

“What Kind of Faith Saves?”

The Three Levels of Faith as Described in the New Testament:

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One major aspect of our work at Atlanta Center *for* Apologetics is helping Christians know *what* they believe and *why* they believe it. This is the work of apologetics. The task, or science of Christian apologetics (defense) is primarily concerned with providing an intellectual defense of the truth-claims of the historic Christian faith which is rooted in history. Therefore, the Christian church has to give a “reasoned statement or verbal defense” of the truth of Christianity.

However, this is to be done in three ways: (i) through, framing our writing, rooting it the flow of history, (ii) by presenting persuasive arguments, and (iii) by living-out, and manifesting the reality of the truth-claims of Christianity in some small way in our lives, before a watching world. The work of apologetics rests upon a biblical command. We find the mandate in Scripture to defend the faith, a mandate that is the birthright of every Christian, and therefore, must be taken seriously (I Pet. 3:14b-16).

The Christian is exhorted in this passage to stand ready in case anyone asks him/her to give a reason for their hope as Christians. The Christian does this by regarding the life and work of Christ as holy. Secondly, there is an ethical emphasis in v. 16: Christians are to answer all inquires—even abusive ones—with gentleness and with respect, so that those who revile Christians as evildoers might be ashamed. In this passage we see the reason for the task of engaging in the defense of the Christian faith—apologetics.

Definition

Justification means, to declare a sinner righteous and *not* make the sinner righteous. It is that legal act of God by which He makes a declaration on behalf of the sinner. It is a legal act on the basis of the perfect righteousness of Christ. Justification is not a renewal, but it affects the *state* of the individual sinner. Justification takes place in Christ alone. Justification takes place outside of man; it’s a work outside of the individual in which the relationship between God and man is restored by the merits, and infinite value of the completed work of Christ on the Cross alone.

When the living God justifies sinners, He is not declaring bad people good, or saying that they are not sinners. God, in fact, is pronouncing them legally righteous, free from any liability to the broken law, because He Himself, in His Son, has borne the penalty of their law breaking.

Justification is by faith in the merits of the works of Christ, alone, but *not by a faith that is alone*. The only kind of faith that saves is a living obedient faith, a vital faith, an obedient faith that produces godly behavior as the fruit of faith. Only obedient faith in the merits of Christ produces Godly behavior flowing forth as the fruit of faith from the individual who is justified. Consider the three main levels of faith as taught and described in the New Testament:

The Three Levels of Faith

The *first* element of faith is **content**. When the New Testament says individuals are justified by faith, it means, the faith that justifies has to have a **specific substance and content**. There is a specific content, or substance, an essential element of information that is part of the Christian doctrinal system the individual is called upon to believe.

The apostles and the early church proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus Christ; and they gave a summary of the key points about the Person of Jesus, and about His finished work. Christ is declared in Scriptures, (i) as being “. . . born of a woman under the law. . .” (Gal. 4:4-6), and (ii) therefore, “. . . repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.” The apostles declared further: “. . . that *people* should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance” (Acts 20:21; Acts 26:20). To the Corinthians, Paul declared: “For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; And that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures” (I Cor. 15:3-4). Then Paul told the Church at Galatia: “And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached the gospel unto Abraham, saying, ” “In thee shall all nations be blessed”” (Gal. 3:8; Gen. 12:3; 15:5). And to the church at Rome, he said: “Therefore, being justified by faith we have peace with God” (Rom. 5:1). Peace comes to the human heart when sins are forgiven through Christ.

Luke records repeatedly for us in the Book of Acts, God’s sovereign initiative in granting repentance: “Then to the Gentiles also *God had granted repentance* that leads to life” (Acts 11:18). “*God first visited* the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name” (Acts 15:14). And when the Gospel went on European soil in Philippi, beginning with Lydia, “*The Lord opened her heart* to pay attention to what was said by Paul” (Acts 16:14).¹

Repentance from sins and turning to God, fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, the death and resurrection of Christ, and justification by faith; are all part of the system of doctrine, or data, or **substance and content of the Christian faith**, mentioned by the apostles and the early church. Before the church can actually call people to saving faith, the church has to give them the information, or **the substance, content and definition** of the faith that they are asked to believe and, therefore, obey. And that involves the mind, the heart, the will, and the affections. It involves communication of information that people can understand.

Any definition of faith is incomplete without a consideration of the **object of faith**. Saving faith has as its object the Person of the risen and living Christ. The New Testament suggests a foundation—Christ Jesus (Acts 16:31). The meaning of the object of faith is to find a dwelling place in; “to go into,” “to rest on,” “to abide in,” or “to find a home.” And that home is found in the *safety* and in the glorified *Name* of the risen and living Christ. With the living Christ as the object of the Christian faith, the obedient Christian is secured as a house on a solid foundation, or as a boat safely at anchor in harbor.

¹John Piper, *Let The Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy Of God In Mission*: (Grand Rapids, Michigan; Baker Academic), 1993, p. 57.

Before a person calls upon Christ as Savior, one has to understand that he needs a Savior. One has to understand that ‘I am’ a sinner, a rebellious sinner. I have to have a degree of some understanding of what sin is, and what shame and guilt are. I have to understand that ‘I am’ estranged and separated from the living God in my sins, and that ‘I am’ subject to the judgment of God. We are not simply talking about guilty feelings, but we are talking about real guilt; the fact that we have true guilt before the living God who exists. An alien sinner can’t reach out for a Savior unless the sinner is first convinced that he/she needs a Savior.

The living God is the One who *first* draws us to Himself, and presents us to His Son for salvation (John 6:44 and 65). The alien sinner cannot come to God on his own merits; we can only come back to God, when the living God draws us to Himself. All these are the data, or the information that a person has to process with the mind and believe on, objectively; before he can either *respond* to the living God in faith, or *reject* the Gospel of Christ in unbelief.

The *second* element of faith is assent. This assent is intellectual assent. If someone were to ask you, “Do you believe that Abraham Lincoln was the 16th president of the United States?” What would you say? Yes, the nations history holds this as true. Believing that Lincoln is the 16th President of the United States doesn’t mean that you have put your personal faith, and trust in Abraham Lincoln. You have just being asked if you believe in Abraham Lincoln, in the sense of whether your mind gives assent to the proposition, “Abraham Lincoln was the 16th president of the United States.”

The Scriptures say, “Jesus is the eternal Son of God;” that’s a proposition. Again the Scriptures say, “Believe on the Lord Jesus and you shall be saved” (Acts 16:31), that’s a command. One can’t have a saving relationship with Christ unless he knows who this Jesus is, and know and affirm the truth of this Jesus, and believing in that truth, that He was risen from the dead—unless I believe that, and place my faith on the complete merits of the work of Christ on the Cross, as historical fact; I will have a relationship with a dead Jesus! All of the essential tenants of the Christian faith that we say we believe about Christ; involve the mind, saying yes to commands and propositions.

If we gain a correct understanding of the *content, or substance* and assent to the truth-claims of Christianity; however, it will not add up to saving faith. In James 2:19, we have a biblical illustration of the faith of the devils: *The devils know and believe the truth about the substance and content of the living God and the risen Christ; and yet they hate God and Christ. They can’t give assent to the complete work of Christ. The devils know about the substance, the content, and the assent of the Christian faith, and they reject the Christian fully—and therefore, they tremble before the living God.*

In hell, evil spirits admit with misery, God’s supremacy and glory, and Christ’s undoubted sufficiency. The devils are fallen angels, and “. . .they are delivered into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment” (2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6). The devil’s existence depends upon his Creator, for the devil is a created being, and he knows it fully, he is fettered in chains and can only carry out evil works of wickedness.

So, content and assent, therefore, are necessary conditions for saving faith. One can't have saving faith without them. Why? Because, both content and assent are not sufficient to save the rebellious sinner. He desperately needs the third aspect of Biblical faith to go along with content and assent.

The *third* element of faith is personal trust and reliance. Resting on Christ fully. Our full confidence is in Him and not in ourselves. *That aspect of faith involves a genuine affection for Christ that flows out of a new heart and a new mind*, the mind that is fully redeemed. It is that element of personal trust, that element of saving faith that can be engendered only by the work of the Holy Spirit. All three elements go together.

The aspect of fully resting on Christ can be drawn out fully from other parts of the Bible. There is an Old Testament example of an element of trusting faith we can look at; demonstrated for us in Leviticus 1:1-5, the children of Israel called on by the living Lord: “. . . If any man of you bring an offering unto the Lord. . . before the Lord. . . he shall put his hand upon the head of the burnt offering; and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him. . . before the Lord. . .” The sacrifice was for the Lord and to the Lord. The worshipper “*shall lay his hand upon the head of the burnt-offering.*”

To have a better understanding of what it means to *rest on* Christ, we turn to Keil and Delitzsch who commented, and gave a word-picture on aspects of the Jewish Sacrificial System in the Old Testament, by stating the following: “The laying on of hands, by which, to judge from the Hebrew verb is to ‘lean upon.’ . . . A forcible pressure of the hand upon the head of the victim, took place in connection with all the slain-offering. It represented a symbol of transfer of the feelings and intentions by which the offerer was actuated in presenting his sacrifice, whereby he set apart the animal as a sacrifice, representing his own person in one particular aspect. . . he transferred the consciousness of his sinfulness to the victim by the laying on of hands, even in the case of the burnt-offering. But this was not all: he transferred the desire to walk before God in holiness and righteousness, which he could not do without the grace of God.”²

We have yet another example in the person of Abraham, in Genesis 15:6: “Abraham believed in the Lord . . .” Many hundreds of years later, Paul used Abraham as an example of justification, and said: “. . . Abraham believed God. . .” (Rom. 4:4). Paul went on to point out in the same chapter, that the Christian is also called upon to “believe God who raised Jesus from the dead. . .” (Rom. 4:24). The Christian is also called to “believe on the Lord Jesus” as Paul told the Philippian Jailor (Acts 16:31), and as John told the Christians: “That you should believe on the name of the Son of God. . .” (I John 3:23).

The whole idea and meaning of the *third* element of faith is to, *objectively*, believe the living God, and the work He accomplished in Christ, and the call to simply; ‘*rest on the merits of the work of Christ -- fully.*’ Personal trust and reliance in the merits of His work on the Cross for salvation from sin is what obedient Christians are called on to believe. Only in the risen and living Christ, has sin met its antidote—and *the antidote* is the only solution to man’s sin, shame, and guilt!

²C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary On The Old Testament, 10 volumes:* (Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Mass), vol.1, 1986, p. 282-283.

Summary:

The Sacraments of Baptism, commanded by the risen Christ (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:16), and the Lord's Supper, (rooted in remembrance of His death, burial and resurrection), can never mean the same for every person; but we do need to fully understand the Sacraments to benefit from them.

Christians are not saved by observing and keeping the Sacraments any more than the Jews were save by observing and keeping the Law; but we are save by and through the Person of the risen and living Christ, who gave the Sacraments as a command.

Apologetics is therefore, a vital task: serving and clarifying the content and the substance of Christianity, and defending its truth-claims historically, intellectually, and Biblically. Christian apologetics is rooted in objectivity; it is not a "blind leap of faith in the dark, or in a vacuum." The Christian faith is rooted in the flow of history, and in the infinite-personal, living God who has revealed Himself both in revelation and in creation—and He lives, and He is not silent in His universe!