

Of Saving Faith (Part 1)

Romans 10:5-17; WCF 14.1

Reformed Church of Wainuiomata, 1 December 2019, 16:30

(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)¹

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

This afternoon we will be hearing the first of two sermons on our saving faith – *your faith & my faith* in Jesus Christ; a faith through which we have been made right with God.

Now, when we talk about this precious faith, it's very common that we use the words, "*our faith*," or "*your faith*," or "*my faith*!"

Question: Is that right? Is it so that the faith which lives in you & me is *your* or *my* faith?

The answer is "Yes and no!"

It's "Yes," because *your faith is yours*. After all, it's not *someone else's* faith which lives in you! So, it *is* your faith, for you now have it!

However, the answer is also "No," for your & my faith has not originated with us! For this reason, no person should ever pray, "God, *I give You my faith*! Now, please give me salvation!" If you ever say such words, then that would reveal that you think your salvation *originated* with you and that you now come to proudly present *your faith* to God in exchange for eternal salvation!

It's in this sense, that using the words, "*my faith*" is wrong and unbiblical!

Well, this brings us to the first of three points...

Grace & The Spirit

My brother & sister, it's important to understand that we are saved *through* faith and not *because* of faith!

Forgive me if I use again an illustration I have used in the past, i.e. the illustration of an agricultural farmer and his drought-stricken fruit tree.

Imagine a farmer has a fruit tree and, for several months, it has not rained. So, what does the farmer now do? Well, between the pump on his borehole and the fruit tree he now lays a pipe – a pipe which becomes the instrument through which the fruit tree gets saved!

See? The fruit tree could in no way have put that pipe in place by itself, because the fruit tree has no hands! It was by the gracious action of the *farmer* that an instrument was put in place through which the fruit tree found salvation! So, if the fruit tree could talk, it could never boast, saying, "It's because of *my pipe* that I have been saved!" No, it could only say, "I have been saved through the pipe which the kind & gracious farmer has put in place for me!"

My brother & sister, see why the Bible, when talking about how we have been saved, constantly uses the words "*through* faith," and not "*because* of faith?" Faith is always the instrument put in place by our Heavenly "Gardener" (God). Therefore, it's *through* faith that we are saved.

Thus, because faith is never the *grounds* on which we are saved, the Bible never says we are saved *because* of faith. Indeed, if the Bible would use the word *because* regarding our salvation, it would say that we are saved because of *Christ's sacrifice*!

¹ In writing this sermon, I am greatly indebted to my two main sources whose guidance I appreciate: 1) Van Dixhoorn, Chad. 2014. *Confessing the Faith: a reader's guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*. Carlisle, PA : The Banner of Truth Trust. 484p.

2) Sproul, R.C. 2006. *The truth we confess*. (In: Sproul, R.C. ed. *Truths we confess: a layman's guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith – in three volumes*. Vol. 2: *Salvation and the Christian Life* (Chapters 9-22 of the Confession) Phillipsburg, NJ : P&R Publishing. 279p.).

Many words & phrases I have written, I have gladly borrowed with great thankfulness from this source.

So, please hear again the very familiar words of Eph 2:8-9, “***For by grace you have been saved through² faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.***”³

It’s clear: your/my faith has come about by God’s grace. Faith is the God-worked instrument through which our Christ-earned salvation is applied to us!

How does God apply this salvation to us? How does He work faith in our hearts?

Through His Holy Spirit! Look, is that not why our Lord Jesus told Nicodemus that the person who gets born again (from above), gets ***born of the Spirit***?⁴

Is it now a wonder that the Apostle Paul (talking to the Corinthians) calls the Spirit, “...the Spirit of Faith?”⁵

Thus, our saving faith comes by grace through faith from beginning to end (first to last).⁶

So far, re point 1: “Grace & The Spirit.”

Here is point 2...

Ordinary Means

WCF 14.1 says that this faith in our hearts “*is ordinarily produced through the ministry of the Word...*”

What does this mean? On which Bible verse does the Westminster Assembly base this statement?

Firstly, what did the Assembly mean by the word “ministry”?

Well, according to the Bible reference given by WCF 14.1 (i.e. Rm 10:14, 17), they meant *preaching* – the preaching of the Word! It’s through the preaching of the Word that faith is produced.

Hear again verse 14 and 17 of our NT passage: “***How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? ... So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.***”⁷

Well, it’s clear: believing (faith) in Jesus Christ comes from hearing the *preached* word! That’s the ordinary way in which a person comes to (and grows in) faith – through hearing someone preach!

Someone might say, “But is it really so?” “Is preaching the only way by which the Holy Spirit can work faith in a person’s heart (and makes that faith grow)?”

My brother & sister, granted, there are abnormal situations in which someone is unable to be there where the Word is preached – unable to, first-hand, hear the preaching of the Word.

² In Greek *dia* (διά): “...the means by which one event makes another event possible—‘by means of, through, by’ (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 785). New York: United Bible Societies).

³ [New American Standard Bible: 1995 update](#). (1995). (Eph 2:8–9). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

⁴ Cf. Jn 3:5-8 (particularly v.8b), ***Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit”*** (Emphasis mine).

⁵ Cf. 2 Cor 4:13, ***It is written: “I believed; therefore I have spoken.” With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, ¹⁴ because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence*** (NIV84, Emphasis mine). I agree with Van Dixhoorn (ibid:186) that the word “spirit” in this verse could hardly refer to our attitude. It should rather have been written with a capital “S” “referring to a divine Spirit of faith, a Spirit who brings faith to a people who tend not to believe what they ought to believe.”

⁶ Cf. Rm 1:17 (NIV84), ***For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith”*** (Emphasis mine).

⁷ ESV (Emphasis mine)

But, ordinarily (in normal situations), the Holy Spirit works (and grows) faith through the hearing of the preached Word.

Someone might say, “But can’t I stay home on Sundays and read my own Bible or good Christian literature or even a sermon?” “Or can’t I watch a video of someone preaching?”

The answer is: “Of course you can!” “But, for various reasons, if that’s what will become *your standing habit*, then you will always miss out on rich spiritual blessings!”

I love the way Thomas Goodwin, one of Puritan England’s most influential theologians, has explained it. He said that good books and conversations are helpful, particularly in times of spiritual drought, but a steady use of these in the absence of preaching is like manually *watering* your pot-plants instead of *putting them out in the rain!*⁸

You need to be “soaked!”

Why will the preaching of God’s Word “soak” me, more than doing my own Bible reading?

Well, as one member of the Westminster Assembly indicated: “...where the Word of God is not expounded, preached and applied” the people “perish.”⁹

Again, someone might say, “But, surely, in our modern age with TV’s, PC’s, and cell phones with online streaming, one can stay home and have God’s Word *expounded, preached and applied* to our hearts.”

Well, I like the story RC Sproul gives. It’s the story of a man who once professed his faith and joined a church, but then attended church only at Easter and Christmas. So, his pastor came to visit him. The man was on his patio busy barbecuing some steaks on his charcoal grill. Asked the pastor: “Why do you come to church only twice a year?” Said the man: “I don’t feel that I need to be in church. After all, I am a Christian, and I can meet God anywhere – even here in the great outdoors!” Well, it was then that the pastor walked closer to the barbecue and, with a pair of tongs, removed one of the coals, carried it over to a brick a few meters away, and asked the man to watch with him that coal for a little while.

Soon, as they were watching, that coal grew cold.

Says the pastor: “You see?” “You take this single coal out of the group of coals and it loses its warmth – its fire!” “That’s what has happened to you.”¹⁰

My brother & sister (young person), you might think that you can get along without the body of Christ and without first-hand hearing the preaching of the Word and participating in the Lord’s Supper and Baptism. But, look! When God saves a person, He does save him/her as an *individual*, but He never *leaves that person alone*. He always places him in His body, the church!

You know, my son and his wife live in China! After their wedding, last year here in this very church, they were so looking forward to going back to China and regularly worship at a church which they had discovered a few weeks before their wedding.

What did they find when they arrived back in China? The authorities had disbanded (dissolved) that church! It doesn’t exist anymore! The sad thing is: our son’s wife (our daughter-in-law) is fairly new to the Christian faith! She *needs* to hear the regular preaching of the Word! She needs the warm fellowship of believers – and participating in the sacraments!

Young people (children), how long will you still be able to, freely and without persecution, attend church?

Rom 10:14 tells us that faith comes by hearing, but also that hearing comes from preaching!

Surely, if that’s what God’s Word says, then you & I need to think twice before we make any other way of communication more important than preaching! God’s Word has explicitly and expressly singled out preaching for our attention!

⁸ My adaptation of the words of Goodwin (apud Van Dixhoorn, *ibid*:187)

⁹ Cf. Van Dixhoorn (*ibid*:187) for these words written in 1649 by William Greenhill, “To All Lovers of Divine Truths,” *The epistle dedicatory of An Exposition Continued upon the Sixt, Seventh, Eighth, Ninth, Tenth, Eleventh, Twelfth, and Thirteenth Chapters of the Prophet Ezekiel* (London, 1649; Edinburgh, 1994), p.v.

¹⁰ My adaptation of Sproul (*ibid*:119-120)

I mean, which new Christian – and even which seasoned saint – if they’re honest, will not confess that his/her faith is often weak? After all, are not we all like that father (of a demon-possessed son), who said to Christ, “***I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!***”?¹¹

Are we not like the disciples who said to the Lord, “***Increase our faith!***”?¹²

And did not Paul commend the Ephesian elders to the Word of God’s grace which can build them up?¹³

And so, too, did Peter when he once urged believers to desire the pure milk of the Word for the exact purpose that they would ***grow up into salvation!***¹⁴

Well, so far re Point 2: “Preaching as the Ordinary Means through which God works faith in your/my heart.”

Here is the last point of this sermon...

Sacraments

WCF 14.1 emphasises that the Christian’s faith is strengthened by witnessing or participating in the sacraments – i.e. in baptism and the Lord’s Supper!

Now, I know the *wedding ceremony* is not a sacrament, but allow me to ask by way of illustration: “Can you recall the last Christian wedding you attended?” “If so, can you remember parts of the wording of the wedding form?” “And can you perhaps remember at least part of the wording in the bride and groom’s vows?” “Well, even if you can’t remember the details of these, can you still remember how, at the time when you heard those powerful words, they strengthened your commitment to your own marriage?”

In the short twelve years of my ministry, I have performed six wedding ceremonies. So, I had six *bonus times* of hearing the words of the wedding form and the vows. And I distinctly remember how I was every time strengthened by them in my commitment to my precious wife, Annette!

My brother & sister, if *that’s* what attending a *Christian wedding ceremony* does to us – a formal ceremony between two mere human beings – is it then not true that participating in (or witnessing) the sacraments which vividly portray the covenant which *God* has made with mere men, our faith must be strengthened?

I mean, even regarding infant baptism, is it not so that the emphasis is not upon the baby, nor upon the parents, but upon God whose covenant graciously includes babies of believing parents – just as it did in the Old Covenant!?

I mean, later on, that child is taught, “God gave you the promise that if you believe in Jesus Christ, you will receive all the benefits of the covenant.” “You received that promise when you did not even know what was going on, but God’s promise was communicated to you, not just verbally, but substantively with this sign!”¹⁵

So, what does hearing the baptismal form do to even the seasoned saint on earth? Well, it reminds him/her of God’s grace, and of God’s faithfulness to His covenant made with every believer!

See? The spiritual blessings of baptism go far wider than just the person being baptised!

The same with the Lord’s Supper!

You see, many people have had their faith strengthened from participating in the Lord’s Supper!

That’s why the Belgic Confession’s Art 35 says, “*We believe and confess that our saviour Jesus Christ has instituted the sacrament of the holy supper to nourish and sustain those whom he has already regenerated and incorporated into his family, which is his church.*”

¹¹ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Mk 9:24). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹² Cf. Lk 17:5 ***The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!”***

¹³ Cf. Acts 20:32 ***And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.***

¹⁴ Cf. 1 Pt 2:2-3, ***Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—³ if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.***

¹⁵ Well-phrased words of Sproul (ibid:120)

John Calvin spoke of the confidence and nourishment which the Lord, through His Supper, gives to unworthy sinners!¹⁶

Well, lastly, the WCF 14.1 says that God does not just use the preached Word and the sacraments, but also *prayer* to strengthen our faith – why also Paul exhorted the Christians in Rome to *be constant in prayer*;¹⁷ and why the Bible tells us about the early church (Acts 1:14) that, “*They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.*”¹⁸

Dear Wainui church family, I pray that the Lord, in His grace, will work faith in the hearts of all our members & children who have not yet received Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord!

I also pray that all who are already in Christ will have their faith constantly strengthened; and that everyone in our church family will remain faithful in church attendance; and that God will bless the preaching and exposition of His Word – and the participation in (witnessing of) the sacraments – to our hearts and lives!

AMEN (2273 words excluding footnotes)

¹⁶ Cf. Calvin, Institutes, 4.17.2 *Pious souls can derive great confidence and delight from this sacrament, as being a testimony that they form one body with Christ, so that everything which is his they may call their own. Hence it follows, that we can confidently assure ourselves, that eternal life, of which he himself is the heir, is ours, and that the kingdom of heaven, into which he has entered, can no more be taken from us than from him; on the other hand, that we cannot be condemned for our sins, from the guilt of which he absolves us, seeing he has been pleased that these should be imputed to himself as if they were his own. This is the wondrous exchange made by his boundless goodness. Having become with us the Son of Man, he has made us with himself sons of God. By his own descent to the earth he has prepared our ascent to heaven. Having received our mortality, he has bestowed on us his immortality. Having undertaken our weakness, he has made us strong in his strength. Having submitted to our poverty, he has transferred to us his riches. Having taken upon himself the burden of unrighteousness with which we were oppressed, he has clothed us with his righteousness (cf. at <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.vi.xviii.html>).*

¹⁷ Cf. Rm 12:12

¹⁸ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Ac 1:14). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.