

### **The Book of Acts (#14); Conversion to Christ (5)**

In our study of the Acts of the Apostles, we have been addressing the glory and wonders of God's sovereign grace set forth on the day of Pentecost. We have been giving special attention and emphasis to the person and work of the Holy Spirit in converting souls to Jesus Christ. This passage records the conversion of 3,000 Jewish men and women to Jesus Christ. These people had gathered before the apostles due to the miraculous signs that they had heard and witnessed. But it was their hearing the gospel proclaimed by the apostle Peter, blessed by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, that caused these people to be smitten with knowledge of their sin and condemnation before God. They had wickedly rejected and crucified their promised Messiah, the king of the kingdom of God. The Holy Spirit laid them low in their sin, and they became vividly aware of their hopelessness and helplessness as condemned sinners under the wrath of God. These Jewish people came to see and acknowledge their guilt and condemnation before God, that they needed God's forgiveness of their sin. They had come to see that they had no righteousness of their own before God, and were therefore morally bankrupt and judicially condemned by God. They came to know with certainty that they were estranged from God, that God had made Jesus both Lord and Christ, and that they were alienated from His kingdom. In desperation they sought counsel from the apostles on what they should do, what they could do, which led to and resulted in their repentance of their sin and faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

Let us once again read what the Lord did in the hearts and lives of these people. Here is Acts 2:37 through 47.

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?"

<sup>38</sup>Then Peter said to them, "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. <sup>39</sup>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."

<sup>40</sup>And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation." <sup>41</sup>Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. <sup>42</sup>And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. <sup>43</sup>Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. <sup>44</sup>Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, <sup>45</sup>and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.

<sup>46</sup>So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, <sup>47</sup>praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

The last time we were addressing our topic, conversion to Christ, we spoke of the work of the Holy Spirit in convicting souls of their sin as the first work of God's sovereign grace in bringing sinners to salvation through Jesus Christ. This moved us to consider our Lord's final words to His apostles, which are recorded in John's Gospel, when He told of His imminent departure from them. Jesus revealed to His apostles that He would send the Holy Spirit to enable them to evangelize the world. Here again is John 16:5-11. Jesus said,

But now I go away to Him who sent Me, and none of you asks Me, 'Where are You going?' <sup>6</sup>But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. <sup>7</sup>Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you. <sup>8</sup>And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: <sup>9</sup>of sin, because they do not believe in Me; <sup>10</sup>of righteousness, because I

go to My Father and you see Me no more; <sup>11</sup>of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged. (John 16:5-11)

The disciples of the Lord were initially very distraught when the Lord told them that He was leaving them. But then He taught them that it was not only necessary that He depart, but that it would be their great blessing and advantage for Him to do so. For then He would send them the Holy Spirit who would enable them to fulfill their mission to extend His kingdom into the world. Through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, His disciples would accomplish the great work of making disciples. With the Holy Spirit working through them, they would accomplish the Lord's work to even a greater degree than what Jesus Himself had accomplished through His earthly ministry (cf. John 14:12). The Lord Jesus then declared to His disciples what the Holy Spirit would do through them and for them in converting the world to salvation through Jesus Christ. Jesus told His apostles, "***And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment.***"

But then Jesus declared more specifically the nature of the convicting or convincing work of the Holy Spirit in converting sinners to Christ, He explained the means by which He would convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment. Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would convict the world

- (1) "***of sin, because they do not believe in Me;***
- (2) "***of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more;***
- (3) "***of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.***"

We had begun to address each of these to better understand the work of grace that God employs in saving sinners, bringing them to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. We first addressed...

## **I. The Holy Spirit's work of grace in convicting the world of sin**

Jesus declared of the Holy Spirit that "when He has come, He will convict the world of sin of sin, because they do not believe in Me." In consideration of this work of God's grace, we have already addressed (1) why it is necessary to convict the world of sin in order to receive salvation from sin. And then we began to address (2) how the Holy Spirit convicts the world of sin. And in doing so, we had set forth six main reasons this illuminating work of the Holy Spirit is necessary in order to bring a sinner to experience salvation.<sup>1</sup> Let us now proceed with our study of the Holy Spirit convicting sinners of their sin.

### **3. The Bible teaches the impossibility of sinners to be convicted of their sin that leads to repentance apart from the Holy Spirit.**

It is not possible for fallen people to be convicted of sin in a manner that will result in their turning from sin and be converted to Jesus Christ. Of course all people will at times feel guilty for having sinned, for that is one of the functions of the conscience that God has given to every human being. But that guilt can only arise to a measure of human remorse, a sorrow of the world, but it cannot arise to that of a godly sorrow that leads to true repentance, that is, turning from sin unto Christ for salvation.

The apostle Paul wrote of the nature of true sorrow of sin that only the Holy Spirit can produce in the soul that leads to salvation. Paul had written a letter confronting the church at Corinth with its sin. The Lord had blessed Paul's words that resulted in the true conviction of their sin that resulted in their repentance from their sin. Paul was sorry in a measure for having caused them distress in his writing to them, but that it had resulted in their true repentance from sin brought him great joy. And so, in commending the Corinthians for their humble contrition in turning from sin, Paul contrasted their Spirit-wrought sorrow (conviction) of sin with something that fails to bring salvation, which he called "the sorrow of the world." Paul wrote,

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<sup>1</sup> These were identified in our sermon notes, FBC 1254, from Thomas Allen, **The Way of the Spirit in Bringing Souls to Christ** (The Northampton Press, 2024 (orig. 1676), 78-86.

For even if I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it. For I perceive that the same epistle made you sorry, though only for a while. <sup>9</sup>Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. <sup>10</sup>For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death. <sup>11</sup>For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication! In all things you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter. (2 Cor. 7:8-11)

There is a sorrow of the world respecting sin, that is, there are often guilty feelings experienced and expressed by all people everywhere when their sin is exposed to them or before others. But the manner in which sinners deal with the guilt of their sin is not the same as when the Holy Spirit convicts the sinner of his sin. Peter was sorrowful for his sin, and repented; Judas was sorry for his sin and despaired of life, hanging himself. Peter had godly sorrow that led to his repentance; Judas had the sorrow of the world that led to his self-destruction.

How do people normally and naturally respond to sin that reveals their need of the Holy Spirit to truly convict them of their sin so as to bring them to salvation? It is a sad but true reality that apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, we refuse to humbly acknowledge ourselves before others, acknowledging that we are truly guilty of our sin and deserving of God's condemnation. There is resistance of every (unregenerate) heart to "come clean" before God and before others regarding our sin. ***Due to our sinful condition we make excuses for our sin, perhaps blame others for causing us to sin, or we may even justify ourselves in our sinning.*** But we will not truly humble ourselves before God and agree to our just condemnation, who are deserving of God's wrath upon us due to our sin. This is how one expressed this human resistance to acknowledge sin honestly and fully:

It appears from the opposition that is in every carnal (non-Christian) heart to be convinced of sin. There is a desperate opposition in our hearts naturally; we are utterly averse and unwilling to be convinced of sin. We are loath to come to the light as Christ tells us in John 3:20, "Everyone that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds be reprov'd," lest he should be convinced; it is the same word as the one in our text (i.e. convicted). He is loath to be convinced of sin. It is the natural frame of our hearts to be averse and opposite to conviction of sin; therefore there must come a stronger power, the power of the Spirit, to this work of convincing of sin, else we shall never be convinced. I pray, mark what this convincing of sin is; for a soul to yield to the convictions of sin is to yield to its own sense of condemnation. And do you think that anyone is ready to yield to the sentence of its own condemnation?<sup>2</sup>

It is quite clear in our passage of Acts 2 that these 3,000 souls who were converted to Christ had become convinced, or convicted, of their sin and that they were justly condemned for it. The Holy Spirit had performed a work of grace in their thoughts and heart.

But in addition to our own heart's refusal to acknowledge openly, fully, and humbly our sin as deserving of God's wrath, ***the devil will so move us not to own our sin and acknowledge our just condemnation before God.*** And so, not only do our own hearts resist acknowledging the guilt of our sin before God that is deserving of His condemnation and punishment, but the devil will also help us in our evasiveness of our sin.

Satan also, the devil, will help the soul hold out against conviction of sin as long as he can. He will keep the soul from yielding to it, for the devil knows that once a soul is convinced of sin by the Spirit of God he is danger to lose that soul; he is in danger that the soul will make an escape. Therefore he lays about him and does all he that he can to keep the soul from yielding to be convinced of sin.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 90.

The devil is a liar, and he is a convincing liar. He told Eve that she could sin, that she could transgress God's law, but come out the better for having done so. And if the sinner has a measure of guilt in his conscience respecting his sin, the devil will cause him to reason that his sin is not as bad as the sin of others. "They are greater sinners than I am", so he reasons that his case is not as bad as theirs. And the devil may even use some of the attributes of God to mollify the conscience so that the sinner continues in his sin. The sinner may come to think or even assert, "Granted, I sin, but God is a very loving and merciful God who will pass over my sin. After all, did not many godly men in the Bible sin in the manner that I have, yet they were clearly redeemed!" Or he may argue, "And after all, we are not saved by works, so my sin is not as egregious as someone who does not 'believe.'" He says this to justify himself even as he does the same things as those who are damned. Paul addressed this false reasoning:

Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. <sup>2</sup>But we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who practice such things. <sup>3</sup>And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God? (Rom. 2:1-3)

Because the devil is wiser, more powerful, and more persuasive than any sinner, we need One far greater than he in order to bring true conviction of sin. Only the Holy Spirit can bring us to the place that we see ourselves clearly as justly condemned before God and helpless to bring any remedy to our condition. This is why we need the Holy Spirit, one infinitely greater than the devil, to convict us of our sin that will bring us humbly and trusting to Christ alone for salvation.

**4. After conversion, the devil will trouble the true Christian's conscience regarding his sin.** It is interesting that before the soul is converted to Christ, the devil will do all he can to diminish that soul's sense of sin and its just condemnation before God. But after conversion, the devil will then distress that soul with the on-going presence of sin to lead him to despair--toward unbelief. The devil first seeks to hide the culpability of your sin before your eyes to keep you in unbelief. But after conversion he will ever display your sin before you. And so, the Holy Scriptures speak of the Holy Spirit convicting of sin, but they also speak of the devil plaguing the conscience of the Christian with respect to his or her sin.

And so, the question needs to be answered: when your soul is pressed upon with a sense of your sin, how do you know if it is due to the work of the Holy Spirit or that it is the work of the devil? We will once again call upon **Thomas Allen** (1608-1673) to assist us. He wrote:

(1) When the evil spirit comes and brings sin, and sets it before the soul, commonly he does so in a tumultuous way. He does it in a confused manner to put the soul into a hurry (i.e. fearful anxiety) so that possibly the soul shall be mightily troubled about sin and cry out, "Oh, I am a damned creature, and I shall be damned in hell for my sins, and the wrath of God will abide upon me forever for my sins." And yet possibly the soul does not know what particular sin it is. If you come to particulars and ask how you are guilty of this or that particular sin, oh, yes, they are sinners, and they are guilty before God. But come to any particular sin and the soul will not fix there, but go from one to another; and still the devil keeps the soul in a hurry and confusion so that one who hears him speak sometimes cannot tell what to make of his condition... But now on the other side, when the Spirit of God comes to convince a soul of sin it sets sin in order before the soul, first one thing and then another. Psalm 50:11, "I will reprove thee and set thy sins in order before thy face," an orderly way, not in a hurry to confound and distract a soul, "but I will set them in order before you." So that is one thing whereby you may know the difference between the trouble for sin that comes from the evil spirit and the convicting of sin that comes from the Holy Spirit of God.

(2) Take another thing whereby you may see the difference, and that is the end or design that satan aims at in his troubling the soul about sin. What is his design? The great design of the devil is to bring the soul into despair, into a desperate case, and so at last to make away itself, to dispatch itself (i.e. unto despair)... He will so set sin before the soul that it is so great that there is no hope it should be pardoned; when he tempts a soul to sin he makes but a little matter of it. "It is but a small matter, and it is but once." But

when the soul has once committed it, then his great design is to overwhelm the soul, and to set the sin before the soul in such a manner that it looks like the unpardonable sin. “Well, your sin is now unpardonable, and there is no hope for you.” And many times he makes souls believe that they have sinned against the Holy Ghost, and now there is no hope for them.” ...Whereas now, on the other hand, the great end of the Spirit of God is to make a soul sensible of sin so as to be humbled for it, so as to repent of it.

(3) When the evil spirit sets home a sin upon the soul it is to drive the soul further from God. When the Holy Ghost comes to convince a soul of sin, it is to draw the soul nearer to God.

(4) Commonly, when sin is set home by the evil spirit, and a soul comes to be troubled for sin by means of the devil, you will find that that soul will be ready to rise up against the very instruments that are the means of his conviction.

(5) When trouble for sin comes from the evil spirit, ordinarily the heart will be ready to murmur against God Himself, to secretly murmur against God Himself, and think that God deals very hardly (harshly) with sinners and very rigidly lays such heavy punishments upon sinners for small matters (as they are ready to think)... Whereas now, on the other side, when a soul is convinced (convicted) of sin by the Holy Spirit of God the soul is ready to justify God though He afflicts it. In Ezra 9:14, Ezra says there, “And whatever is come upon us for our evil deeds, God hath punished us less than our iniquities deserved. God might have laid much upon us.” So in Nehemiah 9:33, Nehemiah and the rest there acknowledge that the Lord was righteous in all that was come upon them. “Howbeit Thou art just in all that is brought upon us, for Thou hast done right.”

(6) You shall find another difference when the evil spirit convinces a soul of sin and troubles the soul about sin. You may observe there, the soul is not troubled for sin as it is sin; nor is taken off from sin as sin, but only troubled about the effects of it... Whereas when a soul is convinced by the Spirit of God, it cuts him off from all sin, so that now a soul loathes and hates every sin that he knows to be sin; he will not meddle with it. In Psalm 119 David says, “I hate every false way.” And as Ephraim says in Hosea 14:8, “What have I to do any more with idols?”... Thus the soul will be taken off from all sin, will not venture upon anything that is sin.

(7) Let me add one more. A soul that is under trouble for sin from the evil spirit, the trouble in time will wear off and will be removed and healed by some way or other that is not the right way of cure... Truly so it will be. A soul will never come to a right cure till such time as it comes to the righteousness of Christ, and the virtue of the blood of Jesus Christ, applied to the soul by faith. And until such time the soul will never come to any true peace and comfort.<sup>4</sup>

The Holy Spirit when convicting sin in a Christian will draw him and move him to look upward to Christ in hope. When the serpent troubles a soul for sin it will cause him to look inward at himself in despair.

## **5. The Holy Spirit’s convicting the world of sin *because they do not believe in Jesus Christ.***

Again, Jesus said of the Holy Spirit, “And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, ...of sin, because they do not believe in Me” (John 16:8f). Let us break this down into three important biblical truths. First, the world is guilty of unbelief. Second, the world is guilty of unbelief in Jesus Christ. Third, In order for the sinner to be saved from his sin, the Holy Spirit must convict him of His unbelief in Jesus Christ.

### **a. The world is guilty of unbelief**

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 92-105.

The fallen people of this world are born into this world alienated from God. They are not at peace with God. They cannot appease God. They do not please God. Jesus declared, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh”, that is, all that are born into this world come into the world alienated from God; they are but flesh, void of the Spirit. Until the Lord in His sovereign grace causes one to be born of the Holy Spirit, he continues in an estranged relation to God who made him.

Paul declared the impossibility for a fallen man to please God. He wrote,

“For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. <sup>6</sup>For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. <sup>7</sup>Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. <sup>8</sup>So then, *those who are in the flesh cannot please God.* (Rom. 8:5-8)

The chief cause of God’s displeasure with mankind is the sin of unbelief. The failure and refusal to believe God and His Word is great sin. Unbelief is rebuked and condemned everywhere in the Holy Scriptures. The Bible opens with the record that sin entered the world through Adam and Eve in their sin of unbelief. The Bible concludes with new heavens and new earth eradicated of all unbelief. We read in Revelation 21, “But the... unbelieving, ...shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.” (Rev. 21:8).

Perhaps the sin of unbelief is the greatest of all sins. It is the sin for which the Holy Spirit was sent by the Lord Jesus to convict the world. For when He comes, Jesus said, “He will convict the world of sin”, of those who “do not believe.” **Charles Spurgeon** (1834-1892) set forth unbelief as the worst of sins::

I am taught in the Scriptures that, “This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world and men love darkness rather than light.” And when I read, “he that believes not is condemned already, because he believes not on the Son of God”, I affirm and the Word declares it, *unbelief is a sin.* Surely with rational and unprejudiced persons, it cannot require any reasoning to prove it. Is it not a sin for a creature to doubt the word of its Maker? Is it not a crime and an insult to the Divinity, for me, an atom, a particle of dust, to dare to deny His words? Is it not the very summit of arrogance and extremity of pride for a son of Adam to say, even in his heart, “God I doubt Your grace. God I doubt Your love. God I doubt Your power”? Oh, sirs believe me, could you roll all sins into one mass—could you take murder, blasphemy, lust, adultery and fornication and everything that is vile and unite them all into one vast globe of black corruption, they would not equal, even then—the sin of unbelief. This is the monarch sin, the quintessence of guilt, the mixture of the venom of all crimes. The dregs of the wine of Gomorrah. It is the A1 sin, the masterpiece of satan, the chief work of the devil.

And then after setting forth the nature and extent of the sin of unbelief, Spurgeon gave forth these words:

Let me remark that you will observe the heinous nature of unbelief in this—that it is the dammed sin. There is one sin for which Christ never died. It is the sin against the Holy Spirit. There is one other sin for which Christ never made atonement. Mention every crime in the calendar of evil and I will show you persons who have found forgiveness for it. But ask me whether the man who died in unbelief can be saved and I reply there is no atonement for that man. There is an atonement made for the unbelief of a Christian, because it is temporary, but the *final* unbelief—the unbelief with which men die—never was atoned for.

You may turn over this whole Book and you will find that there is no atonement for the man who died in unbelief. There is no mercy for him. Had he been guilty of every other sin but had believed, he would have been pardoned. But this is the damning exception—he had no faith... He is faithless and unbelieving and such are the tenants for whom hell was built. It is *their* portion, *their* prison—they are the chief prisoners, the fetters are marked with their names. Forever shall they know that, “He that believes not shall be damned.”

It has also been written regarding the heinousness of the sin of unbelief in this way:

That unbelief is such a great sin (and, oh, that the Lord would open our eyes that we may see it and be made sensible of it) appears because it is that which casts the greatest reproach upon God of all other sin. It casts the greatest reproach upon the God of truth; it strikes at the very being of God, though people do not consider it. I say, unbelief, or not believing on Christ, strikes at the very being of God, He is a God of truth. Truth is the very essential property of God; it is His very Being. His very essence, for He is a God of truth and, in comparison of Him, all men in the world are liars. "Let God be true, but every man a liar" (Rom. 3:4). He is so infinitely true that He is truth itself; and it is impossible for Him to lie, as the apostle said in Titus 2. God must cease to be God if any untruth be found in Him; and yet now mark, unbelief casts so great a reproach upon God as to say, "God is a liar." You have it expressly in 1 John 5:10-11, "He that believeth not on the Son of God hath made God a liar, because he believeth not the record that God gave of His Son."<sup>5</sup>

The writer to the Hebrew Christians declared that only people of faith please God. We read, "But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Heb. 11:6). People born into this world do not believe in God. It is impossible for them to believe in God for they are born unbelievers, incapable and unwilling to believe God. They will continue as people of God's displeasure, unless and until they believe in God savingly. And they cannot and will not believe God until and unless the blessed Holy Spirit is sent to them by the Lord Jesus and He convicts them of their unbelief.

It can be reasoned that unbelief is at the heart of all sin. **John Piper** (b. 1946) expressed it this way:

What Is Sin? The most penetrating and devastating definition of sin that I am aware of in Scripture is the last part of Romans 14:23, "Whatever is not from faith is sin." The reason it is penetrating is that it goes to the root of all sinful actions and attitudes, namely, the failure to trust God. And the reason it is devastating is that it sweeps away all our lists of dos and don'ts and makes anything, from preaching to house-painting, a candidate for sin. In the original language, this is stressed even more than in our versions: it says, "Everything which is not from faith is sin." Anything, absolutely any act or attitude which is owing to a lack of trust in God is sin, no matter how moral it may appear to men. God looks on the heart."

This speaks to the extensive nature, the pervasiveness of sin in the human heart. The antonym (opposite) of unbelief is belief, or faith. What is faith, that is, biblical faith? Or better, what is saving faith? Of course saving faith is due to the grace of God operating upon and within the soul of the one who truly believes. Ephesians 2:8 and 9 states, "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." Saving faith is not the product of a man's understanding and will apart from the grace of God. Saving faith is the product, even the outworking of God's grace in the soul. We might say that God saves His people *through* faith, not *because* of faith. He saves His people because of Christ alone, God by His grace using faith to bring His people to receive the blessings of Christ as Lord and Savior.

It is a very sad and unfortunate fact, however, that there are multitudes who assume that any kind of "believing" in Jesus may be regarded as saving faith. It is thought that if a person "believes", he is to be regarded and treated as a Christian. But the subjective faith that is of a saving kind is qualified in the Word of God. This is why we must frequently refer to Christians as "**true** believers", who exhibit not simply faith, but "**saving** faith."

#### **b. What is saving faith?**

What is faith and what kind of faith is it that God requires in order to be saved from sin, saved from damnation? Saving faith is the faith of God's elect (Tit. 1:1). It is the faith that is produced and sustained by the grace of God (1 Pet. 1:5). The Scriptures teach that saving faith must have three elements or it is not saving faith. (1) Faith must first be based on an understanding of truth; therefore, there must be true

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 121f.

knowledge. (2) Second, there must be an affirmation that knowledge is indeed true. Not all who have knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ believe it to be true. (3) And third there must be a trust and commitment to that truth; one must believe and act upon that truth. Faith is like a three-legged stool, remove one of these three and it is not faith.

But saving faith that is born and sustained by the grace of God has certain characteristics that distinguishes it from faith that does not save the soul from sin. Although we cannot be exhaustive here, we may cite a few of these essential qualities of saving faith. First, when one has saving faith, he humbly acknowledges his guilt for sin before God and that he is incapable of doing anything to remove his guilt or remedy his condition. Second, the one with saving faith has come to understand that if he is to have salvation, it must be due to the mercy of God alone, for he believes rightly that he is deserving of damnation by the just and holy God who holds him accountable for what he does in this life. Third, the one who has saving faith has heard and believes that only through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone as his Lord and Savior can he receive salvation from God. He knows that there is no amount of good works or intensity of feeling or sincerity can atone for his sin. Fourth, the believing sinner knows and seeks to repent of his sin before God, knowing that his faith must be manifested in his turning from living in sin and for sin, so as to live before God in Jesus Christ. And fifth, he has come to see and believe that all that he must know and believe regarding his salvation from sin is contained and set forth in the Bible, the Holy Scriptures, the inspired Word of God. In short, saving faith, one's subjective faith, must be based on and informed by an objective faith, what it is that is believed, and that objective faith is set forth in the Holy Scriptures.

Again, subjective faith is that a person believes; objective faith is what it is that person believes. When the apostle Paul wrote of the matters that Christians have in common, he referenced this objective faith. He declared, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, *one faith*, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all" (Eph. 4:4-6). These words describe what all Christians have in common, namely, we have all received the initial effectual calling into a secure and settled hope of our salvation, we all have the same Lord, even Jesus Christ, and we all have affirmed the one faith in that Lord, all of us confessing that faith in Christ through our one baptism.

But in addition to these objective truths that the true believer embraces, saving faith is evidenced by other qualities. *First, saving faith is an enduring, overcoming faith.* Temporary faith is not saving faith. It is "He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death" (Rev. 2:11). And Jesus said, "To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God" (Rev. 2:7). This enduring faith is in contrast to those who believe only for a time, but then forsake Christ. Christ declared, "The one who endures to the end will be saved" (Mark 13:13). And Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:1ff:

Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you-- unless you believed in vain. (1 Cor. 15:1f).

*Second, saving faith is also manifested in the way of life of the true believer.* Hypocrites are those who profess to believe in Christ, but their lives show forth that they are void of saving faith. Titus 1:16 speaks of false believers: "They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work." They may be ones who claim to be true believers, but they are ones who refuse or fail to walk in the narrow way of faithful obedience that leads to eternal life. Jesus spoke of them in this way:

"Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it. (Matt. 7:13f)

We may also consider what Paul wrote to the church at Philippi regarding hypocrites.

"Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern.  
<sup>18</sup>*For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ:* <sup>19</sup>*whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in*

*their shame—who set their mind on earthly things.* <sup>20</sup>For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>21</sup>who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself. (Phil. 3:17-21).

In this Philippians passage Paul was not writing of unbelievers, but of professing believers who were not living as Christians. They were not characterized as ones who denied themselves, taking up the cross of Christ, and following Christ.

And then *third, saving faith endures through trials, even great trials and troubles.* Peter wrote of the necessity of various trials that all Christians experience, though to different degrees.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup>to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, <sup>5</sup>who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

<sup>6</sup>In this you greatly rejoice, *though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, <sup>7</sup>that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ,* <sup>8</sup>whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, <sup>9</sup>receiving the end (outcome) of your faith—the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:3-9)

And so, the Holy Spirit in bringing people to faith in Jesus Christ first convicts them of their unbelief, that is, that they are without saving faith. But in John 16:9 Jesus declared that there is a specific sin respecting their unbelief to which the Holy Spirit convicts sinners. Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would convict the world “of sin, because they do not believe in Me.”

### **c. The Holy Spirit convicts the world of sin because they do not believe in Jesus Christ.**

If unbelief is a great sin, which we have already shown, the greatest sin of unbelief is the failure or even refusal to have faith in Jesus Christ. When the Holy Spirit came, Jesus said that He would convict the world of sin for their failure to believe on Him for who He is and for what He had done. To call again on Thomas Allen, he set forth this biblical doctrine based upon this verse of John 16:9:

**DOCTRINE: The great and special sin that the Spirit of God usually convinces people of in order to their conversion is their unbelief, their not believing on Christ.<sup>6</sup>**

Now last time we spoke of the role of the law of God as the great standard by which God convicts the world of sin. “By the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin” (Rom. 3:20). But the law of God points to and culminates in the person of Jesus Christ. Paul wrote, For the end of the law, that is, the goal or direction to which the law leads, is to the person of Jesus Christ (Rom. 10:4). Moreover, the Lord Jesus declared that all the law, that is, that the law that was given through Moses, pointed to Him. Jesus told the unbelieving Jewish leaders, “For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me” (John 5:46). One can rightly conclude, therefore, that the greatest sin that one could possibly commit in this life is to have unbelief in the Lord Jesus Christ.

This sin of unbelief in Jesus Christ is a sin that can only be committed by those who have heard and learned of the person of Jesus Christ. Our Lord Himself said to those who heard Him, “If I had not come and spoken to them, they would have no sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin” (John 15:22). Hearing and learning of Jesus Christ is a great privilege and blessing, but it comes with great responsibility and accountability.

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<sup>6</sup> Allen, 111.

To believe on Jesus Christ is the great command of the gospel of salvation. Jesus said, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent" (John 6:29). To fail or refuse to believe in Jesus Christ is to disobey God the Father. This is stated perhaps more directly in 1 John 3:23, "And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ." The gospel commands sinners to believe on Christ for salvation.

To continue in unbelief to Jesus Christ warrants God's everlasting punishment, for it is the greatest of all sins. Paul wrote,

We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other, <sup>4</sup>so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure, <sup>5</sup>which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer; <sup>6</sup>since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, <sup>7</sup>and to give you who are troubled rest with us ***when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, <sup>8</sup>in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup>These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, <sup>10</sup>when He comes***, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed. (2 Thess. 1:3-10)

We will close with this affirmation. The most wicked sin that you could possibly commit in this fallen world, the sin that warrants and will receive the most severe sentence of punishment in eternal hell, is the refusal to believe on Jesus Christ upon having the truth of the gospel clearly and repeatedly set before you, because you continued in unbelief.

Now one might ask, "Really pastor? Are you not guilty of hyperbole, of overstating the matter?" Not at all. The Lord Jesus Himself declared this truth forthrightly. Of the unbelieving people at the center of His public ministry in Galilee, the cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, He declared these words:

Then He began to rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent: <sup>21</sup>"Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. <sup>22</sup>But I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. <sup>23</sup>And you, Capernaum, who are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades; for if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. <sup>24</sup>But I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you." (Matt. 11:20-24)

Unbelief in Jesus Christ is a greater sin than even the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah. Unbelief is the greatest, most heinous sin that people commit. May that not be the case for any one of us.

Jesus had declared, "For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required." We who have been given so much, we, who have been told and taught the things of Christ in truth in manifold ways on multitude of occasions, much will be required. I would exhort everyone of us not to leave this place in unbelief as to who Jesus Christ is, what He has done, and what He has promised to do. Do you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ? If not you are lying in the guilt and condemnation of the most egregious sin possible. May the Holy Spirit convict you of sin for not believing on the Lord Jesus Christ. Cast your all upon Him. Entrust your soul, your life before Him, humbly confessing that He is Lord to the glory of the Father. And purpose to go forth from this place believing and following Him in faith and obedience.

Now we have addressed the first of three truths that the Holy Spirit convicts the world of in order to bring sinners to true salvation. The blessed Holy Spirit convicts of sin, but He also convicts the world of righteousness and judgment, which we will address before long, Lord willing.

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