

Christianity consists of two parts, one outward and the other inward, and it is important that we carefully distinguish each one from the other. God's Word is clear about this, but not everyone who reads the Bible is as clear in his own understanding of it as he should be, so the purpose of this article is to focus on some of those vital differences.

The Call of God

The call of God, for example, has an outward part, which is preaching the gospel, calling all men everywhere to turn from sin, to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved. Left to their own resources, sadly, people will never heed that outward call. But this call of God in the gospel also has an inward part, which is known as "effectual calling." This is God, by means of that outward call, drawing sinners to Christ, making them willing to come to Him, and He does that to the end that they will do so freely and commit themselves wholly to Him. Just as no one would ever commit to Christ by the outward call alone, so no one will ever fail to make such a commitment if he receives this inward call, nor would he ever want to resist it.

These two callings (outward and inward) happen at the same time, but not for everyone. Many who receive the outward call never receive the inward call at any time in their life. This is why we need to distinguish between the call that comes to the ear and the one that conquers the heart, and why as Christians we are to pray, not only for the proclamation of the gospel in our day, but for the Holy Spirit to use that outward call to draw sinners to the Lord Jesus Christ, the only name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

Again, these two callings happen at the same time, but not for everyone in the same way. Some, for instance, hear the good news of Christ many times before they are quickened and convicted by it, whereas others are persuaded when they hear it the first time. Moreover, regardless of the number of times they hear it, some experience a long, drawn-out process of conviction, whereas others are convicted quickly and receive instant assurance. This is why we need to be careful not to rely too heavily on the experiences of others, but examine if our own faith is real, if it is truly rooted in Christ and makes Him precious to us.

Good Works

The Bible is very clear that salvation is by faith apart from works. This is taught in the Old Testament (OT), Genesis 15:6, and this teaching is further developed by Paul in the New Testament (NT), Romans 4. James tells us that faith without works is dead, and, while many have seen this as a contradiction in the Bible, a closer inspection reveals that Paul and James are writing about two very different things; Paul is writing about the means of salvation, James about the end of it. When writing about the end and purpose of salvation, there is no question that Paul is in full agreement with James (1 Corinthians 13; Ephesians 2:8-10).

Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, and in Christ alone. This faith is the inward part, the driving force of Christian living, the means by which God works in His people to will and to do His good pleasure. Good works are the outward part of that faith – the expression of it, if you like – the confirming evidence that the faith is genuine. While salvation is by faith apart from works, therefore, it is never by faith without works.

Since good works are the confirming evidence of saving faith, every professing Christian should be diligent to examine what he does to see if it is rooted in faith. Yet it is right here that he needs to be careful. As believers, we are far from perfect; in fact, we disappoint ourselves regularly. It is not that the Christian does not sin, but that he will not continue in sin. As believers, we are led of the Holy Spirit, so then let us look for the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:16-26), those precious traces of His presence and power. If we see no such fruit, then is our profession of faith without substance and Christ is not precious to us.

Baptism

The Bible is taken up with God's covenant, the Covenant of Grace, from Genesis to Revelation. The terms "Old Testament" and "New Testament" refer to the two administrations of that covenant. Because it is one covenant, we can expect to find continuity throughout; yet, because it is presented to us in two separate administrations of that one covenant, we can expect to find discontinuity as well. This is precisely what we do discover, and why it is that the bloody signs and seals of the Old Testament pointing ahead to the death of Christ on the cross are replaced with non-bloody symbols following His crucifixion in the New Testament.

The symbol of regeneration in the OT was circumcision. It was an outward sign which represented the cutting away of the sinner's old nature. It did not in itself achieve that blessing but portrayed it graphically, was given to every male child in Israel and was meant as an encouragement to everyone (male and female) to seek what it represented, namely, the circumcision of the heart, or what we call today the new birth. Hence, there was an outward part to circumcision and an inward part. Not all who received the outward sign received the inward blessing, no, but that outward sign sealed God's promise of salvation to all who trusted in the coming Messiah.

The symbol of regeneration in the NT is baptism. This fact, plus what we are told in Colossians 2:11f, makes it clear that baptism has replaced circumcision. The sprinkling of water in NT baptism represents the washing away of the sinner's old nature. Again, it does not in itself achieve that blessing but clearly portrays it, is to be given to every child (male or female) who is born of at least one believing parent in the Church, the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16), and is intended to encourage everyone to seek what it represents, namely, the baptism of the Holy Spirit or new birth. This is why Christian parents are to teach their children that they must come to Christ, that they cannot get to heaven on the coattails of their parents, but must by faith lay hold of Christ themselves. Note once again the outward part of baptism and the inward part. As we have come to expect, not all who receive the outward sign receive the inward blessing. Nevertheless, that outward sign, the sprinkling of water in the name of the triune God, does seal God's promise of salvation to all who trust in Christ, the Lamb of God who paid the required ransom and saves to the uttermost all who come unto God by Him.

Let me address anyone reading this who may not have thought through these things before. Whoever believes in the Lord Jesus Christ has everlasting life. God's Word promises that (John 3:16) – baptism (the sprinkling of water) is given to confirm the promise – so, if you are yet an unbeliever, I urge you by the mercies of God to seek the inward part, to believe in Christ Jesus and be saved! If you commit your life to Christ, know this, that it was God Himself who worked in you to will and to do His good pleasure, who has engrafted you into Christ and sealed you for heaven by the Holy Spirit. If you never seek refuge in Christ, on the other hand, this also is true, that you have no one to blame but yourself, that is, your own sinful nature which has moved you to reject God's gracious invitation so

freely and sincerely offered to you. Come to Christ, unbeliever. Do not put it off any longer. He has promised to receive you and will never cast you out.

The Lord's Supper

OT rituals were, for the most part, observed at certain times of the year and marked with very precise liturgical actions. One of them, the annual Passover feast, was a celebration of Israel's exodus from slavery in Egypt. As time went on, however, it was too often reduced to an ethnic tradition, becoming for many merely an external performance with no internal value. The Lord's Supper was first celebrated at a Passover feast; as a celebration of the Church's deliverance from slavery to sin through the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross it replaces Passover in the NT. A much greater deliverance, one with eternal consequences, has now been achieved by the finished work of God's own Son at Calvary.

Mind you, there are a lot of differences between how these two feasts are meant to be celebrated. Passover, on the one hand, was to be celebrated by individual households, and it was for everyone including the children; not partaking of it, but neglecting it, rather, whether by believer or unbeliever, was pronounced sinful. The Lord's Supper, on the other hand, is to be celebrated by the local church, specifically by all professing believers, and only believers, who are gathered together in that assembly. Now, not if he neglects the sacrament, but if he partakes of it, the unbeliever is said to add judgment to himself and is therefore duly warned to refrain from it. Indeed, the discontinuity of these two sacred meals is as remarkable as their continuity, and we must thus be careful not to determine how either is to be administered by rules which apply to the other.

The question arises, "How shall the Supper be administered to reduce outward formality, and to promote, instead, the inward blessing of deep-rooted spiritual benefit?" One answer to that question is by a process of self-examination. Let every believer prepare himself beforehand in order to make himself ready for this celebration of his union with Christ and his communion with other believers.

Another answer – one that is not as obvious, so we will have to examine it more carefully – is by its frequency. Notice, an annual celebration of the Supper is not prescribed. We are instructed, "for as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26), but we are

not told how often that is to be. It is surely beyond question that the Supper is to be administered as often as it may be celebrated most profitably.

It was established in the sixteenth century Reformation, at least in Reformed churches, that the Supper should be celebrated quarterly. Without wishing to be dogmatic about it, I believe that this has generally proved to be useful and appropriate in ordinary times such as we have witnessed in recent years. Some churches, though, have opted to observe the Supper weekly, and they do so thinking that, if the outward ritual helps to confirm the spoken word, then it should be used to confirm that word as frequently as it is practicable to do so. Now that may sound reasonable enough – the weekly celebration was also Calvin's view – but it falls into the danger of attaching too much significance to the ritual itself and fails to consider how easily and quickly rituals, even the best of them, can become mindless exercises, habits we perform outwardly without any inward benefit. Consider, for instance, how many people regularly repeat the Lord's Prayer from memory, being so familiar with it they quickly slide over the words without ever stopping to contemplate anything they are actually saying.

Having noted that, though, it may well be that in times of persecution the Supper could be celebrated monthly very profitably, and in times of severe persecution perhaps even weekly or more. I am reminded of what one sorely persecuted Christian was reported once to have said: "With the imminent threat of a noose around my neck I am more keenly aware of the demands which the Lord has placed upon me, and I am not so inclined to my own naturally wicked thoughts and careless ways."

In regard to the sacraments, baptism and the holy supper, let us not focus on the externals, on the things we can see with our eyes and touch with our hands, but on the internal benefits they help to convey. These symbols are not to be ignored, no, because they are commanded. Yet of what value is the sprinkled water in baptism if we are never made a new creation in Christ? Of what value is the bread and wine in communion if we are not feeding on Christ by faith? Indeed, it is these very signs and seals of God's covenant mercy that will testify against us in the judgment to come if we have not sought refuge in Christ and if we are not seeking to live out our life in a closer walk with Him.