

What Is the Christian Faith?

by Rev. Andy Wilson

The essence of the Christian faith can be summed up in three words: **guilt, grace, and gratitude**. And it is the middle element of this triad (grace) that sets the Christian faith apart from all of the other religions of the world. All other religions, philosophies, and worldviews ultimately have a works-oriented way of thinking about how to find acceptance with God or how to find fulfillment in life. In one way or another, they all teach that salvation, fulfillment, happiness, etc. is obtained through our performance. Only in the Christian religion do we hear the announcement of divine grace, the good news that summons us to “receive and rest upon [Christ] alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel.” (*Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Question 86) This is the one thing that is crucial for a correct understanding of the Christian faith: its central message (the gospel) is not an exhortation for us to do something in order to get in God’s good graces. Instead, the gospel is the announcement of good news, proclaiming what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

Guilt

We can only hear the gospel as good news if we first understand how great our sins and miseries are. We need the Holy Spirit to convict us “concerning sin and righteousness and judgment” (Jn. 16:8), opening our eyes to see the reality of our condition. We need to see that our deepest problem is not the things that happen to us externally, but the condition of our hearts. In the end, we cannot blame other people or our circumstances for the bad things that we do and the good things that we fail to do. No one measures up to God’s law. The Bible says, “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.’” (Gal. 3:10) Because God is a God of justice, he cannot overlook our sin. It has to be punished. There is nothing that we can do to avert God’s holy wrath.

Grace

Our only hope of salvation is if someone else stands in our place to fulfill the law and bear its curse on our behalf. This is exactly what God has done for us in an arrangement that is sometimes called the “covenant of grace.” In this covenant, Jesus Christ, who is both fully God and fully man, stands as the covenant representative for all whom God graciously appointed to eternal life “before the foundation of the world.” (Eph. 1:4) Because of this arrangement, those who have faith in Christ find acceptance with God not on the basis of *their* performance, but on the basis of *Christ’s* performance on their behalf. Because of what Jesus accomplished in his life and death, a great exchange takes place when we lay hold of him by faith: our sins are reckoned to Christ on the cross, and his righteousness is reckoned to us before God. The Bible puts it this way: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us- for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’” (Gal. 3:13). In the covenant of grace, God pronounces sinners to be righteous on the basis of the righteousness of another (Jesus Christ). This is the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Faith is the sole instrument of our justification, but this does not mean that faith is the basis of our justification. Faith is merely the

hand by which we receive Christ and the saving benefits that God graciously pours forth through him.

Gratitude

We are saved by grace alone through faith alone. However, this does not mean that we are free to go on sinning after we have placed our trust in Christ. The gospel saves us from both the guilt and the power of sin. The former has to do with the doctrine of justification, while the latter has to do with the doctrine of sanctification. Sanctification is the term used to describe the continued outworking of God's saving purposes in a Christian's life after he has been justified. This aspect of our salvation can be summed up under the heading of "gratitude" because our motivation for living a holy life is the gratitude that we have towards God for the riches of his grace that he has poured out upon us in Christ. Christians are so thankful for what Christ has done for them that they want to spend the rest of their lives in loving service to him. Sin is still present in their lives, but the fact that this is the case is their greatest sorrow. Christian obedience is a necessary fruit of salvation. There is no true justification without sanctification. This is why the apostle John says, "No one who abides in [Christ] keeps on sinning" (1 Jn. 3:6). While Christians continue to struggle with indwelling sin for as long as we live (see Gal. 5:17), our lives are not to be characterized by the practice of sin but by the practice of righteousness (see 1 Jn. 3:9-10). The gift of salvation includes the gift of a renewed heart, a heart that hates sin and loves righteousness (see Ezek. 36:25-27). For this reason, Christian obedience is not about works that we do in our own strength, but is a matter of gratefully embracing what God has promised us in Christ. The Christian faith is not a moralistic effort to ascend up to God based upon our performance. Nor is it an "easy-believism" that denies that justifying faith needs to bear the fruit of good works. Both Paul and James are correct in their teaching on justification. (see Rom. 3:28; Jas. 2:24) Justification is by faith alone, but the faith that justifies always produces the fruit of grateful obedience.

The Role of the Church

One other thing that needs to be mentioned is that the Christian faith is not merely a private matter between an individual and God. It also involves being under the shepherding authority of a local church. This needs to be emphasized because many who profess to be Christians in our day are rejecting the idea of "institutional Christianity." This is a serious problem, because many Bible passages teach that Jesus established the church's ministry and officers as the means by which he builds up and cares for his church. One such passage is Acts 20:28, where the elders of a particular church are instructed to "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood." Because the communion that we enjoy with Christ is mediated by the Spirit through the church's official ministry, church membership and corporate worship are central to the life of Christian discipleship (see Eph. 4:8-12; Heb. 10:25; 13:17).