

FAITH ALONE SAVES- SO WHAT IS IT?

By Rev. Leo Douma
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I guess most of us are aware that World Youth Day is coming up next month. That's when the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church and hundreds of thousands of RC youth are coming to Sydney. The theme for the occasion is Acts 1:8 "*You will receive power and be my witnesses...*" That could be a good starting point for a conversation with our catholic friends, workmates and neighbours. And it's an opportunity for us to think through some of our own issues. For example, picking up on the theme "*be my witnesses*" when we are witnessing to our family and friends at some stage we will have to tell them that to become a Christian they must have faith in Jesus. To which they might reply- so what is 'faith' in Jesus and why does it make me a Christian? How will you answer them? And how would your answer compare with the Roman Catholics? Really knowing what faith is, is not only important for telling others. We need to get it clear too. How many of us here struggle from time to time with doubt, with the thought that our faith is not good enough; with the feeling 'I don't trust God enough; I don't seem to love him enough; I should be doing more; I'm not sure I am really God's child, that he loves me. And therefore I'm not sure I am saved.'

There are a bit of a trend these days to get away from church confessions and doctrine, to forget about theological hair splitting and just love God and each other. But the irony is that the struggles we experience in our own faith or the inability to explain faith comes about because we lack doctrinal precision. Let me give you an historical example of this. At the Reformation Martin Luther stressed we are saved by faith alone. The focus on the word 'alone' gets to the heart of the difference he had with the church at the time. The Roman Catholic Church does not deny we are redeemed by the work of Christ and that this is received by faith. But they said a person is saved by faith and works; "*faith and charity*" as the Council of Trent put it. The word '*and*' describes the difference. The Romans Catholics hold to the bible and tradition; Christ and the saints, faith and works. That's why Luther and Calvin spoke of Christ alone, scripture alone, faith alone.

Now with the Catholics closely associating faith and works, it affected their definition of faith. Using the words of their Catechism faith was seen as a '*deed of the intellect*'. It meant to '*give assent to the things God said we should believe.*' This '*assent*' was seen as '*...cooperating with God's grace*' to prepare a person for justification. Their definition gave the notion that faith was '*meritorious*' which called for a '*reward*'. Now look at the language. Compare that with the Reformed position. Gresham Machen (Orthodox Presbyterian) said "*Our salvation does not depend on the strength of our faith.*" Benjamin Warfield wrote "*It is not strictly speaking even faith in Christ that saves, but Christ saves through faith....the saving power resides exclusively, not in the act of faith...but in the object of faith; that is Christ.*" So being acceptable to God has nothing to do with the worthiness of my faith; but with the worthiness of Christ's work and I receive that by faith.

So what's it all mean? It comes down to this. We are saved not because of faith but '*through faith*' to quote Paul in Ephesians 2. The difference here is not just a play on words. '*Because of*' means the cause of something; why something happens, what makes it happen. E.g. a boy was sick '*because*' he drank six chocolate milkshakes. The word '*through*' does not describe cause and effect. It indicates how something went from one place to another. E.g. the boy drank six milkshakes '*through*' a straw. The straw is the instrument through which the boy receives the milk. See the difference?

Now, if we say we are saved 'because' of our faith, that suggest that our faith is the cause of our forgiveness. It suggests that faith itself justifies us. But it does not. God justifies us by his grace. Faith is simply the channel 'through' which we receive this benefit. Guido de Bres made this clear in the Belgic Confession. (Book of Forms p39 Article 22) "*...we justly say with Paul that we are*

justified 'by faith alone' or by faith 'apart from works'. However we do not mean, properly speaking, that it is faith itself that justifies us- for faith is only the instrument by which we embrace Christ, our righteousness." We note there that faith is "...only the instrument". That is why we stress that we are justified 'through' faith rather than 'because' of faith. As Paul wrote on Ephesians 2:8 "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith. And this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God."

Now the distinction is stressed because too often people get it wrong. Too often folk conceive of faith as a sort of good work which God admires and then rewards them with salvation. Is it good enough? Do I know enough? Am I sure enough that I believe? They think they have to produce a certain amount of effort; to produce some sort of belief so God will be pleased. But such thinking is wrong. Faith is not some do it yourself attempt to believe. This is subtly shifting into works salvation. It may not advocate actually doing many god works to be saved, but it does imply working up a sufficiently good faith to be saved. A minister tells the story of counseling a woman of 80 years who had been converted when she was 46. He says she was always trying to determine whether she had the right kind of faith at her conversion. You see, her teacher had said that besides true faith there was also historical faith and miracle faith. So she was continually attempting to convince herself, and the minister, that her faith and commitment had been genuine. She was trying to strengthen her belief in her faith. She believed in her belief. The devastating effect of this approach to faith is that it leaves us without any reassurance of our relationship with God. We are forever trying to crank up faith or doing good works to feel perhaps we are saved.

It reminds me of a good friend I had in Devonport, Father Joseph, the local Catholic priest. Once when we were talking about being assured of being saved, Joseph admitted to me that he had no such reassurance. He could only hope that he would go to heaven. He found my clear assurance that I was saved as being presumptuous. Why do we keep going back to this idea of doing good works? Perhaps it's because of our human nature. We feel we have to do our bit. It is hard to accept that we stand before God completely empty handed. We can't cope with the idea of being completely powerless and at another's mercy. But the reality is that nothing we do is acceptable to God, not even our faith. Being forgiven and loved by God is all of grace. It is God's free gift to us. He gives it to us purely of his own accord, and what Christ has done. The work of Christ is the only basis for our being right with God.

Now while faith merits nothing, faith is indeed indispensable. (Example of a person reaching out to receive a book) It is the hand that receives the gift from God. But we do not credit the hand of the beggar for the generous gift some one else has placed in that hand. Faith has been described in terms of a man hanging on the edge of a cliff. Faith is the belief, the trust, as he lifts his hand out to the stranger who says "Let me help you. I'll pull you up". The hand reaches out and clings to the saviour. A missionary once was in his hut translating the bible. He was struggling to translate the word 'faith'. One of the natives of the land come in and flopped himself on a chair and said a word which roughly translated meant: I flop myself or I am leaning all my weight on this chair. The missionary cried out -That's it! That is faith. For example do you trust the pews you are sitting on? Do you sit on edge afraid of falling or are you relaxed with your whole weight on the pews? Faith is trusting in Christ completely. It rests on him with all our weight, with all our guilt, with all our hope. Salvation begins with confessing our total unworthiness. We have empty hands. We have nothing, absolutely nothing to bring. And we reach out those empty hands and embrace Jesus. We embrace him and 'hang on for dear life', for eternal life. We trust totally in him. In Jesus we have forgiveness and life. We simply believe that and trust Jesus.

Now notice what (who) faith reaches out to. Faith is not just belief in some ideas or doctrines; that Jesus existed or died and rose again. It is not just assent to biblical facts. Faith is a personal trusting, embracing, of the Christ. Ideas and doctrine do not save. Jesus does. What we learn through

doctrine etc introduces us to Jesus. It is our living union with the living Lord that saves. Again as we note the Belgic Confession (Book of Forms p38) “...*the Holy Spirit kindles in our heart a true faith that embraces Jesus Christ, with all his merits, and makes him its own and no longer looks for anything apart from him...faith is the instrument by which we embrace Christ, our righteousness.*” The language here describes it beautifully. Faith is hugging Jesus; and hanging on!

Now with this embrace we are so closely tied to Jesus that God sees us as if we were his son Jesus. So we have not only forgiveness of sins, but all the glory of Christ. Paul says in Ephesians 2 that “*we have been made alive with Christ; God raised us with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realm...*” Note the repeated phrase ‘*with Christ*’. Paul talks as if we were there at the first Easter; ‘*with Christ*’ on the cross and made alive. And that we are now in heaven ‘*seated with Christ*’ at the right hand of God. That is what we gain ‘through’ faith. That is how sure we can be of our salvation. We are already with Christ in heaven.