
Author:	Rev. Stephen 't Hart send email...	Order Of Worship (Liturgy)
Congregation:	Free Reformed Church of Melville Melville, Australia www.frcsr.com/fellowship/melville/	Liturgy from 1984 Book of Praise Psalm 71:1,3 Psalm 131:1,2,3
Preached At:	Free Reformed Church of Baldvis Baldvis, Western Australia frca.org.au/baldvis/	Psalm 62:1,3,4 Psalm 40:4
Title:	The Holy Spirit grafts us into Christ by a true faith.	Hymn 53:1,2
Text:	LD 7 (View)	
Occasion:	Regular Sunday	Read: John 3:1-21
Topic:	Faith	Romans 11:11-36
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Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I preach to you the Gospel of salvation by faith alone in Christ alone under the following theme:

The Holy Spirit grafts us into Christ by a true faith.

True faith consists of:

1. An assured knowledge.
2. A knowing assurance.

1. True faith consists of an assured knowledge.

As we have proceeded through our study of the Heidelberg Catechism, we have been following a clear line of thought, a line of thought that comes from the Scriptures itself.

The comfort that we have in life and in death is that we belong to our faithful Saviour Jesus Christ, who has fully paid for all our sins with His precious blood and has set us free from the power of the devil. This is not just a great comfort; it is also a great miracle. For, as we learned further in Lord's Day 2, to live before the face of God we need to be perfectly holy, just as God is holy. However the more we learn about what it means to be holy, to live in perfect obedience before God, the more we realise how far we fall short in doing this, and that it is beyond our strength and capability to ever be holy in and of ourselves. And therefore, but for the grace of God, we would have perished eternally along with the rest of the human race, and that eternal judgment would have been just. But the Gospel, the Good News is that God who sent us His Son so that in Him we might have life.

But now comes Lord's Day 7.

“Are all men, then, saved by Christ just as they perished through Adam?”

Who gets to be saved in Christ? Everybody?

When we read this question today, we read it in the context of a heresy called Universalism. Universalism is a false teaching that is promoted by many people, the most recent person being Rob Bell, in a popular book called “Love wins”. Universalism teaches that at the end of time everyone will be saved. Hell will be empty and heaven will be full. For, they say, we believe that God is a God of love, and how could a God of love send anyone to the eternal fires of hell? And so Universalists teach that there is no such thing as hell, that we are all going to enjoy the pleasures of heaven.

Others are not quite so positive but still believe that most people will be going to heaven. It will only be the worst criminals, the vilest of the vile, who will be in hell; but the rest of us who try to live a good life – whether we be Jews, Christians, Muslims, New Age or a blend of everything can most certainly look forward to whatever heaven there is to look forward to when we die.

Lord's Day 7 gives a strong biblical response to the heresy of universalism when it answers the question of whether or not all men will be saved in Christ just as they perished through Adam with a resounding NO. The idea that all people, or even most people, will be saved is simply not true.

“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.” Matthew 7:13,14.

But at the time that Catechism was written, the answer NO to the question of whether or not all men are saved by Christ would not have been a new or even a very controversial answer. Almost everybody believed in the final day of judgment, that there is both a heaven and a hell, and the fact that salvation in Christ is not for all. But what was not commonly understood, however, was how one could actually be joined to Jesus Christ, how he could be saved.

In the 1500s the Roman Catholic Church did not emphasize personal faith but rather the faith of the Church. You are saved, they said, by being a member of the church. It was not necessarily for individuals to read the Bible for themselves, to study it and to learn what God's Word has to say. In fact, to read and study the Bible for yourself was forbidden! It was the church's job, they said, to know what God's will is, and a person was saved by simply agreeing to the faith of the church. So the way to be saved, the Roman Catholics taught, was to be baptised, take the Mass, submit to the authority of the church, and then do the good works that the church demanded.

It would appear that Nicodemus had similar views when, in John chapter 3, he came to Jesus at night. Nicodemus, who himself was a teacher of the law, did not understand how one was saved and so when Jesus told him that unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God, he was confused. For Nicodemus, one was saved by being a child of Abraham and then keeping the law in the manner explained by the religious leaders. But our Lord explained to Nicodemus that actually, this was not the way to salvation, that the

way to salvation was completely different. To be saved, one must be born again, which was a work of the Holy Spirit. And being born again, it is through faith that one is saved. And more specifically, it is through faith in God's only begotten Son, the One who came to be lifted up on the cross, that one receives salvation. That is the way that you will be joined to Christ and receive the benefits that He came to bring.

And so the Catechism refutes the teaching of Rome and reflects the truth of Scripture when it says that to be saved by Christ, you need to be joined to Him like a branch is joined to the trunk of a tree. The Bible teaches this in John 15:4,5.

“Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.”

But, as the Catechism also teaches us, we are not *naturally* a part of the vine, for by nature we were children of wrath. And so we need to be grafted in to Christ to be a part of Him and enjoy the privileges He came to bring. And the word “grafting” is very good one to describe how we are joined to Christ. The process of grafting involves taking the branch of one tree and binding it to another tree so that it grows to become a part of that new tree. And that is what happened to us: we were by nature children of wrath, but we were taken and then, through the work of the Holy Spirit, were joined to Christ. This is explained further in Romans 11.

In Romans 11, the apostle Paul was explaining just the new covenant community is now made up more of Gentiles than of Jews – and that being joined to Christ is something to be thankful for, not proud. Paul describes the covenant community as an olive tree, with Christ being its root, from which the fatness, the riches, the life of the tree was found. But he explained that some of the natural branches (that is the covenant children of Israel) were broken off and then we, who were wild olive branches, were grafted in.

And being grafted in to the Olive Tree who is Christ is not our work, but a gift of God. As the first part of Romans 11:24 says,

“For . . . you were cut out of the old olive tree which is wild by nature, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree . . .”

And it is not because of you or what you did because you were such a good branch that you were grafted into the Olive Tree, into Christ. In fact, it was not even your own doing. Just as the branch of one tree can not decide to leave that tree and join another one, so we could never be grafted in to Christ, joined to Him, by our own works or our own decision. We are joined to Christ by the grace of God, through the working of the Holy Spirit.

But there is more to be said about *how* we are joined to Christ. The Bible teaches us that we are joined to Him by faith. It is by faith that we are joined to Christ and it is by unbelief that others are cut off from him and stand condemned. Romans 11:19,20 –

“You will say then, “Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in. Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith.”

And that is what Christ also explained to Nicodemus in John 3. When Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, our Lord said to him that the only way to enter the kingdom of heaven, the only way to be saved, is to be born again. Being born again is the work of the Holy Spirit, something that in itself we can not fully comprehend. But when Nicodemus asked our Lord how these things can be, Christ spoke about the need for faith, for personal faith, in the Son of Man, the One who would be lifted up just as the snake was lifted up in the wilderness.

John 3:16,

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever *believes* in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

And verse 18,

“He who *believes* in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.”

The Catechism is right when it asks and answers,

“Are all men, then, saved through Christ just as they perished through Adam? No. Only those are saved who by a true faith are grafted into Christ and accept all His benefits.”

So to be saved one needs to have faith.

And that faith must be personal. And that faith must have a specific content. It is a faith in something or, more correctly, in *Someone*. In his Institutes, John Calvin spoke strongly against the Roman Catholic teaching that the laity, the common church member, could remain ignorant and be saved simply by being a member of the Roman Church. In Book 3, Chapter 2 he explained that faith rests upon God’s Word. To show that faith and teaching go together, he quoted from Ephesians 4:20,21

“But you have not so learned Christ, if indeed you have heard Him and been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus.”

And John 20:21,

“. . . these things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.”

And Romans 10:17,

“So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”^[1]

True faith, therefore, has a specific content, and the content is the holy gospel – which, as confessed in Lord’s Day 6, is found in entire Bible. And, as it says in answer 21,

“True faith is a sure knowledge whereby I accept as true all that God has revealed to us in His Word.”

So in order to be grafted into Christ and accept all His benefits, we need a true faith. And in order to have such a faith, we need to have an assured knowledge, where we both know and accept as true all that God has revealed to us in His Word.

So in the first place, we need to *know* what God has revealed. We need to come to church, hear the preaching of the gospel and then work with the preaching, reading the Bible further for ourselves, studying it, that we might know and understand it more and more. And then, as the Holy Spirit works faith in our hearts by the gospel that is preached, we will be assured that the Word of God is true and trustworthy. True faith is an assured knowledge.

But to be an assured knowledge, true faith must also be a complete, well rounded knowledge. Answer 22 goes on to teach what a Christian must believe:

“All that is promised in the gospel, which the articles of our catholic and undoubted Christian faith teach us in a summary.”

A true faith is a personal faith for each of us personally must listen, learn and believe. But it is not an individualistic faith: it is a *catholic*, universal faith, for it is a faith in the firm and unchanging Word of God. And so together, with the church of all ages, we confess in summary what this faith consists of in the Apostles' Creed.

This Creed was not written by the apostles, nor was it written by a single person or at a particular time in church history. The Apostles' Creed began as a brief summary to teach people the basic truths of the Gospel before they were baptized and became members of the church. Over time this creed grew and developed. It was the king and Christian leader, Charlemagne of what is now known as France, who in 813 AD made the Apostles' Creed as we have it today the standard creed of his kingdom. From there the Christian church adopted it as the catholic or universal summary of the Christian faith. And so we still hold on to it today.

The Apostles' Creed is a summary of the gospel, the Word of God. And what we confess in this Creed is then explained in Lord's Days 8 to 22. It is good for us to learn from this every year again, because for our faith to be a true faith it must have a specific content, it must believe in the full Word of God. And as we learn from the Gospel, we must pray that the Holy Spirit will bless us with what we learn so that we may be assured that what we learn in the Gospel is true, and that what is promised is also for us..

2. True Faith Consists of a Knowing Assurance.

The Catechism's definition of true faith teaches that it is more than an assured knowledge. True faith also consists of a knowing assurance:

“At the same time it is a firm confidence that not only to others, but also to me, God has granted forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness, and salvation, out of mere grace, only for the sake of Christ's merits.”

This assurance of faith was already expressed in answer 1 of the Catechism –

“Therefore by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life.”

Such assurance gives us peace and confidence for the present and the future. It was the assurance of faith that enabled David to sing in Psalm 46:1,2

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, even though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea.”

And Psalm 3:5,

“I lay down and slept; I awoke, for the LORD sustained me.”

True faith gives us that assurance, that deep-seated, heart felt confidence of the love and protection of God, of His salvation.

But that does not mean, however, that David – or we – have perfect faith, nor that we always enjoy such confident assurance. The same David who wrote Psalms 3 and 46 also wrote Psalm 42:5 –

“Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me?”

And Psalm 31:22 –

“I said in my haste, ‘I am cut off from before Your (that is, God's) eyes.’”

It is not as though David's faith was always strong and solid as a rock. And if David, a man after God's own heart, struggled with such doubts, it should not surprise us that even the most godly may at times find his faith sorely tested by waves of doubt. Our Canons of Dort acknowledges this in chapter 5 article 11,

“Scripture meanwhile testifies that believers in this life have to struggle with various doubts of the flesh and, placed under severe temptation, do not always feel this full assurance of faith and certainty of perseverance.”

And in the form for the celebration of the Lord's Supper we confess,

“We do not have perfect faith and we do not serve God with such zeal as He requires. Daily we have to contend with the weakness of our faith and with the evil desires of our flesh.”

But here too we see the grace of God – a grace that directs us away from our weakness and back to God's trustworthiness. For, as we confess in Lord's Day 23 of the Catechism,

“Not that I am acceptable to God on account of the worthiness of my faith, for only the satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ is my righteousness before God.”

It is not faith that makes us acceptable to God, but what Christ has done. And so God looks upon us in His grace and mercy when we cry out to Him,

“I believe! Help me in my unbelief!”

And so even as we experience struggles in the flesh and doubts arise in our hearts, we may be encouraged by the words of Psalm 27:14,

“Wait on the LORD; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart. Wait, I say, on the LORD!”^[2]

And the blessing of the hope of faith is that those who wait on the LORD are never put to shame! Those who wait on the LORD do have their strength renewed like that of eagles. The assurance of faith is restored and strengthened. For when the doubts of faith arise, we

do not look inside ourselves but we look to Jesus, the author and the perfecter of our faith. Faith is not trust in ourselves, that we think we are strong enough to hold on to God. But faith is trust in God, that He who created and redeemed us is always true to His Word, and that He will never let us go!

But such faith is a *knowing* assurance. Such conviction of faith is not based on mere feelings, but it is based on the truth of promises of the gospel, the truth of God's Word.

“This faith the Holy Spirit works in my heart by the gospel.”

And so let us turn and return to the gospel. Let us turn and return to the Word of God, to the preaching, to the reading and the study of it. Come to church, regularly, every Sunday, morning and evening. Read the Word, the Bible, talk about it and study it. And above all pray to the Lord for His grace and the Holy Spirit, that He might work and strengthen that true faith in your hearts. Set your heart on Jesus Christ, look to Him. Remember that God has made Him our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption. And then you will enjoy the assurance that comes from a true faith in Him. Amen.

[1] Rom. 10:17 quoted in Book 4, chapter 1 paragraph 5.

[2] As quoted in Calvin's Institutes Book 3, chapter 2, paragraph 17.

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