus was discussing two tragedies that had occurred, He said: **“Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish”** (Luke 13:2-5). It is clear from the context that repentance in this case includes both the terror on account of sin and trust in Jesus’ forgiveness. For no one is saved simply by being contrite without trusting in Jesus. Judas Iscariot regretted what he had done in betraying Jesus, but he did not trust that Jesus could forgive him. In despair he took his own life (Matthew 27:3-5).

The word “repent” must be understood in the broad sense in Jesus’ statement: **“There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents”** (Luke 15:10). Certainly the angels would not be happy to see a sinner come only to recognize his sins, but not find the remedy for his sins. So, in this case, the repentance includes trust in Jesus for salvation. Repentance thus involves a complete turn-around – a total change in heart and mind. A person is heading in one direction, away from God through sin and unbelief, and in repentance he turns and is heading in the opposite direction, trusting in Christ and living under grace and traveling towards heaven.

Repentance in the broad sense therefore has two parts: contrition and faith. The Bible also speaks of the fruits of repentance, which are the fruits of faith in Christ. John the Baptist called for such fruits from the Pharisees and Sadducees, whom he called a **“brood of vipers.”** He told them: **“Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance”** (Matthew 3:7-8). Compare also Luke 3:8-14, where various fruits of repentance are spelled out. The apostle Paul explained his work to King Agrippa in these words: **“I...declared...that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance”** (Acts 26:19-20).

God is the One who works repentance in a sinner. For this purpose, He uses both His law and His Gospel: He uses the law to bring about contrition and He uses the Gospel to create faith in Christ. When Jesus told His disciples that He would send the Holy Spirit to them, He pointed out one of the things the Spirit would do: **“When He has come, He will convict the world of sin”** (John 16:8). The Holy Spirit in the apostle Paul preached the law to Governor Felix, and we read: **“Now as he reasoned about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid”** (Acts 24:25).

After introducing the theme of his letter to the Christians in Rome, the apostle Paul launched into a prolonged discussion of the law of God, showing that the purpose of the law is to show sinners of all types their sin, in order to bring about contrition. **“The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men”** (Romans 1:18). He concluded his presentation with a blanket condemnation: **“Both Jews and Greeks...are all under sin”** (Romans 3:9). The purpose of the law’s condemnation is **“that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God... By the law is the knowledge of sin... All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”** (Romans 3:19-20, 23).

But this law preaching can do no more than create terrors of conscience and feelings of contrition. The Holy Spirit’s work of convincing sinners of their sin is only preliminary to His main work of bringing about faith in Christ through the Good News of Christ and what He has done.

The repentance of a sinner is the work of God, which He carries out through the preliminary preaching of the law and the proclaiming of the Gospel. The law by itself cannot create faith in Christ. The law is not a means of grace. When Peter and the other apostles were brought before the Jewish council, they said: **“The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins”** (Acts 5:30-31). When the Gospel preached by Paul was successful in bringing Gentiles to faith in Christ, the early Christians **“glorified God, saying, ‘Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life’”** (Acts 11:18).

There is no way for Christians and Christian evangelists to lead others to repentance other than to use the tools God has provided: the Law to expose sin and the Gospel to extend the forgiveness won by Jesus to troubled sinners. The apostle Paul reminded the elders of Ephesus how he had worked among them for three years: **“I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ”** (Acts 20:20-21).

The true teaching of repentance was gradually lost in the Roman church, until it degenerated into the sacrament of penance, which requires three human works for it to be effective: contrition, confession, and satisfaction¹. The proclamation of forgiveness in Christ and the need for faith in Christ were minimized, and they emphasized human action.

In contrast, our Lutheran fathers adopted Article XIII of the *Augsburg Confession*, which declares: *“True repentance is nothing else than to have contrition and sorrow, or terror, on account of sin, and yet at the same time to believe in the Gospel and absolution that sin is forgiven and grace is obtained through Christ. Such faith, in turn, comforts the heart and puts it at peace. Then improvement should also*

¹ Satisfaction is an act that the sinner is told to do to make up for their sin.

follow, and a person should refrain from sins. For these should be the fruits of repentance” (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 44).

Questions

1. What is the difference between repentance in the narrow sense and repentance in the broad sense?
2. Why is the preaching of God’s law important in the teaching of repentance?
3. Why is the law by itself unable to bring about faith in Christ?
4. What, then, is the main purpose of the law?
5. What are the two parts of repentance in the broad sense?
6. What is meant by the fruits of repentance?
7. How did the apostle Paul carry out his mission work in Ephesus?
8. What is the difference between the Roman teaching of repentance and the Lutheran teaching of repentance?
9. What is meant by the term “means of grace”?



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 7.3.3 – The Doctrine of the Way of Salvation (Soteriology)

Regeneration or Being Born Again

Jesus Himself said to Nicodemus, a Pharisee who came to see Him by night: **“You must be born again”** (John 3:7). Regeneration, or being born again, is necessary because our first birth from our biological parents provides physical life, but not spiritual life. **“That which is born of the flesh is flesh”** (John 3:6). Our parents are sinners, and therefore we are sinners also. In fact, by nature we are **“dead in trespasses and sins”** (Ephesians 2:1). That is why Jesus said to Nicodemus: **“Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God”** (John 3:3). In further explanation Jesus said: **“Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God”** (John 3:5). This second birth is a spiritual birth brought about by the action of the Holy Spirit. **“That which is born of the Spirit is spirit”** (John 3:6).

The result of the second birth is faith in Jesus and thus becoming a child of God. For it is written: **“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, not of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God”** (John 1:12-13).

How does the Holy Spirit bring about this new birth? The apostle Peter explains that we who believe in Christ have **“been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God, which lives and abides forever”** (1 Peter 1:23). The Holy Spirit creates spiritual life through the Word of God, specifically, the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. **“Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God”** (1 John 5:1). Jesus’ brother James also tells us how God brings about this second birth. He uses the Gospel. **“Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth”** (James 1:18). God uses human instruments to proclaim His Gospel, and through the Gospel we proclaim, He regenerates sinners, and brings them out of spiritual death to spiritual life. He makes them alive. Paul wrote to his converts in Corinth: **“Though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel”** (1 Corinthians 4:15).

Just as no one can contribute to his own physical birth, so also no one can contribute to his own spiritual birth. Paul says: **“God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ”** (Ephesians 2:4-5). God gets all the credit for regeneration, for He does this without the help of the person being regenerated. **“You, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses”** (Colossians 2:13). A dead person certainly cannot contribute anything to his being made alive.

The regenerating power of the Holy Spirit is also present in baptism. Paul says: **“Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life”** (Titus 3:5-7). God works regeneration through the Holy Spirit’s washing of regeneration and renewal, which is baptism. For baptism is **“the washing of the water by the word”** (Ephesians 5:26). It is not simple water only, but water that is connected with the Word of God and used by God’s command. That is why Jesus said to Nicodemus: **“Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God”** (John 3:5). Nicodemus, as a Pharisee, was not willing to

be baptized by John the Baptist, and therefore Jesus made it clear that Nicodemus needed baptism just like any other sinner. For it is through baptism that the Holy Spirit washes away our sins and creates in us new spiritual life. We begin to have faith in Christ through the Holy Spirit's cleansing in baptism.

The new life God that creates in us in our second birth through God's Word can be lost again through our rejection or neglect of the Word of God. In His parable of the sower and the seed, Jesus spoke of the seed that fell on the rock and grew up quickly but soon withered away and then explained: **"But the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away"** (Luke 8:13). In such cases the person needs to be regenerated anew by the Spirit through the Word of God.

God warns us through Paul: **"If you live according to the flesh, you will die"** (Romans 8:13). **"Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall"** (1 Corinthians 10:12). **"You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace"** (Galatians 5:4).

Thus, Jesus and His apostles teach us that there are those who believe in Christ for a while and then fall away. For this reason, we cannot agree with Calvinists and others who teach that a believer in Christ can never lose his faith. "Once saved, always saved" is their motto. This has led some persons who were once believers to think they are still believers, even though they are living in a way that is directly contrary to the Word of God without repentance. The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy that Hymenaeus and Alexander had **"suffered shipwreck" "concerning the faith"** (1 Timothy 1:19-20). Referring to some of his converts in Galatia who had fallen from faith in Christ, Paul said: **"My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you"** (Galatians 4:19).

For this reason Martin Luther wrote in the *Smalcald Articles*, one of our Lutheran confessions: *"Therefore It is necessary to know and teach that when holy people – aside from the fact that they still have and feel original sin and also daily repent of it and struggle against it – somehow fall into a public sin (such as David, who fell into adultery, murder, and blasphemy against God), at that point faith and the Spirit have departed. The Holy Spirit does not allow sin to rule and gain the upper hand so that it is brought to completion, but the Spirit controls and resists so that sin is not able to do whatever it wants. However, when sin does whatever it wants, then the Holy Spirit and faith are not there"* (*Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 319).

Questions

1. Why is it necessary for a person to be born again?
2. What is the difference between physical birth and spiritual birth?
3. What is true of every believer in Christ?
4. How does the Holy Spirit bring about spiritual birth?
5. How can baptizing with water bring about regeneration?
6. Why did Jesus tell Nicodemus that he had to be born of water and the Spirit?
7. How do we know that spiritual life can be lost again?
8. What is wrong with the slogan: "Once saved, always saved"? Explain.
9. Summarize Martin Luther's statement in the *Smalcald Articles* printed above in your own words.



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 7.3.4 – The Doctrine of the Way of Salvation (Soteriology)

Illumination and Enlightenment

The beginning of faith in Christ in an individual can be pictured as coming out of the darkness into the light. This is what is meant by the terms “illumination” and “enlightenment”. The apostle Paul said that his assignment as missionary to the Gentiles was **“to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me”** (Acts 26:18). Being without faith in Christ is like being in the darkness, but knowing Jesus and His blessings is like being in the light. The apostle Peter used the same picture when he wrote to the Christians in his care: **“You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light”** (1 Peter 2:9).

In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul compared God’s creation of the spiritual light of faith with God’s creation of light on the first day of world history: **“It is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”** (2 Corinthians 4:6). Notice that God is the Creator of spiritual light just as He is the Creator of physical light, and this creation of light is accomplished in both cases by His Word.

The difference between darkness and light is not only a difference between unbelief and faith, but between evil and good. Paul says: **“You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), finding out what is acceptable to the Lord. And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them”** (Ephesians 5:8-11). How can we tell the difference between the works of darkness and the goodness that comes from the Spirit? The psalmist answers: **“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path”** (Psalm 119:105).

It is important that we remember that spiritual light does not come from within ourselves but from an outside source; it comes from the Holy Spirit using the Word of God, just as God created physical light on the first day of creation using His Word when He said: **“Let there be light”** (Genesis 1:3). George Fox, the founder of the religious group known as the Quakers, claimed that true spiritual light comes from within a person. He called this “the Inner Light”, and taught his followers to look for this inner light within themselves. But the Holy Spirit does His work by shining the light of the Gospel in a person’s heart; this light comes from the Holy Spirit through the Word, as it is written: **“It pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe”** (1 Corinthians 1:21).

The means of enlightenment is not the law of God, for Paul claims: **“By the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin”** (Romans 3:20). The Holy Spirit does not bring about enlightenment by leading us to be more obedient to His law by gradual steps until finally we are enlightened and do what is right. God’s law has only a negative role in showing us our sin. Enlightenment does not come until Christ Jesus and His grace are proclaimed to us. For it is written: **“He called you by our Gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ”** (2 Thessalonians 2:14). It is **“the prophetic word”** that we are **“to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts”** (2 Peter 1:19). How did the Holy Spirit do His work of enlightenment of the Gentiles through Paul? He preached **“among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ”** (Ephesians 3:8). As the psalmist said: **“The entrance of Your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple”** (Psalm 119:130).

Questions:

1. What is spiritual darkness, and what is spiritual light?
2. Who brings us out of spiritual darkness into the light?
3. How are we brought out of spiritual darkness into the light?
4. Where did George Fox say we should look for the light?
5. What is wrong with George Fox's teaching on this matter?
6. Prove that the Holy Spirit does His work of enlightening through the Gospel.
7. What purpose does the Law serve in enlightening those in the dark?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 7.3.5 – The Doctrine of the Way of Salvation (Soteriology)

Conversion as Turning or Changing Direction

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament picture the change from unbelief to faith in Christ as a turning or change in direction. It is a turning away from sin and a turning towards God that is brought about by the Holy Spirit through the Word of God – the Law prepares for the change and the Gospel is the Holy Spirit's instrument of conversion or means of grace.

The necessity of turning away from evil is brought out by the prophet Jeremiah. As a spokesman for the Lord he says: **"If that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it"** (Jeremiah 18:8). False teachers are condemned because they make no attempt to use God's Word to turn the people away from their evil ways. God says through Jeremiah: **"I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran. I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied. But if they had stood in My counsel, and had caused My people to hear My words, then they would have turned them from their evil way and from the evil of their doings"** (Jeremiah 23:21-22). But even true prophets who use God's Word correctly will not succeed in turning or converting all their listeners. God spoke through the prophet Ezekiel: **"If you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul"** (Ezekiel 3:19). True teachers use the means God has provided for bringing about conversion, but they are not at fault if the people do not listen to them.

Throughout their history the Israelites often fell away from their God and needed to have their direction reversed. They needed to turn back to their God. Without that turning they were doomed to destruction. Moses encouraged the people to turn back to God in times when God was sending judgments on them because of their sins. He told them: **"When you are in distress, and all these things come upon you in the latter days, when you turn to the LORD your God and obey His voice (for the LORD your God is a merciful God), He will not forsake you nor destroy you, nor forget the covenant of your fathers which He swore to them"** (Deuteronomy 4:30-31).

The prophet Samuel was a faithful teacher of God's people, and the people responded to his call for conversion (or changing direction). He said to them: **"If you return to the LORD with all your hearts, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths from among you, and prepare your hearts for the LORD and serve Him only; and He will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines."** The response: **"So the children of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and served the LORD only"** (1 Samuel 7:3-4). The result was a great victory commemorated by the stone called Ebenezer (Stone of Help). Many years later, the faithful king Hezekiah assured his people: **"The LORD your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn His face from you if you return to Him"** (2 Chronicles 30:9).

As we begin to examine the New Testament for its teaching on conversion, we find John the Baptist to be a faithful preacher of repentance and conversion. Even before John was born, the angel Gabriel told his father Zacharias: **"He (John the Baptist) will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord"** (Luke 1:16-17).

It is a great privilege to be used by God to turn someone from his sin and back to God. Jesus' brother James writes: **"Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins"** (James 5:19-20).

After our Lord Jesus completed His work of redeeming the world, He sent His followers out into the world to use His Gospel to bring about the conversion of all people everywhere. This work began among the Jewish people first. Peter was Jesus' chosen apostle to bring the Gospel to the Jews. So we find Peter at the temple in Jerusalem, calling out to his people: **"Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out"** (Acts 3:19). A bit later Peter was enabled by the Lord to heal a bedridden man named Aeneas of the town of Lydda, and in that connection **"all who dwelt at Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord"** (Acts 9:35).

Soon Christians were bringing God's Word to the residents of the important city of Antioch in Syria. They **"spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord"** (Acts 11:20-21). The Pharisee Saul himself was converted and became Paul, a Gospel missionary to the non-Jews (the Gentiles), saying to them: We **"preach to you that you should turn from these useless things (their idolatry) to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them"** (Acts 14:15). Paul recognized that he was sent to the Gentiles so **"that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance"** (Acts 26:20). Paul accomplished his mission in many of the cities and villages of the Roman Empire. For example, he wrote to his converts in Thessalonica: **"You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come"** (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10).

Conversion involves a complete turn-around. Peter wrote to his readers: **"You were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls"** (1 Peter 2:25). Jesus insisted that such a turn-around was altogether necessary: **"Unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven"** (Matthew 18:3).

There is no neutral position between unbelief and faith in Christ. A person is either a believer or an unbeliever. In other words, conversion is a matter of a moment – it is instantaneous. That is, a person may be an unbeliever at 4:00 p.m. and be converted to faith in Christ by 4:01. At that moment the change in direction occurs. For this reason, some teachers have taught that every Christian should be able to specify the exact moment of his conversion. But that is usually not possible, nor is it necessary to know. Jesus said to Nicodemus: **"The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit"** (John 3:8). The workings of the Holy Spirit are as mysterious as the workings of the wind.

As long as a person is an unbeliever, he is **"under law"** (Romans 6:14). That is, God's wrath hangs over his head because of his sin. For it is written: **"He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him"** (John 3:36). The believer in Christ, on the other hand, is **"under grace"** (Romans 6:14). He has escaped from the wrath of God through trust in what Jesus has done for him. It is grace, because it is God's undeserved gift to him. **"The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"** (Romans 6:23). If it is a gift, it is grace. The believers in Christ can say with Paul: **"Now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter"** (Romans 7:6).

Even though conversion itself is instantaneous, there may be a shorter or longer time of preparation during which God is making us more aware of our sins and a need for something different and better in our lives by means of events in our lives or encounters with Christians or the reminders of God's law in our conscience or through hearing His Word.

Questions

1. In what way does conversion involve a change of directions?
2. In what way were the false teachers failing in the days of Jeremiah?
3. What hope did Moses hold out to the Israelites when they were being punished for their sins?
4. What was the special task given to John the Baptist?
5. What did the apostles Peter and Paul teach about conversion?
6. Why is it true that conversion is instantaneous?
7. Why is it not necessary for a person to specify the exact moment of his conversion?
8. What is the difference between being under law and being under grace?
9. What can you recount about your own conversion?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)
Lesson 7.3.6 – The Doctrine of the Way of Salvation (Soteriology)

Conversion as a Work of God Alone

Since no one who is dead in sins can bring himself to spiritual life, conversion has to be the work of God alone, without any cooperation from the person who is converted. The prophet Jeremiah puts these words into the mouth of the Israelites: **“Restore me, and I will return, for You are the LORD my God”** (Jeremiah 31:18). God is the one who does the restoring.

John says in his Gospel that **“children of God”** are born **“of God”** (John 1:12-13). Jesus Himself said: **“No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him”** (John 6:44). Just as a magnet draws particles to itself, so the Father draws or attracts people to Jesus. Because it was a hard saying for those who were following Jesus, He repeated it once more: **“No one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father”** (John 6:65).

When the book of Acts recounts the conversion experiences of the Christians, it always gives full credit to God for their conversion. When Peter told of how Cornelius and his family became believers in Jesus, his listeners **“glorified God, saying, ‘Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life’”** (Acts 11:18). When Paul and Barnabas reported on their first mission journey, **“they reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles”** (Acts 14:27).

The apostle Paul emphasized that conversion is a work of God. He wrote to the Christians in Corinth: **“No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit”** (1 Corinthians 12:3). To the Christians in Ephesus he wrote: **“God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)”** (Ephesians 2:4-5). Even the desiring to believe is already a work of the Holy Spirit, something we are unable to do, for it is written: **“It is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure”** (Philippians 2:13). Through His Word God changes the unwilling one into a willing one.

It is true that God uses human agents to administer the Gospel Word and the Gospel sacraments, for this is the way God has chosen to bring about conversion. **“It pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe”** (1 Corinthians 1:21), for **“faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God”** (Romans 10:17). The Old Testament prophets repeated God’s promises of the Messiah, and in so doing brought about faith that God would provide a Savior. Jesus’ apostles were united in preaching the Good News of Christ, which Paul summarized with the words: **“Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and...He was buried, and...He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures”** (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). Of this Gospel Paul said: **“Whether it was I, or they (the other apostles), so we preach and so you believed”** (1 Corinthians 15:11). **“We preach Christ crucified”** (1 Corinthians 1:23), said Paul. But it is God alone who must get all the credit for the converting.

Since God must get all the credit for conversion, John Calvin and his adherents drew the logical conclusion that non-conversion also must be attributed to God. But such a notion is directly contrary to God’s Word. God’s Word teaches us that God wants all persons to be saved, that Jesus died for all persons, and that the Holy Spirit is earnest in inviting all sinners to take refuge in Christ. When a sinner is not converted, the fault is not God’s fault. The fault is entirely the sinner’s own fault, as the Bible teaches in many places.

Listen to Jesus as He addresses the city of Jerusalem with these words: **“How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!”** (Matthew 23:37). So also Stephen attributed the refusal of the Jews to receive Christ, not to a lack of love or interest in saving them on the part of God, but to their own stubbornness, saying to them: **“You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you”** (Acts 7:51). When the Jews in Antioch of Pisidia opposed the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus by Paul and Barnabas, they said to them: **“It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first, but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles”** (Acts 13:46).

The prophet Isaiah compared God’s rebellious people to a vineyard that failed to produce good grapes. The man who planted the vineyard did not take the blame for the poor grapes. He said: **“What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done in it?”** (Isaiah 5:4). God does not take the blame for the rejection of His people. Through His servant Jeremiah God said to the people: **“Although I have spoken to you, rising early and speaking, you did not obey Me. I have also sent to you all My servants the prophets, rising up early and sending them... But you have not inclined your ear, nor obeyed Me”** (Jeremiah 35:14-15).

Sometimes conversion is wrongly thought to be a cooperative effort between God and man. Some teachers have wrongly said that God begins the effort, and then man chooses to cooperate of his own free will. Others have said that man makes a move toward God, and then God helps him along until he is converted. Some have even maintained that man is able to make a choice to obey God and believe in Him without any special help from God at all. All of these teachings are contrary to God’s Word. God’s Word clearly teaches that when a person is converted, God must get all the credit for bringing him to faith in Christ. On the other hand, when a person rejects the Gospel of Christ, it is his own fault.

Since God’s teaching on this point does not seem logical to the human mind, false teachers have tried to correct God’s teaching in one of two ways. John Calvin and his adherents claim that God must be credited with both the salvation of sinners and their damnation. They teach that God from eternity chose some sinners to be saved and chose other sinners to be damned. Jesus then died only for the elect, who were those chosen to be saved. The Holy Spirit tries to save only those God has chosen, whereas God has chosen to reject the others.

On the other hand, Jacob Arminius, John Wesley, and many others have maintained that man has a free will either to accept Christ or to reject Him. This also is a denial of the Bible’s teaching, for since man is by nature dead in sins, there is no way he can contribute anything to his own conversion. He does not have a free will to choose to believe in Christ. His coming to faith in Christ is entirely the work of God, not his own work, as without God, we can do nothing. This is the meaning of the word “grace,” namely, that we are saved entirely by the working of God, not at all by our own efforts.

Even Martin Luther’s associate, Philip Melancthon, the chief author of the *Augsburg Confession*, was misled in his later years and taught that there are three causes for conversion: the Holy Spirit, the Word of God, and man’s assenting will. The first two are correct, but the third one is contrary to the Word of God and it in fact negates the concept of salvation by grace.

Many missionaries, evangelists, and pastors in our time are Arminians. They teach the cooperation of the sinner in his own conversion. This is sometimes called “decision theology,” because salvation is presented as an offer from God, which the listener can decide or make a decision either to accept or reject. But the fact is that sinners can only decide to reject. It is God alone who, through the Gospel, can change a person from rejection to acceptance. A person who is dead in sins has no power at all to make a decision for Christ, and thus no one cannot cooperate in their own conversion.

There have been controversies among American Lutherans on the doctrine of conversion. The Church of the Lutheran Confession subscribes to the *Brief Statement* of 1932, which includes a long section

on the doctrine of conversion. Here are some excerpts from the *Brief Statement*:

Faith in the Gospel, or conversion to God, is neither wholly nor in the least part the work of man, but the work of God's grace and almighty power alone...

We reject every kind of synergism, that is, the doctrine that conversion is wrought not by the grace and power of God alone, but in part also by the cooperation of man himself, by man's right conduct, his right attitude, his right self-determination, his lesser guilt or less evil conduct as compared with others, his refraining from willful resistance, or anything else whereby man's conversion and salvation is taken out of the gracious hands of God and made to depend on what man does or leaves undone...

We reject also the Calvinistic perversion of the doctrine of conversion, that is, the doctrine that God does not desire to convert and save all hearers of the Word, but only a portion of them...

From Scripture we know only this: A man owes his conversion and salvation, not to any lesser guilt or better conduct on his part, but solely to the grace of God. But any man's non-conversion is due to himself alone; it is the result of his obstinate resistance against the converting operation of the Holy Ghost.

Questions

1. Why is it impossible for sinful man to cooperate in his own conversion?
2. Prove from Scripture that God alone must get the credit for our conversion.
3. What does the Holy Spirit use to bring sinners to faith in Christ?
4. Whom does the Holy Spirit use to bring sinners to faith in Christ?
5. What is the Gospel of Jesus Christ (give a brief summary of the Gospel message)?
6. What is the cause of a person's failure to believe in Christ?
7. What is the cause of a person's coming to faith in Christ?
8. What is wrong with the teaching of Calvinism concerning conversion?
9. What is wrong with the teaching of Arminianism concerning conversion?
10. Which is the greater danger in your locale?
11. What is wrong with Melancthon's presentation on conversion?
12. Summarize what the Bible teaches concerning conversion in your own words.



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 7.4.1 – The Doctrine of the Way of Salvation (Soteriology)

Faith

We have already referred to faith many times in what we have studied so far. But since the word “faith” is so often misused and misunderstood in religious talk, it is good that we take a very close look at what the Bible says about faith.

Other words such as “trust”, “confidence”, “reliance”, or “dependence” can usually be substituted for the word “faith” without any real change in meaning. The apostle Paul used the example of Abraham to bring out the meaning of the word “faith”. God first came to Abraham with the great promise recorded in Genesis 12:1-3. God promised to give Abraham a land, a nation, a name, protection from all foes, and, above all, the promise that **“in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”** (Genesis 12:3). On the basis of this promise Abraham moved to the land of Canaan with his family and lived there as a wandering nomad. God repeated His promise to Abraham from time to time, most notably when God brought him outside and showed him the vast number of stars in the sky. God then said to him: **“So shall your descendants be”** (Genesis 15:5). We are told at that point that Abraham **“believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness”** (Genesis 15:6). To believe in the Lord is to have faith and confidence in what He says to us, that is, to trust in Him, to depend on His Word, to rest your hopes in what He has said.

On the basis of this account in Genesis, the apostle Paul presents Abraham as an example of justification by faith. He writes: **“What does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.’ Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness”** (Romans 4:3-5). Notice that faith is contrasted with works. Works is associated with pay received for work rendered. A man works and gets paid for it. But faith is not a work of man. Faith is not a relying on one’s self to accomplish a certain thing and get paid for it. Faith is depending on something else, on Someone else, in this case, on God and His promise. To someone who believes God’s promise, God counts that faith in God as righteousness. We understand that the core of God’s promise to Abraham was the promise that He would send a Savior to be born from Abraham’s family who would be a blessing for the entire world.

Continuing to present Abraham as an example of faith, the apostle Paul says that Abraham, **“contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, ‘So shall your descendants be.’ And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah’s womb. He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform”** (Romans 4:18-21).

When God showed Abraham the stars of the sky and made His promise about his descendants, Abraham was already an old man, and his wife Sarah was an old woman who had been barren her entire life. Using his reason or common sense, Abraham could conclude that he and Sarah would never have any children. But Abraham believed God’s promise. He was convinced that God would do as He said He would do. Thus, faith is essentially trust and confidence in something else or someone else. In Abraham’s case he trusted in God and His promises.

The letter to the Hebrews also presents Abraham as an example of faith in God's promises, along with many other Old Testament examples of faith. The author begins his discussion of faith with this definition: **"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen"** (Hebrews 11:1). Abraham had no evidence that he would have descendants through Sarah. All he had was God's Word, but for faith God's Word is sufficient, and nothing more is needed.

So we read: **"By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going"** (Hebrews 11:8). Why did he go out? Because he believed God's promise that God would give him and his seed a land.

"By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, 'In Isaac your seed shall be called,' concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead" (Hebrews 11:17-19). After God fulfilled His promise and gave Abraham and Sarah their son Isaac, God told Abraham to offer up his son Isaac to God as a sacrifice, and Abraham was willing to do this. Why was he willing? Because Abraham believed God's promise that in his son Isaac the whole world would be blessed. In this faith Abraham was about to kill his own son, believing that God could raise him up again from the dead in order to fulfill His promise. As we know from Genesis, Abraham already had the knife in his hand to kill his son, when God intervened and told Abraham not to lay his hand on his son (Genesis 22:10-12).

Other illustrations and examples of faith abound in the Scriptures. Paul says: **"In whom (Christ) we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him"** (Ephesians 3:12). Faith in Christ leads to boldness and confidence to pray to our God in Christ's name.

Jesus used an incident recorded in the book of Numbers to illustrate faith. When the Israelites were traveling through the wilderness, they complained to God, and God sent them serpents who bit them and caused them to die. The people repented of their complaining, and God gave Moses a strange antidote for the poison. He told Moses to put up a bronze snake on a pole, and He told the people that if they looked up at that snake on a pole, they would be healed. Those that believed this word from God and looked up at that snake on a pole were indeed healed. They had faith in God's remedy, even if it did not seem to make any sense. Jesus then said: **"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life"** (John 3:14-15). So, it is necessary for us to believe and trust in God's promise of eternal life through the suffering and death of Christ on the cross. **"He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him"** (John 3:36).

Death stares everyone in the face. It seems that no one can escape from death. But here is Jesus' promise that He wants us to trust in, to believe, to rely on, to depend on: **"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die"** (John 11:25-26).

Notice that before there can be faith, there must be a promise from God to have faith in. Faith does not hang on thin air. It has to have something to trust in – some person or some word. The apostle Paul writes: **"How shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? ... So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God"** (Romans 10:14-15, 17). So also in his letter to the Christians in Ephesus Paul writes: **"In Him (Christ) you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation"** (Ephesians 1:13).

Questions

1. What are some other words that mean about the same thing as the word "faith"?
2. What promise did God give Abraham?
3. What was Abraham's reaction to this promise of God?
4. What did God say about Abraham's faith?
5. How did Abraham demonstrate his faith?
6. What illustration did Jesus use to explain the nature of faith?
7. How can faith help us when we are faced with death?
8. What must there be before there can be faith?



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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?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 7.4.3 – The Doctrine of the Way of Salvation (Soteriology)

Objective Faith and Subjective Faith

In the New Testament the word “faith” almost always refers to the trust in the heart that clings to Christ the Savior and the promises of God. This is known as subjective faith, that is, the faith by which one believes. For example, “faith” is clearly understood this way in Galatians 2:16, where we read: **“A man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.”** So also in Galatians 2:20: **“The life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.”**

There are also a few examples of objective faith, that is, the faith which is believed or the doctrine (or teaching) that is believed. One example of this is in Jude 3, where we read: **“I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.”** Jude, the brother of Jesus and James, here is speaking of the body of doctrine that has been given to Christ’s Church. We are to proclaim and protect and defend this doctrine, so that it is not contaminated by false teachers.

Intellectual Faith

Faith can also refer to an acceptance of a certain truth without trusting in that truth for salvation. Jesus’ brother James refers to such intellectual faith on the part of the demons: **“You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe – and tremble!”** (James 2:19).

Sincere Faith and Hypocritical Faith

Faith can be described as being sincere or hypocritical. Sincere faith produces the right kind of love, which is what God wants to create in His believers. Paul wrote to Timothy: **“The purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith”** (1 Timothy 1:5). On the other hand, there are some who claim to have faith, but their lack of the fruits of faith proves that they do not have faith. James asks: **“What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? ...Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works... Faith without works is dead”** (James 2:14, 18, 20). The kind of faith that has no evidence of any fruit is not really faith at all.

Christ is our only Savior from sin, and we are saved alone by faith in Him, not by our own works, but all those who truly believe in Christ will show their faith in Christ by how they live their lives. Martin Luther summarized this truth by saying that faith alone justifies, but faith is never alone.

Little Faith and Great Faith

The Bible also talks about having little (or weak) faith and having great (or strong) faith. It is important to remember that we are not saved by the amount of faith we have – even a tiny bit of sincere faith in Jesus saves. As we discussed in the previous lesson, we should not focus on our faith (and how strong or weak it is), but rather on the object of our faith: Jesus Christ and His life, death and resurrection. We are saved by trusting in what Jesus has done for us, no matter how strong that trust may be.

So, having little faith is not the same as having no faith. Jesus often scolded His disciples because their faith was so little and so weak. When we believers in Christ worry about such things as lack of food or

clothing, we need to remember Christ's words: **"If God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?"** (Matthew 6:30). When Jesus' disciples were out on the Sea of Galilee in a storm and Jesus came to them walking on the water, Peter wanted to walk on the water also. Jesus told Peter to come to Him on the water. At first Peter's faith was strong and he actually walked on the water like Jesus, but when he saw what the wind was doing, he lost faith and began to sink. Jesus pulled him out of the water, saying to him: **"O you of little faith, why did you doubt?"** (Matthew 14:31).

At another time Jesus' disciples were concerned because they had forgotten to bring bread for their voyage. Jesus said to them: **"O you of little faith, why do you reason among yourselves because you have brought no bread? Do you not yet understand, or remember the five loaves of the five thousand and how many baskets you took up?"** (Matthew 16:8-9).

On the other hand, Jesus called attention to the strong faith of the centurion of Capernaum and the woman of Canaan. Of the centurion He said: **"I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel"** (Matthew 8:10). The centurion believed Jesus could heal his servant simply by saying a word. To the woman of Canaan Jesus said: **"O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire"** (Matthew 15:28). Jesus at that point healed the woman's daughter.

One's faith may fluctuate at times. It might be stronger one day and weaker the next. Since faith does not come from us, but is created by the Holy Spirit through God's Word (Romans 10:17), it is important have our faith continually strengthened by remaining in His Word (John 8:31-32).

Saving Faith is a Matter of the Heart

The Bible often emphasizes that saving faith is a matter of the heart, not just the head. When the Bible refers to the heart, it is not referring to the body's organ that pumps blood, but to the innermost emotion and feeling of the believer. For example, David wrote: **"I have trusted in Your mercy; my heart shall rejoice in Your salvation"** (Psalm 13:5). Faith is a matter of the heart, and only God knows what is going on in the innermost feelings and thoughts of a person. When Peter reported on his visit to the home of Cornelius and mentioned how God had given the Holy Spirit to these Gentile believers, he said: **"Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith"** (Acts 15:7-9).

The apostle Paul also spoke of faith as a matter of the heart, for he wrote to the Christians in Rome: **"If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation"** (Romans 10:9-10). Faith includes the idea of head knowledge and assent to the truths of God's Word, but the key element is trust in the heart.

Questions

1. What is the difference between subjective faith and objective faith?
2. What kind of faith do the demons have?
3. What is it that shows that faith is not sincere?
4. How do believers give evidence of their faith to others?
5. Give examples of "little faith" among Jesus' disciples?
6. How do we show little faith in our lives today?
7. What made the faith of the centurion and the woman of Canaan so great?
8. How is the word "heart" used in the Bible?
9. Why is it so important that we have faith in Jesus in our hearts?
10. How does the Holy Spirit create faith in Jesus in human hearts?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 7.4.4 – The Doctrine of the Way of Salvation (Soteriology)

Faith as Knowledge, Enlightenment, Wisdom, and Obedience

Sometimes the Bible uses the term “knowledge” as a synonym of “faith,” and “know” as a synonym of “believe”. When the prophet Jeremiah describes the arrival of the new covenant through the Messiah, he says: **“No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more”** (Jeremiah 31:34). The ones who “know” the Lord are those who trust in Him, those who are forgiven through faith in Him.

The priest Zacharias prophesied that his son John the Baptist would **“give knowledge of salvation to His people by the remission of their sins”** (Luke 1:77). Through John’s work the people would come to know their Savior and trust in Him for the forgiveness of their sins. Jesus prayed to His Father on the night before His death: **“This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent”** (John 17:3). This is not just knowledge that there is a God, but it includes trust and confidence in Him, knowing Him as the Savior and the Giver of eternal life. The apostle Paul also spoke of **“the knowledge of the Son of God”** (Ephesians 4:13) and **“the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord”** (Philippians 3:8), certainly meaning more than an intellectual awareness of the existence of Christ. To know Christ is to trust in Him and rely on Him for salvation. So also the apostle Peter wrote: **“Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”** (2 Peter 3:18). Surely he meant more than that we should learn more facts about Jesus and His life; he meant that we should grow in our trust in Him, that is, we should come to know Him more and more by experiencing His love and coming to understand the richness of His grace.

Sometimes the words “enlighten” and “enlightenment” are used with reference to saving faith in Jesus Christ. The priest Zacharias said that the mission of his son John the Baptist was **“to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death”** (Luke 1:79). People are in the light, rather than in the darkness, when they are brought to faith in Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul explains it like this: **“It is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”** (2 Corinthians 4:6). When the light shines in our hearts, then we know who Jesus is and what He has done for us, and we trust in Him. Then we can consider ourselves God’s own special people whom He has called **“out of darkness into His marvelous light”** (1 Peter 2:9).

Sometimes the word “wisdom” is used to refer to those who know Jesus Christ by faith in Him. Believers in Christ possess wisdom of God, not the wisdom of the world. Paul wrote to Timothy: **“From childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus”** (2 Timothy 3:15). Those whom God has brought to faith in Jesus have wisdom for salvation; they know that the true and only way to eternal life is Jesus Christ, and they trust in Him. For this reason, the apostle Paul prayed for his converts in Ephesus, **“that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened, that you may know what is the hope of His calling”** (Ephesians 1:17-18). Likewise, he wrote to the Christians in Colossae: We **“do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding”** (Colossians 1:9).

The word “obedience” is sometimes associated with faith. For example, the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome: **“Through Him (Christ) we have received grace and apostleship for obedience to the faith among all nations for His name”** (Romans 1:5). Obedience to the faith is equivalent to believing the Gospel of Christ. The same concept is expressed in Romans 6:17, where Paul says: **“God be thanked that though we were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered.”** The “form of doctrine” refers to the Gospel of Christ. When the Gospel was brought to them, they obeyed it from the heart; that is, they believed it and trusted in it with all their hearts. Paul wrote about making the Gentiles “obedient” in Romans 15:18. This means that Paul preached the Gospel to them with the aim of bringing them to faith in Christ. Luke tells us in the book of Acts that even **“a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith”** (Acts 6:7).

It is also true that the believer in Jesus who has obeyed the Gospel begins to live an obedient life in the sense of trying to please God in his thoughts, words, and deeds. This obedience is always imperfect because of the continuing presence of the sinful flesh in every believer. Paul encourages the Christians in Rome with these words: **“Do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God”** (Romans 6:12-13). Instead of obeying sin, which leads to death, we should obey our Lord God who has brought us to faith in our loving Savior. The Holy Spirit, who has created faith in Christ in our hearts through the Gospel, also works in our hearts to produce the fruits of the Spirit, which can also be called the fruits of faith: **“love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control”** (Galatians 5:22-23).

The apostle Paul joins faith with hope and love in 1 Corinthians 13:13: **“And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”** Love is listed as the first fruit of faith. As soon as a person is brought to faith in Christ, he begins to have love in his heart for his Savior, and then love for those around him as well. Also, as soon as a person is brought to faith in Christ, he has hope in his heart with reference to his future salvation. Hope always has to do with a future that cannot yet be seen. Believers in Christ have the sure hope of heaven. Paul writes: **“Hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance”** (Romans 8:24-25). **“Having been justified by faith, we...rejoice in hope of the glory of God”** (Romans 5:1-2).

The apostle Peter calls this **“a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time”** (1 Peter 1:3-5). Now we believe God’s promise of forgiveness in Jesus, and at the same time we hope for the full salvation that will be revealed to us at the end of time.

The apostle John emphasizes the relationship of faith with love. **“Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God”** (1 John 4:7). We are born with a second birth when God brings us to faith in Christ. That is when we begin to know God, and when we begin to know God, then we begin to love Him and our neighbor. **“We have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him... We love Him because He first loved us. If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?”** (1 John 4:16-20).

Thus faith, hope, and love are joined together. But faith comes first. First we are brought to faith in Christ through the Gospel, and then we begin to have a sure hope for eternal life in heaven, and then, because God has loved us and brought us to faith in Christ, we begin to love Him and our neighbor as well. It seems love is called **“the greatest”** (1 Corinthians 13:13) because it endures after there is no more need for faith in God’s promises and no more need for hope in a future salvation.

The Roman Catholic Church officially contradicts the Bible's teaching about faith when it declares: "If anyone says that justifying faith is nothing else but confidence in the divine mercy which remits sins for Christ's sake, or that this confidence alone is that by which we are justified, let him be anathema (cursed)" (*Council of Trent, Session 6, Canon 12*). This directly contradicts Paul's statement in Romans 3:28: **"Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law."** It is by faith alone in Christ that we are declared righteous in God's sight. But the Roman Catholic Church teaches that faith in Christ is not enough. "Faith, unless hope and love are added to it, neither unites perfectly with Christ nor makes one a living member of His body... Faith cannot bestow eternal life without hope and love" (*Council of Trent, Session 6, Chapter 7*).

Notice how this teaching changes the Gospel of Christ. The Gospel says that Christ finished the work of redemption on the cross, and that we are saved alone by faith in Him and what He has done for us. We have all the blessings of God by faith in Christ. We are 100% righteous in His sight through faith in Christ. But the Roman Catholic position is that faith in Christ is not enough. They say that we are saved by faith, hope, and love. This makes our own actions and feelings necessary for our own salvation. We are not saved alone by faith in Christ, but partly by faith in Christ, and partly by our own response to what Christ has done for us. This robs us of any certainty of salvation, for if our salvation depends partly on our own actions, it will never happen, for the fruits of faith are always imperfect.

Questions

1. List some words that the Bible sometimes uses to refer to saving faith.
2. What does it mean to know Christ?
3. How has God enlightened us?
4. What is the difference between wisdom of God and the wisdom of the world?
5. How did the child Timothy gain wisdom?
6. What does it mean to be obedient to the faith?
7. How do we obey the Gospel of Christ?
8. What is true of the life of every believer in Christ?
9. Why is it wrong to say that we are saved by faith, hope, and love?
10. What is meant when we say that love is a fruit of faith?
11. How does the Roman Catholic teaching make a person uncertain concerning his salvation?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 7.4.5 – The Doctrine of the Way of Salvation (Soteriology)

The Faith of Infants and Small Children

Some Protestant churches teach that the children of believing parents are believers by birth. Others teach that children are not responsible for any sins until they reach the age of accountability. But the Bible does not teach such doctrines. Jesus said to Nicodemus: **“That which is born of the flesh is flesh... You must be born again”** (John 3:6-7). The Bible says nothing about an age of accountability, rather it says that **“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”** (Romans 3:23) and that the purpose of God’s Law is **“that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God”** (Romans 3:19). David confessed: **“Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me”** (Psalm 51:5).

The fact is that infants and small children also need faith in Jesus Christ to be saved. God creates such faith through the means of grace: the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. We also know that it is God’s will to save everyone, especially also the little children, for Jesus said: **“It is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish”** (Matthew 18:14) .

But is it really possible for infants and small children to believe in Jesus? Many think that it is not possible to believe in Jesus without being able to understand that faith and verbalize it by a confession. But Jesus did not say that infant faith is impossible. Rather, He said: **“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea”** (Matthew 18:6). When the Jewish priests and scribes objected to the praises given to Jesus by the little children on Palm Sunday, Jesus replied by quoting Psalm 8:2: **“Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants You have perfected praise”** (Matthew 21:16).

When Jesus’ own disciples tried to prevent parents from bringing their little children and **“infants”** (Luke 18:15) to Jesus for His blessing, Jesus was not pleased with His disciples and said to them: **“Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God. Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as (like) a little child will by no means enter it”** (Mark 10:14-15).

It is through Gospel and Sacrament that God creates the faith in Jesus Christ that is necessary for salvation. The apostle Paul states this clearly when he calls baptism **“the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit”** and says that through that washing **“He saved us”** (Titus 3:5). One could translate this passage’s description of baptism as “the Holy Spirit’s washing of regeneration and renewing.” Thus, baptism is God’s way of creating faith in Christ in little children, for regeneration means to be born again. This agrees with Jesus’ words to Nicodemus: **“Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”** A spiritual rebirth is necessary, for only **“that which is born of the Spirit is spirit”** (John 3:5-6)

We will be discussing the means of grace more in the next chapter. In particular, we will look at the sacrament of baptism and what God says about baptism in His Word. For now, we simply want to teach and confess the truth that it is possible for infants and little children to believe in Christ, as it is also possible for the feeble-minded and mentally challenged to believe in Christ. Even adults continue to believe while they are sleeping, as do persons who are unconscious in a coma.

Questions

1. What is true of every infant that is born into this world?
2. How do we know that infants and children are also responsible before God for their sins?
3. Where does the Bible speak of the faith of little children and infants?
4. Why was Jesus displeased with His disciples when they prevented parents from bringing their children to Him for His blessing?
5. Why is baptism called a washing of regeneration?
6. What is the difference between being born of the flesh and being born of the Spirit?
7. What religious groups in your locale practice infant baptism, and which groups object to infant baptism?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 7.4.6 – The Doctrine of the Way of Salvation (Soteriology)

Faith as the Receiving Instrument

It is important to remember that our faith in Christ does not earn or merit the forgiveness of sins, as though God rewards us for our good action of faith by giving us eternal life. Christ is the one who has earned eternal life for us by His life, suffering, and death in our place. His resurrection proves to us that what He did in our place is sufficient to earn eternal life for us and for everyone else in the whole world. Faith in Christ is only the instrument or the means by which we receive for ourselves what God has won and accomplished for everyone.

When Jesus cried out: **“It is finished”** (John 19:30) from the cross, our salvation was an accomplished fact – a finished product – ready to be offered and distributed to the world as a free gift. Jesus’ resurrection from the dead proved that the work of redemption had been successfully completed, and that all of our enemies (Satan, sin, death, hell) had been absolutely and permanently defeated.

For this reason, the apostle Paul tells us that if we think we can add something ourselves to our completed salvation, we in fact lose what He has done for us. These are Paul’s clear words: **“Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace”** (Galatians 5:2-4). The false teachers in Galatia were telling the Galatians that what Christ did was not quite enough to save them; they would also have to be circumcised in order to be saved. Paul then tells them that if they wanted to be saved by their own works, they would have to do more than succumb to circumcision; they would have to keep God’s entire law perfectly. But anyone who tries to save himself by his own works, even by his own faith, if he thinks of his faith as a work deserving a reward, will lose Christ and in fact will forfeit the salvation Christ won for him.

This faith in Christ is only the receiving instrument. Faith receives what Christ has done; it does not add anything to what Christ has done. The salvation that Christ won for us is complete in itself. As the prophet Isaiah foresaw: **“Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her, that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, for she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins”** (Isaiah 40:2). The Gospel (or Good News) of Jesus is complete in itself: forgiveness of sins for all sinners through what Christ has done. Jesus said to His disciples: **“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature”** (Mark 16:15). How do we receive this Gospel and enjoy its benefits? **“He who believes and is baptized will be saved”** (Mark 16:16). The reconciliation is complete; it is a ready blessing offered to the world. **“God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself”** (2 Corinthians 5:19).

If we think of faith as our contribution to our salvation, we do not understand the concept of grace. Paul writes: **“Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed”** (Romans 4:16). If God contributed 99% of our salvation, and our faith is our contribution of 1%, our salvation would no longer be certain and it would no longer be by grace alone. Faith does not contribute anything; faith simply receives the 100% contribution by God. Thus, it is false teaching when someone says to a sinner: “God has done His part by making your salvation possible through Christ. Now it is up to you to finish the job by doing your part and consciously choosing to believe in what Christ has done.” Faith is not our contribution to our salvation. Faith, in fact, is also

God's contribution, for it is God who creates the faith in our hearts that receives the Gospel He brings to us. This is why faith in Christ is always contrasted with works. We are saved by faith, not by works (Romans 3:28).

The Gospel of John speaks of receiving Christ and points out that those who receive Christ are those **"who believe in His name"** and become **"children of God"**. John then quickly adds that these believers in Christ are **"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 belief in His name and this new birth all come from God.

The Bible carefully avoids any expression that gives the impression that we are saved because of¹ our faith. The Bible only talks about faith as the way by which or through which² salvation is received.

It is not wrong to speak of believers as receiving Christ as long as we realize that this receiving of Christ is not our own work but a result of *God's* working in us. Paul writes: **"As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving"** (Colossians 2:6-7). The Holy Spirit convinces the sinner to recognize that Christ's reconciliation of the whole world applies also to him, and so he begins to take comfort in that fact and rejoice in his salvation. He is led to apply the Gospel truth of universal justification to his own individual situation, as Paul did when he said: **"The Son of God...loved me and gave Himself for me"** (Galatians 2:20).

Questions

1. Why is it important that we do not think of faith as a work we do?
2. How should we think of faith?
3. What was wrong with what the false teachers in Galatia were saying?
4. What did Jesus mean when He said "It is finished" from the cross?
5. What is the Gospel (the Good News) of Jesus?
6. How much of our salvation has God contributed?
7. What part of our salvation do we contribute?
8. What must we remember when we talk about receiving Christ?
9. Why does the Bible avoid saying that we are saved because of faith?
10. Why is it important for a believer to say that Jesus died for him?

¹ This would be expressed in Greek with the preposition *dia* (διά) with the word "faith" in the *accusative* case. This construction does not occur in the New Testament.

² This is expressed in Greek with the preposition *dia* (διά) with the word "faith" in the *genitive* case. This construction (meaning "by which" or "through which") occurs in Romans 3:22, 25, 30; Galatians 2:16; Galatians 3:14, 26; Ephesians 2:8; Ephesians 3:12, 17; Philippians 3:9; Colossians 2:12; 2 Timothy 3:15; Hebrews 6:12.

Two other ways of expressing "by which" or "through which" are the *dative* case alone or the preposition *ek* (ἐκ, "from"). The dative case is used in Acts 15:9; Romans 3:28. *ek* is used in Romans 1:17; Romans 3:20; Romans 4:16; Romans 5:1; Romans 9:30; Romans 10:6; Galatians 2:16; Galatians 3:8, 24.



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 7.4.7 – The Doctrine of the Way of Salvation (Soteriology)

The Assurance of Faith

The devil always tries to make believers in Christ doubt their salvation. In the Garden of Eden the devil tried to get Eve to doubt the goodness of God. He suggested that God was trying to keep something good away from Eve by His command that she and Adam should not eat the fruit of the forbidden tree (Genesis 3). So also the devil does all he can to create doubt and uncertainty in the hearts of Christians today. God, on the other hand, wants to make sinners confident of their salvation through Christ. He assures us that His desire is for all to be saved, and that Jesus died for all, and that there is no sin too horrible to be forgiven through Christ's redemption. **"God...desires all men to be saved... Christ Jesus...gave Himself a ransom for all"** (1 Timothy 2:3-6). **"Where sin abounded, grace abounded much more"** (Romans 5:20).

It is possible, however, to have the wrong kind of assurance. We may put our trust in ourselves – in our own faith and love – and talk ourselves into believing that our faith is so strong that we could never fall away. To such a person Paul says: **"Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall"** (1 Corinthians 10:12). Peter walked into this trap when he told Jesus on the night Jesus was arrested that even if all the other disciples fell away, he, Peter, would not fall away. But when the others fled, Peter fled also, and later that night he said that he did not even know who Jesus was (Mark 14:29-31, 66-72). The apostle Paul himself considered his own weakness, and said: **"I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified"** (1 Corinthians 9:27).

In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul considered the question of why so many Jewish people rejected their own Messiah, whereas so many Gentiles were being brought to faith. Even though they had been brought to faith, Paul warned the Gentile Christians: **"Because of unbelief they (the Jews) were broken off, and you (Gentiles) stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear, For if God did not spare the natural branches (the Jews), He may not spare you either. Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off. And they also, if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again"** (Romans 11:20-23).

False assurance in oneself or in something other than Christ is called carnal security. It is an attitude that the Old Testament prophets rebuked frequently. For example, the people at the time of Jeremiah trusted in the fact that they worshiped God in the magnificent temple built by Solomon, and therefore they were certainly secure, even though they freely disobeyed God's commands otherwise. Therefore Jeremiah said to them: **"Do not trust in these lying words, saying, 'The temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD are these.' ... You trust in lying words that cannot profit. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and walk after other gods whom you do not know, and then come and stand before Me in this house which is called by My name, and say, 'We are delivered to do all these abominations?'"** (Jeremiah 7:4-10).

When we understand faith properly, we realize that our salvation is sure because it does not depend in any way on us or on any other undependable person or thing; it depends only on God, who cannot lie and is always faithful to His promises. Faith means that we give up on ourselves and on our own efforts entirely and depend completely on Christ and on what Christ has done for us and on what God

says about what Christ has done for us. The intended result of such faith is peace with God, joy in God's salvation, and the sure hope of eternal life. **"Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ"** (Romans 5:1). **"Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed"** (Romans 4:16).

It is the work of the Holy Spirit to give us faith in Christ and to strengthen our faith in Christ through the words and promises of our God. Jesus said to His disciples: **"When the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me"** (John 15:26). Again: **"When He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth... He will glorify Me"** (John 16:13-14). The Holy Spirit makes us certain of our salvation because He testifies of Christ and glorifies Christ as our one and only Savior. He reminds us of what Christ has done to win for all the forgiveness of sins, and He teaches us to pin our hopes entirely on Him.

"The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Romans 8:16). He teaches us not to trust in ourselves, but in Christ. He shows us that even faith in Christ is His work in us, not our own. **"So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy"** (Romans 9:16). **"It is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure"** (Philippians 2:13). **"His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by His glory and virtue"** (2 Peter 1:3). **"God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God"** (1 John 5:11-13).

Yet because of our sinful flesh, we who believe in Jesus do have doubts and uncertainties at times about our salvation and about our faith in Christ. We even have doubts about such things as whether God is telling us the truth and about whether our faith in Christ is strong enough. At such times we need to turn to Christ, and the only place we can find Christ is the Holy Spirit's book: the Holy Scriptures. We are like the man who pleaded with Jesus to heal his demon-possessed son who struggled with unbelief and doubt. He said to Jesus: **"Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!"** (Mark 9:24). This man went to the right person with his doubts; he went to Christ. In the same way we go to Christ when we go to His Word and listen to what He says.

The apostle Paul directs us to Jesus, who alone can give us certainty of faith, in these assuring words from his letter to the Christians in Rome: **"If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: 'For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.' Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded (convinced) that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord"** (Romans 8:31-39).

Questions

1. How does the devil try to rob us of the joy and certainty of salvation?
2. How does God make us certain of our salvation?
3. Give some examples of false assurance from the Bible.
4. What may easily happen when we put our faith in ourselves?
5. What is meant by carnal security, and why is it dangerous?
6. How can we become certain of our salvation and eternal life?
7. Who is the one who brings us to faith and keeps us in faith?
8. How does this one strengthen our faith and our assurance?
9. What should we do when we have doubts and uncertainties about our salvation?
10. What convinced the apostle Paul of God's love for him?
11. Is it right or wrong to be certain you are going to heaven? Give a reason for your answer.