



Session Nine

We Are Saved By Faith

The crucial doctrines of the Incarnation and the Atonement explain the process by which God acted decisively in history for our benefit. The equally crucial doctrines of Salvation and Sanctification describe what can happen to us because of God's action. In short, the Incarnation and Atonement make Salvation and Sanctification possible.

Since the Fall of Adam, humans have been trapped by the bondage of our sin, our rebellious self-interest, and by the tragedy of our broken relationships with God, others, and ourselves. We leap from one emphasis to another trying to discover our own salvation, trying to find meaning, purpose, and happiness in life. We try capitalism and communism, democracy and totalitarianism, puritan ethics and pornography, mind expanding drugs and psychology, education and hedonism, alcohol and low carbohydrate diets, vocational training and birth control — and nothing buys our salvation. We are unable to earn or work out our own salvation without God's help.

But, God loves us and wants us to have perfect lives on earth and eternal lives, so God came as Jesus Christ to set in motion the possibility of our salvation.

THE DOCTRINES OF SALVATION

Scriptures: Luke 24.46-47; John 3.5-8, 16-18, 10.27-30; Romans 4.5; 8.28-34; Galatians 4.4-5; Ephesians 2.8-9; 1 Timothy 2.3-4.

In classical Protestant and Roman Catholic doctrine, the consequences of sin are the burden of guilt, the fear of death, and the anticipation of either eternal nonexistence or eternal punishment in Hell. Historically, the most emphasized benefit of salvation through Christ's Incarnation and Atonement has been the escape from guilt, death, and Hell.

This fear of Hell and the hope of Heaven have been functional concepts for humankind throughout most of our history. And, they still are for masses of people operating within the fabric of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Also,

Leader's Guide to *Big Christian Ideas*

Session Nine: We Are Saved By Faith

there are times when everyone suffers from guilt over actions they consider to be substantial violations of some standard of goodness. And all people face their own finitude from time to time.

However, there is growing evidence that the sin-guilt-death-Hell formula is no longer operative for a large segment of modern humankind. Modern humans have had a taste of psychology, the mind-molding impact of mass communications, the hope of advanced education and technology, and the pressures of their inability to make life meaningful. For many moderns, the question is not "Is there life after death?" but "Is there meaningful life after birth?"

Salvation for most Christians entails much more than the promise of Heaven. When we accept God's grace and opt for a life of obedience to God, we are freed from the bondage of our own selfish appetites. Temptation remains; but the emphasis of life shifts from a primary focus on ourselves to a primary focus on God and others.

One of the ironies of human life is that those persons who believe they are choosing freedom by turning away from God and others and turning toward themselves become gradually entrapped by their own selfish interests. Excessive self-interest soon succumbs to excessive personal appetites for power, wealth, alcohol, drugs, success, sexual gratification, etc. Persons find themselves in a never-ending spiral of self-indulgence that becomes more and more frustrating as ultimate meaning for life continues to elude them. Furthermore, when the relationship with God is broken by excessive self-interest, relationships with others begin to deteriorate until these persons find themselves alone as well as lost and trapped in the indulgent spiral of self-interest.

A growing number of Christians worldwide

are viewing Salvation in terms of worldly freedom from oppression as well as spiritual freedom from sinfulness. In short, Salvation is being freshly defined in our time as liberation from both the burdens of our own sin and the burdens of the sin of others. Sin is excessive self-interest, and excessive self-interest always leads to the oppression of other persons. But, faith in the freeing power of Christ sets persons free from both their own inclination to oppress others and from the need to submit to the oppression of others. You can feed Christians to the lions for their unwillingness to submit to oppression, but you cannot force them to submit. They are free.

As the center and numerical strength of Christendom is gradually shifting to the Third World nations, this understanding of salvation as liberation is growing. And historically oppressed minorities in the historically Christian nations are also gradually coming to understand salvation in terms of a liberated and meaningful existence now as well as a hoped-for abundance and equality in the hereafter.

The primary purpose for God's action in the Incarnation and the Atonement was to make possible a renewed love relationship between God and us. Ultimate meaning in life is achieved only through the kind of relationship with God and others whereby we understand ourselves as God's agents, continuing the ministry begun in Christ of restoring all broken relationships. As our own relationships with God are restored (our salvation), we become involved in aiding the restoration of others (their salvation), and life takes on ultimate meaning. Through salvation and the restoration of our relationship with God and others, we find the answer to life's most perplexing question, "What is the purpose of existence?" We exist to serve God by serving others so that

they can come to know of God's love and also be set free.

The very word salvation implies being saved "from" something rather than "for" something, even though the latter is more in tune with the whole spirit of the New Testament and Christian faith. Anyone who has recently gone through what we call the "Salvation experience" can normally affirm a great sense of rebirth, of being made new, of starting fresh. And even though this sense of rebirth distinctly is a sense of escape "from" the burden of sin, it is even more a sense of freedom "for" a new life of responsibility, obedience, and meaning.

Salvation, for many Christians, is the beginning of movement toward a divine state. In addition to many of the ideas listed above, classical Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox, as well as some Protestant, doctrine includes the concept of the ultimate deification of humans through the gradual infusion of God's grace. The process begins with the infusion of Sanctifying Grace (usually through the sacrament of baptism), continues with additional doses of Grace being added through participation in the other sacraments, and ends with unhindered, immediate and total vision of God, an eyeball-to-eyeball relationship with God called the Beatific Vision.

GRACE

Grace is favor, kindness, forgiveness, and mercy freely shown by a superior to an inferior, such as the kindness shown by a master to a servant or slave, especially when the latter has done nothing to merit the kindness. The act of a victor in mercifully freeing his vanquished victim is an act of grace. Some of the confusion about this most central concept of the Christian faith is that "grace" is no longer widely used in the sense of "unmerited kind-

ness shown to an inferior" in secular speech. We tend to think of a "graceful" person more in terms of their ability to drink soup without slurping than in terms of their mercy and kindness toward others.

However, at the core of all Christian doctrine is the concept that God loves us totally and eternally whether or not we love God in return. And the result of this total love toward us is a constant, freely given favor and mercy which God directs toward us. We believe that the ultimate expression of this divine favor of God for us was the Incarnation and Atonement through which God acted decisively to make available the possibility of salvation.

The classical Protestant understanding of grace is that it is primarily God's constant attitude of forgiveness and God's unending desire for reconciliation of our broken relationship. This forgiveness and restoration is always available to us as a gift that God constantly extends on our behalf. Our only effort is one of accepting the gift and believing in its efficacy.

The classical Roman Catholic and Eastern orthodox doctrine defines grace as a kind of substance or power that is put into a person usually through the sacraments. Then, with this infusion of grace, comes the growth of specific habits or virtues, especially the virtues of faith, hope, and love. As these virtues are properly exercised, they merit more grace, which, in turn, increases the use of the virtues. More grace means more development of the virtues means more grace means more . . . and so on, until the soul is gradually elevated to the same divine state that humans had before the Fall of Adam.

It is usually presumed that the primary difference between the classical Roman Catholic and classical Protestant understanding of the means of grace is that one focuses on the sacraments and works while the other focuses

Leader's Guide to *BigChristian Ideas* Session Nine: We Are Saved By Faith

on the preached word and faith. Even though there is some truth to this, the two positions are much closer than they seem to be on the surface. For instance, Protestants generally deny that the sacraments are objective means by which grace is transmitted, and, yet, most Protestants affirm that the sacraments are significant means by which persons are enabled to avail themselves of God's grace. And, Catholics generally deny that salvation comes primarily through hearing, accepting, and trusting the word of God, but most affirm that the word is critical to the development of the virtues that increase the infusion of Grace.

In addition to the sacraments and the preached word, works of piety and charity are critical to both Roman Catholic and some Protestant understandings of the way in which grace is transmitted. Some believe that specific works are the product of infused virtues, and they, therefore, merit more grace. Others see works, such as the sacraments, as one of the means by which we grow more righteous and, thereby, avail ourselves of more grace.

As some Protestants and Catholics have gradually defined and redefined their positions, they have frequently subdivided grace into categories, much in the same manner as they have subdivided sin into categories.

PREVENIENT GRACE is the activity of God in our favor before we make any movement toward God. Prevenient grace is a widely accepted concept, especially among Christians of the Catholic and Methodist traditions. God seeks everywhere to move persons to repentance and faith through grace, most commonly identified as conscience. Some believe prevenient grace works primarily through the lives and words of other persons, while others see it as a force that works within each person.

IRRESISTIBLE GRACE is a definition of

grace particularly expressed in some of the Calvinist (Reformed or Presbyterian) traditions. Grace is irresistible for those who have been elected for salvation but not for others.

ACTUAL GRACE is a Roman Catholic concept for a special but temporary infusion of power necessary to perform some particular act or to resist a particular temptation. When this grace is resisted by humans, it is called sufficient grace because even though it was not used, it was sufficient for the act. When a person accepts and uses this special dose of power, it is called efficacious grace.

COOPERATING GRACE is the assistance that God provides to a person of faith to help that person grow stronger in faith.

SANCTIFYING GRACE is, for Roman Catholicism, the basic substance or power that is poured into the human soul primarily through participation in the sacraments. It is sometimes called habitual grace because it is constant (in contrast to actual grace), because it brings with it the virtues or habits of faith, hope, and love and because it grows as these habits are used benevolently. For some Protestants, especially those in the Wesleyan tradition, sanctifying grace is the empowerment of the Holy Spirit that aids Christians in the pursuit of holiness.

FAITH AS BELIEF

Roman Catholics, generally, and some Protestants affirm faith as essentially intellectual belief in certain truths about God. This seems to be the basic understanding of faith in the early church, and the concept has been fleshed out in considerable detail over the centuries. Faith results from an act of the will, which submits to the authority of God and the church, but the actual act of faith is merely assent to specific dogmas (those doctrines which are absolutes and have divine authori-

ty). This intellectual assent or faith is usually believed to be a virtue that is infused into us along with sanctifying grace.

Faith as intellectual assent is the first step in the salvation process for sacramental Christians. If the virtue of faith is used, sanctifying grace cooperates with it, and the virtues of hope and love grow within the individual. Then, as these three virtues are used, they merit more grace which intensifies the use of the virtues, etc., leading to final salvation and the unhindered vision of God.

In Roman Catholic and some Protestant doctrines the concept of faith as intellectual assent is sometimes divided into explicit faith — belief in and understanding of explicit tenets — and implicit faith — belief in all other revelations stemming implicitly from the accepted dogmas. Implicit faith usually is worked out as acceptance of all teachings of the church, whether or not they are understandable.

FAITH AS TRUST

The classical Protestant understanding of faith includes the idea of intellectual belief but is primarily focused on obedience or trust toward God. It is an orientation or condition of our total being — a turning toward God in trustful obedience. Faith, therefore, is the total trust that God is loving, that salvation is possible only through God's grace, and that acceptance of God's gift of grace is all that is necessary for salvation. When Protestants say "salvation through faith alone," they are affirming that salvation comes when a person's whole orientation is dramatically turned toward God in trust.

Faith as trust means the total orientation of the individual toward God, and, historically, Protestants have believed this to be the necessary human action in accepting the totality of God's grace. Repentance is the technical term

for this act of faith or obedient trust. Repentance (contrary to popular use of the term) does not mean "feeling bad about our actions." It means changing, turning toward God and away from sin in trustful obedience.

JUSTIFICATION

The basic need of humankind is to be justified, to be returned to a right relationship with God, with ourselves, and with other persons. When a line of type on a printed page is out of its proper relationship with the other lines on the page, we say it needs to be justified. Our need is the same, and God, being totally loving and desirous of this right relationship, made our justification possible through the Incarnation and Atonement of Jesus Christ.

Even though there are several different ways in which Christians view the justification process, most ideas fall generally into two historical concepts: justification by faith alone and justification by the infusion of grace.

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE.

"Justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone" has as its primary focus the unmerited act of God. The concept excludes all thought of our being able to do anything to earn merit or influence our own justification. Only when we have faith (obedient trust) that the Incarnation and Atonement are sufficient for our salvation are we justified. We trust that God's action in and through Christ's death on the cross provides all of the merit necessary for justification.

We have been justified by the gift of God's grace, a gift that is constantly being offered. God's grace and our justification are freely offered, and our act of faith is our acceptance of these gifts. Faith is, therefore, a condition of justification only in the same way that accepting is a condition of receiving any gift.

Within this basic concept of justification by

Leader's Guide to *Big Christian Ideas*

Session Nine: We Are Saved By Faith

faith there are several variations that include focus on whether or not justification is available to everyone or to a predestined (elected) group. There is also disagreement as to whether or not it is possible to “fall from grace” once the initial act of justification takes place and whether or not God’s grace can be resisted or whether for some it is irresistible. Finally, there is much difference of opinion, largely subjective, as to whether or not justification by faith is an instantaneous “lightning conversion” event or a gradual process of nurture.

JUSTIFICATION BY INFUSION OF GRACE. The concept of justification by infusion of grace is more complicated because it is multi-faceted, but it is also less complicated because it is less abstract. It focuses on a belief in grace as a kind of power or substance that is gradually added into the believer. This supernatural substance (grace) is infused in many ways but primarily through the sacraments of the church. In Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodoxy it is believed that God’s grace is objectively present in the sacraments and is transmitted to the believer through participation in them. Even though this is not formal Protestant belief, in practice certain “sacramental” activities, such as worship attendance or adult baptism, take on virtually the same meaning for many Protestants.

The process begins when a person is lead to sense his or her need for justification through the infusion of prevenient grace. This produces a kind of “holy uneasiness” about life that “quickens” the soul toward a desire for change, repentance, and faith. Faith here is understood as a virtue or habit which is no more than an initial step, a meager beginning on the way to full justification.

Next, a supernatural force or substance called sanctifying grace is gradually added into

the person, primarily through participation in the sacraments. Then, as the quantity of God’s grace increases, the person develops the virtues of hope and love. The degree to which we use these three supernatural habits (faith, hope, and love) earns merit for us that increases the amount of sanctifying grace we receive from God. More grace means more meritorious use of our virtues which means more grace. So, God’s grace and our works cooperate to move us to greater and greater justification.

PREDESTINATION

One of the historical debates within both Protestantism and Roman Catholicism is whether or not ultimate salvation is available to everyone or to a special few who have been pre-selected by God. The doctrine of predestination has had a checkered history with periods of time when it dominated both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism and other periods of time, such as today, when its affirmation is limited to only small portions of even its traditional constituencies.

The doctrine of predestination was originally developed by St. Augustine (354-430), and some Roman Catholics accept a mild form of predestination that says that God’s grace is irresistible for some but can be resisted by others. Some are, therefore, elected by God while others have justification available to them on an optional basis. Other Roman Catholics affirm that God foreordains that humans will be free and that some will be saved and some will perish but does not foreordain which ones.

The harshest predestinarians were the leaders of the Protestant Reformation, particularly John Calvin (1509-1564) and his followers in the Reformed-Presbyterian tradition. They believed that eternal life was foreordained for some and that eternal damnation was foreor-

dained for others and that neither election nor rejection can be affected by human works or righteousness.

In contrast to predestination, other Christians stress the ability of persons to accept or reject divine grace freely. Jacob Arminius (1560-1609) and his followers articulated a minority position among Protestants that was published in a document known as *The Remonstrance* in 1610. They affirmed that whoever believes in Jesus Christ will be saved because the Atonement was for everyone. They were condemned as heretics by the Protestant Synod of Dort in 1619, but their ideas persisted and greatly influenced the evangelical revival led by John Wesley (1703-1791). Under the influence of Wesley and other evangelical leaders over the next 200 years, the Arminian understanding gradually prevailed over the Calvinist tradition in Protestantism.

THE BENEFITS OF SALVATION

Salvation has many benefits. Any person who has gone through the life change called salvation can list a new awareness of people as persons instead of objects, a newly found ability to love the unlovable, a sense of meaning, and purpose, and a commitment to change society and share God's love with others. But, most important to many Christians, is a newly discovered sense of freedom. We are set free from the bondage of self-interest, free from the burdens of having to succeed in some secular (usually financial) way, free from the pressures of secular value systems, and free to be new persons in love with God, neighbors, and ourselves.

DISCUSSION SUGGESTIONS

1. Before beginning this section, it would be worthwhile to ask the group to give you adjectives which define a Christian. You will get many terms like loving, honest, concerned, believing, compassionate, etc. But, most groups will be reluctant to bring up salvation terms such as saved, reborn, redeemed, etc., even though this is the focal point of the Christian life. Have the group discuss their reluctance to focus on salvation theology.
2. What does salvation mean to you?
3. Is it possible to "fall from grace?"
4. Discuss how our frequent use of the term "grace" is likely to be understood by persons outside of faith.
5. How do we know that God acts graciously toward us?
6. What does faith mean to you?
7. Is it possible to have faith and doubt at the same time?
8. If one tradition says "salvation comes through faith (as total trustful obedience) alone," and another tradition says "faith is the first intellectual assent which must be followed by trustful obedience which earns salvation," are the two substantially different?
9. Have persons who believe they have been justified or "saved" describe the sense of being restored to right relationships.
10. Is it important to you exactly how the process of justification takes place? Why or why not?
11. Do you believe that your actions are

Leader's Guide to *Big Christian Ideas*
Session Nine: We Are Saved By Faith

important to whether or not you become justified or remain justified?

12. Are you more or less free than persons without faith? Why or why not?

13. Do you believe God pre-selects some persons for salvation?

14. Do you believe God pre-selects some for damnation?