

Faith of a Servant or Son, Part 3

1 John 3:7-10; 4:7-8, 13; 5:1-5, 18-20

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For years, he served God with passion, studied Scriptures, gave to the poor, called on the sick, prayed, served his neighbors, worshiped with others, and spoke to others of salvation. Yet, he was driven more by fear than faith. He actually became a missionary to save his soul. On his trip across the Atlantic, gales, storms, and remnants of hurricanes dogged his journey and paralyzed him with fear. Although he pursued the mission of Christ with the zeal of Apostle Paul, he had none of the faith that Jesus expected from his disciples. Do you remember the story from Matthew 8 when Jesus' disciples crossed the Sea of Galilee and a furious storm arose? With waves sweeping across the boat, the disciples frantically woke Jesus who was asleep in the back of the boat. Jesus confronted them about their fear and lack of faith. John Wesley, sharing that fear and lack of faith on his rocking boat, saw clearly his estrangement from God. He knew no peace because he had the faith of a servant, but not the faith of a son. He had faith in the law of God, but not in the promise of God. In May of 1738, he wrote:

*In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death. (Wednesday, May 24, 1738 **Journal of John Wesley**)*

At that moment, John Wesley moved from the faith of a servant to the faith of a son. He now felt the love of God that forgives us. He had peace with God, and God's love was burned into his heart. He desired to worship his heavenly Father and honor Jesus who laid down his life in the love of his soul.

This wonderful life in God's love was lost when Adam sinned. Jesus went to the cross so that you and I might experience what Adam lost. We are to stroll through this world in the cool of the day intimate with God. To do so, we must be born of water and of spirit. We must be born physically and spiritually. We must be born again, reconnected with the love and communion of God. Whatever happened to John Wesley, who God used to begin the Methodist movement, for a long time he believed and acted as a servant rather than a son of the Father.

On the first Sunday of January, I asked if a person could be a Christian, but not born again. I said that I saw nothing in the Scriptures that suggested it was possible to have two classes of Christians: those who are born again and those who are just believers. Yet, I have witnessed many church members over the years who believe every tenet of Christian faith, who conduct themselves with humility, reverence and service to others in obedience to the gospel, but give no evidence that they have tasted the forgiveness and joy of being God's adopted children. Last Sunday I spoke of anger in evangelical churches by people who formerly populated pews in United Methodist Presbyterian, Lutheran and Roman Catholic congregations, who felt cheated because they never heard, thought about or experienced what it means to be born again, spiritually connected with God and his love. I mentioned that it is God's plan to send the Spirit of his Son, who cries out "Papa, Father," into the heart of every believer who through repentance and faith seek forgiveness of sins.

Although this may not be clear to you, sacramental and evangelical churches tend to treat this new birth experience differently. Sacramental churches see the gift of the Holy Spirit accompanying baptism. They focus on Scriptures like what Ananias said to Paul:

And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name. (Acts 22:16, NIV)

They cite Paul's teaching in Romans 6:

Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life... The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Romans 6:3-4, 10-11; NIV)

They teach that we were baptized into Christ through their water baptism, and that we now share his life and victory. Therefore, we are now to walk by faith in this new life. They note what Paul taught the Galatians:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. (Galatians 3:26-27, NIV)

The sacramental church understands that we are children of God through our faith in Christ Jesus that is consummated in baptism. In other words, your faith leads you to act on his promise and receive the gift of new life as you are baptized into Christ.

They trust what Peter wrote:

God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also — not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ... (1 Peter 3:20-21, NIV)

The sacramental church believes they are following the word of God as they locate the born again experience with baptism. However, the evangelical church has long observed a

divide or disconnect between baptism and faith. John Wesley grew up and preached in sacramental churches. He was horrified at the spiritual condition of the baptized. Some years ago, I learned that 90 percent of Nazi Germany was baptized. There is no way that those baptized Nazis were being led by the Spirit of Christ. The evangelical church notes how with Abraham his faith (not some physical act such as circumcision) was credited to him as righteousness. They point to Jesus' teaching:

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?" Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!" (Matthew 7:21-23, NIV)

Jesus teaches that some people who think they are following him have a false peace, a false assurance. They are disconnected from him as they do their Jesus' type deeds such as prophesy, drive out demons and perform various miracles. They are clearly in the Christian community and in the Christian ministry, but they are disconnected from Christ and his salvation. The evangelical church looks to Paul's teaching:

If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame." For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile — the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (Romans 10:9-13, NIV)

They often use these communion railings for altar calls, where they invite people to acknowledge their sinfulness and call upon the name of the Lord for salvation. They note that relationships require sincere communication. With joy they proclaim that all who repent and call on Jesus will be saved. They often assist people in calling on Jesus by providing a "sinner's

prayer” that repents of sin, declares trust in Jesus, and invites the Spirit of Jesus to reside in the sinner’s heart. Then they assure the individuals if they sincerely did this that their sins are forgiven and the Spirit of Christ did enter their heart.

John Wesley believed both the sacramental and the evangelical position. He would not lighten one text to give proper weight to another. He believed the plain sense of Scriptures rather than our explanations of them should inform our minds and direct our behaviors.

This morning I read to you Scriptures from 1 John 3, 4 and 5 that inform us what signs accompany those who are born of God. *One is that you start doing right.* You begin learning and obeying the commands of God. *Two is that you can’t continue to sin.* You can’t continue to walk a path of destruction if you’re connected with God. If you do so, you are being formed and led by the devil as his child. *Three is that you will love others.* You will value and love people with whom you disagree. You will love, value and serve others. *Four is that you will know God and his love and forgiveness.* His Spirit of love will be in you ministering to your heart. You’ll have peace in his love and mercy. *Five, you will acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God and cherish his word.* Jesus and his words will mean everything. *Six, you will grow to know and understand Jesus and the Father* as you walk in life. You won’t just know what the Bible says about Jesus and your heavenly Father. You’ll be taught by them as you walk through each day. This is what the Bible says in the texts we read today.

I understand Bethany is a former Evangelical United Brethren congregation. I want you to know that the early preachers in the Evangelical Church, the United Brethren Church and the Methodist Church preached the same thing. They like John Wesley weren’t as concerned about your baptism or your experience with God at some altar call if these signs of God’s Spirit were missing from your life. They didn’t care if you prophesied, drove out demons or performed

miracles in Jesus' name. They cared that you were being taught daily by God, growing in obedience to Christ's commands and love for your neighbor. They cared whether your heart was growing tender or hard. Regardless of your past experience, they would confront you with evicting God's Spirit through your rebellion and unbelief. They would call you to be born again through repentance and faith. They would call you to let nothing get in the way of God making you holy.

Today, I will answer questions and share more in the Sunday School hour. However, I want you to think now about your soul. Jesus came to give you the full rights of a child of God, who is reconnected and walking with God in this world. Is that happening for you? As I and the congregation read together the following prayer, I encourage you to make it personal, to welcome freedom from guilt, your standing as a child of God, and the work of the Holy Spirit to form you into the full measure of Christ Jesus.

God and Father of all, I've been caught up in the rebellion against you. Although I have acknowledged you as creator and ruler, my acknowledgment has often been empty. I am guilty of ignoring your authority and will, of interpreting your commands and claims to fit my sensibilities and comfort, of squandering your gifts, betraying your trust, despising your word, misrepresenting you and harming your children. I have not only sinned against you and others, but I also have misled others to join in my sins. Your enemies have used my attitudes and actions against you.

Despite all of this and the horrific damage it creates, you passionately love me. You've sent your one and only Son, Jesus the Christ, to die and atone for my sins. I recognize this to be an undeserved gift, through which you remove my judgment and award me all the rights necessary to be your child and to live as your heir. Please forgive my unbelief and all my guilt. (Forgive me for quenching and grieving your Spirit who generously worked in my baptism.)

I accept the gift and rights of being your child. I welcome now into my heart your Spirit that restores me as your child, that cries out to you, "Papa, Father." (Thank you for giving me a public ceremony of adoption where I was baptized into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.) You gladly own me as your child, and I gladly own you as my Father. Amen.