



CHRISTIAN FAITH



The Reality
of God

The Bible

The Human
Condition

Jesus
Christ

Christian
Faith

BC booklets are a series of brief studies by Dr. Glenn Parkinson examining the essentials of Biblical Christianity. These pamphlets are a series, meaning that each one builds upon the content of earlier ones. They do not have to read as a series, however. The reader should feel free to dip into the progression of thought at any point of interest.

I will betroth you to Me forever; Yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, in lovingkindness and in compassion, and I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness. Then you will know the Lord.
Hosea 2:19-20 (NASV)

Here are all the themes of biblical Christianity, as fulfilled and taught by Jesus Christ. There is God's righteousness, his holy character that originally created mankind with the noble and delicious charge to rule the earth in his name. There is justice, the good and proper judgment of a holy God in response to what we have actually done with our lives and with this planet. There is compassion, the desire of God's heart to forgive and restore the human race that he cherishes. There is lovingkindness, the biblical word describing God's faithfulness to his promise to personally pay the price required by justice in order to forgive. There is knowing God, a personal relationship that lasts forever, which is the whole point and goal of biblical faith.¹

But how does one get started with the Christian faith?

In one sense, getting started is as simple as just believing the gospel message outlined above. Faith that trusts Christ for forgiveness and practical leadership is evidence that God's Spirit has called a dead heart to life. Anyone who truly believes in Christ has become God's friend, even if he has not had the benefit of any religious rituals (such as baptism, the Lord's Supper, walking down an aisle after a service, etc.).

However, since faith implies a new relationship with the Lord, it is most appropriate to enter into it with a conscious personal decision. This helps to prevent us from being deceived about the nature of real faith. Faith in Christ is more than just sincerely affirming the facts of who he is and what he accomplished. The Apostle James pointed this out:

You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.
James 2:19

Obviously, confidence in the facts concerning Christ is necessary for faith. But if even the Devil believes all the facts about Jesus, saving faith must be something more. Being personally reconciled to God involves entering into a mutual personal commitment with Jesus Christ, based upon who he is and how he accomplishes God's plan.

GOD'S PROPOSAL

The biblical model of salvation is the *covenant*, an ancient word describing a binding relationship between two parties. In a covenant, each party commits himself or herself in a specific, mutually agreed upon manner. Marriage is the most common example of a covenant.² In fact, the Bible understands the concept of love in terms of faithfulness to one's covenant relationships.³

When God created our first parents, the covenant he established with them and their children was simple: God would pour out his love by giving us unending blessedness in his presence. We were to return our love through joyful and total obedience. Tragically, our first parents rejected that covenant, thereby forfeiting our blessedness and twisting the human spirit into something incapable of enjoying obedience to God.

In order to reestablish his covenant with sinful humanity, God came to us in Christ to bear the penalty of our sin (death) and begin to untwist our spirit so as to freely offer joyful obedience once more. Christ's death on the cross covers the offense of rejecting God, and his resurrection enables him to utilize God's Spirit to renew our spirit.

Because of Christ's death on behalf of sinners, we can enter into a new covenant as if there had never been any sin separating us from God. For those in this new covenant, all sin—past, present and future—was vicariously punished on the cross, just as if sinners had hung there in agony instead of Jesus, fully paying for their own sins. More than that, when Christ assumed our place on the cross, he enabled us to assume his place in God's heart. This means that the original covenant offered at creation has been significantly amended; it has become a covenant of

amazing grace. Our sin need no longer prevent us from receiving God's perfect blessing. That blessing becomes partially accessible throughout this life, and will become available without measure when the Church is complete and Christ returns.

Jesus makes a new relationship with God available to sinners, but we still must personally accept God's proposal and enter into that new covenant by our own choice. Entering into the covenant requires confidence in what Jesus did, is doing and shall do, along with an unreserved commitment to trust and obey God in all things. While Christ's completed work covers the ongoing failure of any still-imperfect spirit, the sincere desire to obey is necessary evidence that our faith is saving faith.⁴ True faith wants to rediscover God's design. While it's true that even our sincerity is imperfect, God knows the heart and sees the earnest desire to trust and obey him again.

Confidence in the work of Jesus the Savior and an earnest desire to follow him as Lord are the marks of the Holy Spirit of God at work in us.⁵ This combination of Christ-centered confidence and Christ-centered commitment is what the Bible knows as saving faith.

So, in light of all this, what must we actually do in order to enter into God's covenant of loving grace—a covenant that will make God our friend, remold our lives and secure us eternal blessedness?

“I Do”

What we must do is exercise our own faith⁶—believe in God's gracious offer of a restored relationship, accept his promises of grace to us, and offer to him our promise of joyful obedience. Responding by faith to God's proposal is the equivalent of saying, “I do” in a marriage covenant—a simple act with large consequences! In this case, we become God's adopted children in a new humanity that will one day rule the earth as he originally intended.

Exercising faith seems an awfully simple requirement to affect so great a change. But remember that the benefits of salvation do not come from changes we make in ourselves; they come from a restored

relationship with God. To again use the analogy of marriage, the union of commoners with royalty benefits the commoners immensely, not because of what they bring to the marriage, but because of all that royalty is willing to share.

Of course, as with human marriage, our commitment must be in good faith, including an honest commitment to give ourselves totally to the relationship. God holds us accountable to our covenant promises, and does not respond well to those who only pretend to enter into covenant with him. Fortunately, and unlike any merely human covenant, Christian faith does not initiate a relationship based upon our virtue and strength, but rather accepts a relationship based upon God's.

In other words, the value of Christian faith is not what it says about our heart—the quality of our godly emotions or spiritual strength of will. The value of faith is what our heart has chosen to say about God. The Lord looks for a faith that truly embraces the glory of his original design, the depth of our sin, and the greatness of Christ's restoring love.

The Lord requires nothing less from us, but nothing more. Nothing more is necessary. All our guilt—past, present and future—has been buried in Christ's tomb, and we will gladly spend the rest of eternity pleasing God out of grateful joy for the opportunity to do so. He knows that former commoners will naturally adopt royal manners in time.

Whenever you are prepared to accept Christ's death as a gracious substitute for your own, and want to devote the rest of your life to honoring God to the best of your ability, the covenant between you and the Lord is established. You have said by your faith, "I do." God sees your heart and at that point considers you to be his friend and child forever⁷

Of course, as with a marriage or any other covenant, it is appropriate to mark your new relationship with special ceremony. Public commitments help us ground our emotions in reality, and enable us to and share our joy.

Christ gave us two ceremonies (called *sacraments*) to publicly celebrate our relationship with him. They were chosen by Jesus to illustrate how

he is the fulfillment of the new covenant described throughout the Old Testament. The first is Baptism, a symbolic washing that accompanies the entrance into discipleship.⁸ The second is The Lord's Supper (also called Communion or the Eucharist), a symbolic meal where we enjoy fellowship with the risen Christ himself.⁹

The sacraments were designed by Christ to help us exercise and share our faith tangibly with other believers, collectively called the Church. Christ's Church comes in all sorts of flavors. A good Church is one that clearly puts Christ first and strives to be faithful to the Bible. It is important to choose a Church fellowship wisely. Ask advice from Christians who obviously enjoy their faith and try to live according to God's Word.

However, should you desire right now to express faith in Christ, I encourage you to offer up to God a personal prayer of faith. Such prayers do not bring us salvation, but they help us express the faith in God's grace which does. If you would like to offer to God a prayer to formally enter into a new and permanent covenant with him, I recommend the following:

- Plan a time and place where you can be alone with God.
- Read a passage or two of the Bible, such as John 1:1-18; Titus 3:3-8; Romans 5:1-2; 10:9-13 or Hebrews 10:15-17. If you do not have a Bible, or are unfamiliar with how to use one, ask a Christian you respect for help, or go to www.spepchurch.org and use the contact information there to request some assistance.
- Tell the Lord of your desire to be his friend and a part of his family forever.
- Acknowledge that you cannot claim his love based on how you have lived, and that your sin has rendered you incapable of giving him the love and obedience he deserves.
- Express to God your confidence in what he did through Jesus Christ to make reconciliation with him possible.
- Explain to God your earnest commitment to relearn how to love him, by treating Jesus as the unquestioned Lord of your life.

- Ask God to help you find a Church that honors him well, where you can learn to live out your faith with others who share it.

If such a prayer reflects the desires of your heart, then the Lord Jesus would like to seal his new relationship with you—make it official and open for all the world to see! His seal is baptism. If you were baptized as a child, then confessing your faith in a Christian church will affirm and complete the promises God made then. If you have never been baptized, the Church you join will make that a part of your welcome into God's family.

Always remember that the Lord's love for you can never again be diminished by your failures—you belong to him now, and he belongs to you. He will work with you year after year to grow in spiritual wisdom and integrity. This world is still dying, but you have come alive. Death will merely mark the end of this world's claims upon your body, and its scars upon your soul. You will be resurrected one day as Jesus was, to pursue life forever as it was meant to be lived.

Faith shows itself to be genuine by its endurance and growth over time. Since this world is in general rebellion against its Creator, expect your faith to be seriously tested over and over.¹⁰ That's why you constantly need the Bible, prayer and the fellowship of other believers to maintain spiritual confidence and communion with Christ.

If you have just begun a life of faith, make it a priority to learn all you can about the Living God and the life you share with him.

If you have not yet begun a life of faith, I urge you to consider these matters in depth and then make a decision about your response to Jesus Christ.

This is the most important thing you will ever do. And as I like to assure everyone ... you will never regret it.

(Endnotes)

- 1 This booklet assumes familiarity with the biblical notion of sin and its consequences, as well as an understanding of who Christ is and what he accomplished. These matters are treated in earlier pamphlets in this series.
- 2 The Bible actually likens the relationship of God to his people as that of a husband to his wife. See Ephesians 5:21-32; 2 Corinthians 11:2 and Revelation 19:9.
- 3 Deuteronomy 10:12-13; Romans 13:8-10.
- 4 Romans 7:14-8:17; John 14:22-24; 1 John 2:1-6.
- 5 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:16; 1 Corinthians 12:3.
- 6 John 6:28-29.
- 7 John 1:12-13.
- 8 Matthew 18:18-20. A “disciple” is a trainee, someone who is being taught by a Master — in this case, by Jesus Christ. You may already have been initiated by your parents as a disciple when you were a child. If so, then the next step is to enter into the Lord’s Supper with full understanding and commitment.
- 9 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.
- 10 John 15:18-21; Romans 8:18-25, 35-39; 1 Peter 4:12-14.



SEVERNA PARK

evangelical presbyterian ^(PCA)

110 Ritchie Highway ~ Pasadena, MD 21146

410-544-5013 ~ www.spepchurch.org