

How Faith is not a Work

I. An Intellectual Conversion

The title of my talk points to a problem that I've thought about ever since I was in high school—it once motivated much of my thinking about theology. But in recent years I've largely forgotten about it—I no longer ask this particular question much—because the answer to the question was really more like changing the subject than like answering it. So now I'm thinking: once you've changed the subject, you should be able to say what the best answer to this question is, or at least why the question no longer looks so important—why it doesn't need to be important.

Here's how it happened. When I was really wrestling with this question, I was making the usual assumptions that people make when they don't realize what Christian faith is all about. I was assuming that the big question is how we get saved, and the answer was: we're saved by faith alone, not by works. And with those assumptions, the question of how to keep faith from becoming a work looms very large. You've *got* to keep faith from becoming a work, or you're trying to get saved by works, which defeats the whole point about salvation by faith alone. And in fact I did see all sorts of ways in which people made faith into a work, or rather, were told or were telling themselves that faith was really a work (I'll get to those in a minute). And I didn't see any way out of it. In retrospect, I don't think there is any way out of it, based on those assumptions (that faith is about getting saved, etc.). You have to change the subject before you see how faith is not a work.

So how did I change the subject? Well, I was persuaded by Karl Barth that Christian faith is about Jesus Christ. You might think this is rather obvious, and of course in a sense it is. And yet I had been thinking something different. Remember, my assumption—really the assumption of all the Christians I knew, because I certainly didn't make it up myself—was that faith was all about getting saved. But once I saw that there was a difference between my assumption and what Barth was saying, then there was no doubt where I wanted to go. What Christian would want to go anywhere else? *Of course*, Christian faith is all about Christ! We all know that, but we don't always think consistently as if that were true. We get distracted by secondary things and make them into first things, as if what really mattered was not Christ but how to get saved—as if getting saved was the bottom line, and Christ was important not because of who he is but because that's the way I get saved. That's getting priorities backwards, of course, and results in all kinds of problems—including theological problems, like how to avoid making faith into a work.

That's how it is with bad theology. Bad theology is a way of misunderstanding our very own faith, the faith in the depth of our hearts. For Christian faith is always by its very nature faith in Christ—if it's faith in something else it's not *Christian* faith—yet we do indeed talk and think as if Christ was not quite at the center of it, as if he were only a means to an end, that what it's really all about is getting saved or whatever. But then good theology has this strange and wonderful effect: it reminds us what our own faith has always really been about. Because we do

forget. We talk in forgetful ways, as if what we really wanted out of life was to get saved or something trivial like that. When of course what we really want, what our life and faith is really all about, is Christ. And so when we encounter good theology we say, "Well of course my faith is all about Christ (I'm a good Christian!) *but...*" There's a real intellectual conversion that takes place when you drop that "but," and that defensiveness ("but I'm a good Christian..."). Then what you say is different: "Well of course, Christian faith *is* all about Christ! How wonderful! YES! How wonderful! How could I have forgotten? How come I didn't *get it* before? I've been a Christian all this while, and I didn't really get it that my faith is all about Christ! How could I have gone so long without noticing?" That realization gets everything else in proper perspective, including my salvation. Because if my faith and life are all about Christ, then the problem about salvation takes care of itself, or rather, Christ my savior takes care of it. It's not my concern anymore, but his. So once I went through this intellectual conversion, everything else I thought about, every other problem I faced in life, looked different.

Two things about this intellectual conversion. It's not a conversion to faith in Christ. It's merely an intellectual conversion, a conversion of understanding. It's a deepened and clarified understanding of a faith you already have, but have been understanding badly, talking about in ways that don't really make sense of it, as if the reason to have faith was so as to be saved. Secondly, because it's an intellectual conversion, it takes study. It takes a while reading good theology before you get it. Lots of good people—lots of good Christians—never quite get it. That is to say, lots of people are not good theologians, not good at talking about what their own faith really means, and they tell themselves things about it that hinder their Christian lives, e.g. that the reason they believe is so they can be saved, and Jesus is important to them because he's how they get saved. It takes study, quite a lot of it, before you see why this is *obviously* wrong, before you "get it." That's why I didn't get it until I had read a fair amount of Barth, who hits you over the head with this, over and over again: Christian faith, Christian life, Christian theology, it's all about one thing and one thing only, the one thing necessary: Jesus Christ.

And so that's how I learned to change the subject. Once you do get it, everything changes in your thinking, you no longer have the same set of problems to think about, and above all, you realize why you never want to go back. Why would I ever want to go back to thinking that Christian faith was about something other than Christ? Once you "get it," it just makes no sense to go back. And that's why, for all that it is an intellectual conversion, a conversion of understanding, it's still a conversion. Afterwards, you just can't imagine going back to your old way of thinking. How could I be a Christian and not believe that my life, my faith, everything, is about Christ? It just doesn't make sense.

II. The Problem

Alright, so back to that problem I used to think about so much. You already know what the solution is going to be, and why it will be glorious. But let's imagine our way back into the darkness, into the kind of problem that it's easy to have when you don't realize your faith is all about Jesus Christ.

There a quite a number of ways to make faith into a work. My problem was that I couldn't see an option that *didn't* make faith into a work.

For instance, there was the notion that faith was what you do to get saved. Well, if it's what you *do*, then it's your work. Someone gives you a "how to": this is how to get saved. Well, that's exactly what a work is. If someone tells you "how to" fix your car or apply for a loan or get whatever else you want, you're being given a technique, and you're supposed to do something to apply that technique to your situation. And what you're supposed to do is obviously something you *do*, a work. That's the problem, you see: what you *do* is your work. How could it be otherwise?

It doesn't make it any better if it's something you do in your heart. In fact, that makes it worse, in a number of ways. At least you can tell whether you're doing OK if the work you're supposed to do is external, right out there where you can see it: have I done a good job fixing the car, filling out the loan application, whatever? But suppose you ask the question, "have I done a good job accepting Christ into my life, have I *truly* accepted him in my heart?" Ewww! That's really psychological, and in the worst way. How in the world can I tell if I've done a good job at something inward like that? I'm supposed to look inside my heart and be able to tell? But the heart is deceitful, who can fathom it? as Jeremiah says. How in the world can I tell if I've really and truly, not deceitfully and insincerely and half-heartedly, accepted Christ into my life?

You see, the problem with works is that you have to do a good job at them, or they don't count. So in fact we've just noticed the two key concepts about "works": they're something we do, and they're something we have to do a good job at. What makes salvation by works so deadly is that you can always ask that question about works: have you really done a good job at it? And if the works are supposed to save you, that inevitably becomes a question about your heart: have you really loved God with your whole heart, mind, soul and strength? And your neighbor as yourself? REALLY? Really, truly, in the depth of your heart, with no inward grumbling and resentment and hypocrisy and insincerity and half-heartedness? And if you say, "well, you shouldn't worry about that because you're saved by faith alone," then you've got a really big problem if you can ask the very same questions about your faith: Do I really, truly, trust God fully? Have I really "sold out" to Jesus Christ, or am I holding something back? Do I REALLY believe, or am I just fooling myself, telling myself I believe when I don't really, truly, trust God in the depths of my heart?

If faith is something we have to *do* to get saved, then it's a work. If it's something we have to do right, do a good job of, then it's a work. And if it's a matter of the heart, then it's the worst kind of work we can be required to do, an inner work of the heart, which is precisely the kind of work we're worst at. Giving to the poor I can do. But giving to the poor with a pure and generous and cheerful heart—that's really hard, and it's even harder to know if I've really done it (the heart is *so* deceitful). Confessing the faith of Christ with my lips, I can do. But believing him in my heart—how can I be sure I've really done that, when my heart is so deceitful, so dishonest, so full of hypocrisy and insincerity? How can I look into my heart and see anything but deceitfulness? How can I look into my heart and see faith?

The requirement to look into your heart and see faith is what I mean by making faith into a work. It's just deadly. It gets you caught in a trap that you just can't get out of. For it means looking in the wrong direction. You have to look elsewhere than at your heart. You have to look at Christ.

That's what faith *does*, after all. So as soon as you start asking, "do I have true faith?" you're looking in the wrong direction, and you're caught in a trap you can't get out of until you look somewhere else. You have to stop looking at faith and start looking where faith looks, which is at Christ.

So here's the problem with treating faith like a work. If faith is a work, then it's something we do a bad job at, like all our good works. That's precisely why works can't save us. And if we treat *faith* as a work, then it can't save us either. We do too bad a job of it. Insofar as faith is a work, something we do, we have to treat it like all our other works: it is a sin we must repent of.

Now isn't that a nice thought? Suppose I look at my heart and I don't have to try to find true faith in there, but I am allowed to be honest and see what really is there: deceit, hypocrisy, half-heartedness, a faith that I do not do a good job at, at all. I can't trust that anything in there can save me. What I need is not to put my trust in something in *there* (that's the trap of salvation by works) but to *repent* of what's in there, in my heart. Now isn't that a wonderful thought! Instead of having to pretend to myself that I'm a good Christian with a strong faith (talk about making faith a work! Strong faith! What a load of malarkey!) I get to look at my weak, inadequate, insincere faith and repent of it, repent of my insincerity and deceit and half-heartedness. I get to be a penitent rather than a believer with a strong faith.

And that's very freeing. Clearly there's something wrong with any theology that doesn't allow me that freedom, the freedom to repent of my unbelief: the freedom to look inside my heart and see an unbeliever, and confess that—confess it as a sin, of course, but confess it boldly and happily, rather than thinking that if I'm an unbeliever then I must be damned, so the last thing I can allow myself to do is look inside my heart and see an unbeliever. That requirement to see myself as a believer, as a person with strong faith, is a recipe for self-deception, whereas repentance is a recipe for self-knowledge: I get to see myself as who I really am, a sinner and an unbeliever, someone who denies Christ right and left, just like the apostle Peter, someone who can in no way claim to be a true believer. But you can only stand the thought of this kind of repentance—repenting of your own unbelief—if you've really come to understand that faith is not a work.

If faith is a work, something we do in our hearts to get saved—you know, truly making a decision for Christ, really trusting him, letting him into our lives, etc. etc.,—then we are not free to repent of our unbelief, because that would be like saying Christ was not our savior anymore. So there's a real problem here: how did the doctrine of salvation by faith alone end up making it impossible for us to be repentant in this one crucial area of our lives—our faith? It's as if we are forbidden to do like the man who came to Jesus saying, "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief." We think as if we are supposed to look into our hearts and find true faith, when what we really need is to look inside our hearts and find unbelief, insincerity, half-heartedness, and repent of it. In order to put our faith in Christ alone, we need the freedom *not* to put our faith in our own faith, not to believe that we are believers, but to be penitents who confess our unbelief, admitting first to God and then to ourselves that our faith is no good at all, and certainly cannot save us. Only Christ can save us. If our salvation depended on our faith, on how real it was, then we'd be damned for sure. There really is no hope for me in myself, not even in my faith. No hope at all.

Unless Jesus Christ died to save me from my sin, I just have no hope. So I need to give up believing in my faith and believe in him instead.

Now there's the trick, of course. How can I believe in Christ without believing in my faith? It looks impossible, but that's because we're still looking in the wrong direction. We'll never solve this problem if we're still looking at our hearts. Indeed, the fact that we're looking in our hearts *is* the problem. We have a faith that is, in part at least, a faith in our own faith (a reflective faith, as I called it in a recent article).

We need an unreflective faith, one that is in no way a faith in faith, because there is a rather straightforward sense in which faith really is a work and therefore cannot be something to trust in. For of course faith really is something we do—and something we do badly. As long as we're looking at our faith, we're looking at our works, which means our sins. So as long as we're thinking about our faith instead of about Christ, we cannot help making faith into a work. For faith in itself, apart from its connection with Christ, simply *is* a work.

III. The Logic of Belief

So what is the special connection faith has with Christ, which makes faith so different from all our works—even though faith, considered in itself apart from Christ, really is just one more work? I think it has to do with the special connection that all beliefs have with truth. To believe something is by definition to believe it's true. And here I want to emphasize: I'm talking about any belief, not just Christian faith: belief that snow is white, or that $2+2=4$, or that Jesus is Lord. All of these are equally beliefs, in the sense that I'm using the word here. Moreover, I'm not making any distinction now between belief and faith. The Bible makes no such distinction, and indeed English is rather unusual in having these two different words for what is, in most other languages (including the Greek of the NT) one word. So I'm specifically suggesting that we get rid of the notion that there's something special about faith that makes it more than mere belief, more than merely believing something is true. That extra stuff—call it trust or confidence or accepting Christ or whatever you want to call it—that's precisely the *work* of faith, which can't save us. Only the truth about Christ can save us, and what's unique about Christian faith is simply that it means believing that truth.

Another way to put this is: if you want to understand why faith is not a work, you need to focus not on the psychology of faith but on the logic of belief. The point is not about trust, acceptance, making a decision for Christ and so on, but about the truth. Faith does not mean asking, "Do I really believe?" or "Have I really accepted Christ?" but rather, "Is Christ who he says he is? Is he really the Son of God who shed his blood for my salvation?" Faith does not say, "I believe" but rather, "Christ is my savior." For faith does not look at itself but at Christ. That's the sense in which faith is not a work. Faith is not about what faith is and does but about what Christ is and does.

This correlates with the distinction Luther draws between Law and Gospel: God's Law is about what we are to do, like loving God with our whole hearts or believing in Christ. The Gospel is about what Christ does, like being born of the virgin Mary for us and our salvation, and being

crucified for us under Pontius Pilate—all that stuff in the creed. So when you tell people they have to believe in Christ, you're preaching Law, not Gospel: you're telling them what to do. But when you tell them that Christ died for them, then you're preaching the Gospel: you're telling them part of the story about who Christ is and what he does for us and our salvation. We are saved by faith not because we make a decision to believe, but because we receive Christ by believing that what the Gospel says about him is true. It frankly doesn't matter whether you ever make a decision (that's a work). You can grow up a baptized Christian and be taught what to believe about Christ as a child, never having to make a decision. (Like Luther, I'm a firm believer in infant baptism, you see). All that matters is that you believe that what the Gospel says about Christ—that he is the Son of God, your savior (etc.)—is true.

The reason we get into such trouble if we try to look at our own faith is because of a fundamental feature of the logic of belief. Belief is inherently unreflective: it's not about itself, not about the fact that I believe, but about what I believe in. To ask about my own belief is in fact profoundly contrary to the very nature of belief—not just Christian faith, but any belief. Think how this works. Normally, when you're trying to figure out what you believe, how do you go about it? What questions do you ask? It doesn't help much to ask, "What do I believe?" or "Do I truly believe X?" The question you need to answer is, "What's the truth about X?" Once you've answered that question, then you know what you believe. If I think it's *true* that snow is white, well then I've just discovered that I believe snow is white. If I think it's true that $2+2=4$, then I believe $2+2=4$. And if I think Jesus Christ really is my savior, well, that's all there is to believing Jesus is my savior. Deciding for Christ, trusting in him, all that stuff, has nothing to do with it, thank God. All that is salvation by works, and therefore irrelevant. The only interesting question, for Christian faith, is whether the stuff the Gospel tells me about Christ is true: is he really the eternal Son of God who became flesh for my sake, shedding his blood on the cross for my salvation? That's *all* that matters. *All* that Christian faith cares about is that that's the truth. All the rest is works, which is to say, our sinful failure to believe as well as we ought. Don't go there. Just believe that Christ is who the Gospel says he is.

So this is the key feature of the logic of belief to be aware of: if I find X is true, then that's all there is to believing X. But now let's notice the crucial twist which explains how it's possible to make faith into a work. The logic of belief as I've described it so far is inherently a first-person proposition: if I discover something is true, then there's no further question about whether I believe it. Of course I believe it—I've discovered it's true! But the connection between belief and truth is not the same when it comes to *other* people's beliefs. If I want to know whether *you* believe X, then it's not enough for me to find out whether X is true. I have to find out what you think. Typically, of course, that means I need to ask you. I don't have a right to say what *you* believe. You have to tell me. So the logic of belief works differently in the second person than in the first person: finding out what *you* believe is very different from finding out what *I* believe.

And it's different again when I try to find out what some third person believes. The question, "Does he or she believe X?" requires a different approach from the question "Do you believe X?" and "Do I believe X?" In the third person case, I'm not asking you, but observing someone, or looking for evidence about what they believe. Did Columbus believe the world was round? Did Galileo believe the earth moved? Did Darwin believe God created the world? I can't ask them, so I have to look for evidence in their lives. Did Columbus really try to sail around the world?

That would be evidence he believed it was round. Did Darwin go to church? That would be evidence of his beliefs. But of course there is always the problem of sincerity. Could it be that Darwin was like a lot of other Victorian gentlemen, going to church because it was the proper thing to do but not really believing what was said there? I'd need to find some evidence that if he went to church, he was sincere, not half-hearted or hypocritical or deceitful when he did things like reciting the creed on Sundays when he went to church.

Now isn't this interesting? Notice what's happened. All of a sudden I'm using the same vocabulary I used earlier to describe the problem of faith being a work: my heart is deceitful, half-hearted, hypocritical, etc. And what we need to notice is that this is the language that comes up when we're thinking about belief in the *third person*: trying to figure out whether Darwin or some other person we know about really believes this or that. It's not the language we use for first person beliefs, figuring out what *I* believe. Logically, the thing to do when I want to know what *I* believe is just to find out what's true. My own sincerity and hypocrisy and all that, simply shouldn't be an issue; logically, they're beside the point, like changing the subject. And that's what happens when I try to figure out whether I truly trust in Christ, have given my heart to him, etc. I've changed the subject. I'm no longer dealing with what Christian faith is all about, which is the truth of the Gospel of Christ, but with my own works, my sin and unbelief. That's a good thing to do if it's time to examine my conscience and repent of my sins, but it's a really lousy way of coming to faith in Christ. It flies in the face of the logic of belief, breaking the inherent connection between faith and truth. It is not about faith at all, but about works, because it is not about Christ but about myself.

When I look at myself and try to tell whether I have true faith, I'm taking a third-person view of my own faith, treating it as if it were someone else's faith rather than my own. I'm asking the same questions about myself that I would ask about anyone else whose sincerity I must question: does this guy really believe what he says when he goes to church and recites the creed? How can you tell? Well, look at his life. Hmm. Looks bad there. Certainly doesn't behave like a Christian. Well, suppose we look at his heart. We can do that, because that's myself in there. And whew, is it ever dark and stinky in there! Looks very bad indeed.

Now here's the point that may take the most getting used to. When we look at ourselves, we look at ourselves from the outside, just as we do when we look at our reflection. When we see ourselves in a mirror, we are seeing exactly what other people see of us. This is true, I think, even when we try to look inside our own hearts. What we're doing, in that case, is trying to see ourselves as God sees us. And that is why the only safe and legitimate and Christian thing to do after looking deep inside yourself is to repent. Because there's only two ways you can see yourself as God sees you. One is to look at your life and repent, and the other is to look at Christ and see what God really thinks of you. If you look inside yourself and try to find anything good in there, including faith, you are almost sure to deceive yourself. Because you cannot see yourself as God sees you, except by looking away from yourself at Christ. Then you know what God really thinks of you. You are one of those for whom Christ died. You are one of those for whom, in the unfathomable depths of divine love, the eternal Word became flesh and shed his blood. If you want to know who you really are, that's where you have to look.

So you cannot know whether you really believe by looking at yourself. All you can do that way is give yourself something to repent of. If you want something to believe in, you've got to look at Christ in the Gospel. It is the word of the Gospel that gives you the truth about Christ to believe in. For as I said, if you want to find out what you believe, you have to look for the truth. So if you want to believe in Christ, you have to hear the Gospel, which is the truth about Christ.

IV. Toward a historical diagnosis

To conclude, let me hint at what I think are the historical reasons why we got into this pickle, this awful habit of asking ourselves unanswerable questions like "Do I really believe?"—questions that are unanswerable because they run counter to the very logic of belief. I think we get stuck with these questions because we're looking to the wrong part of Scripture to be the basis for our hope of salvation. Just as we can't base our hope of salvation on the 10 commandments, which can't save us (for though they are God's word, they are Law not Gospel), so we can't base our hope of salvation on Scriptural truths about faith. That's where those false assumptions I took for granted back in high school came from.

The idea was that what you really needed to believe was a Scriptural truth like "Whoever believes in Christ is saved." Now this is God's Word, just like the 10 commandments, but it's not the Gospel, because it's just one more way of telling us what to do. To take this as the basis of your salvation is inevitably to make faith a work: faith is what you do to get saved.

But suppose we base our faith on the Gospel instead. The Gospel, remember, is not about what I do but about what Christ does. This is Luther's way of putting it, and I think he just got it right. That means that telling people how to get saved, even telling them to believe in Christ, is not the Gospel. You have to tell them about Christ. And if they are Christians anxious about whether they have true faith (and who because of bad theology are not free to repent of the fact that they're just like the rest of us and *don't* have true faith) then the way to help them is to remind them of the sacramental promises of Christ, such as "This is my body, given for you." If you're baptized, this promise is for you. When Christ says he's giving his body "for you," that means *you*. So in the sacrament, the Gospel promise to you is spoken in your hearing, so that Christ gives himself to you through his word. For of course in giving you his body he gives you his soul and divinity, his blessedness, righteousness, salvation, and glory—all that is in him. So when you believe this promise, you know that Christ is yours and that he is your savior. For he said so, and he's telling the truth.

So you see, the sacramental promises of the Gospel carry out the 1st-person logic of belief. Christ promises to give himself to me, and that's the truth, so I can know I have him as my savior. And that's how my faith in Christ is strengthened. By contrast, if you don't have a genuine Gospel promise to believe in, one that's all about what Christ does, then you have to rely on your own faith rather than Christ. If, for example, you base your salvation on the truth that "If you believe in Christ, you're saved" then you're stuck having to believe in your own belief.

The logic is very clear:

Premise 1: If you believe in Christ, you're saved.

Premise 2: I believe.

Conclusion: therefore I am saved.

By contrast, consider the logic of a Gospel promise, one that's about Christ rather than me and my belief:

Premise 1: Christ says, "This is my body, given for you" and he means me.

Premise 2: Christ does not lie but tells the truth.

Conclusion: Christ has given himself for me. He is therefore my savior.

The crucial difference in logic here is between the two "Premise 2"'s. In the one, I have to believe that I believe. In the other, I have to believe that Christ tells the truth. The one makes faith into a work, the other simply believes in the truth of Christ.

So here's my historical conjecture, which I've developed at greater length in that article I mentioned before. Notice that what I've identified as the Gospel promise is a sacramental word. I think that when you have a doctrine of salvation by faith alone, and you don't have a strong sacramental piety, then you *have* to end up making faith into a work, for you end up putting faith in a Word of God that is not Gospel but Law: a word like, "Whoever believes in Christ is saved." That's true, it's the Word of God, but it's not the Gospel of Christ. It's about what we must do to be saved, and therefore it's God's Law but it's not the Gospel, precisely because it's about what we must do rather than what Christ has done.

In short, when Protestantism tries to get along without a strong sacramental piety it inevitably makes faith into a work. I think that explains a lot of the hankering for a rich sacramental life that many Protestants are feeling these days. It is a hankering for Christ, for the Gospel and for a deeper Christian faith, one that is not reflective, not a faith in our faith, not a trust in our ability to accept Christ but a trust in what Christ has done for us. I don't think you can be strengthened in such trust and faith without the Gospel, and that it is hard to hear the Gospel as good news for me without the sacramental word, "This is my body, given for you."

I think this hankering for a richer sacramental life is altogether a good thing, and will have very good consequences, for it is a hankering after Christ, and it will bring all Christians closer together. The Protestant doctrine of salvation by faith alone makes no sense unless the faith we're talking about is faith in Christ alone, not a faith in faith—and this kind of faith in Christ alone is impossible if we do not have the Gospel promise, which is never more clearly preached than in the sacraments, in baptism and eucharist. If all of us are drawn together to the sacraments, then all of us will be drawn together in the one body. I think there is a movement of the Holy Spirit here, a movement away from faith in faith and toward deeper faith in Christ.