FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

- How is the doctrine of salvation commonly taught in your Christian environment?
- Are repentance, faith and regeneration each given their due?
- How do you understand and explain the role of each person of the Trinity in salvation?
- What does Bregle mean when he says ‘that the power of evil habits is broken by regeneration’?

repentance, faith and regeneration

Doctrine for Today

Series: The Army’s Eleven Articles of Faith

Our seventh doctrine is a product of New Testament teaching. While repentance, faith, and even regeneration are evidenced in the Old Testament, they come into full light through the saving work of Jesus Christ. According to Hebrews 10:1, under the Law Israel had ‘a shadow of the good things that are coming’. The perfect sacrifice of Christ brought those ‘good things’. A history of salvation, from the initial sin to the resurrection of Christ, is enriching for both mind and soul, but the nature of salvation that is described in doctrine seven – and its pertinence to our lives – is decidedly a New Testament teaching, contingent on Christ’s saving work.

The wording of this doctrine draws attention to each person of the Godhead, as well as each step in the salvation process. The first two steps – repentance and faith – are taken by the human being in equation. Before investigating any part of the doctrine any further, the immediate question is: What causes a person to become aware of his/her need for reconciliation with God? How can he/she be sensitive to spiritual things while still in his/her natural state?

The first work of the Holy Spirit in the act of salvation is to convict the sinner. John Wesley is credited for coining the term ‘prevenient grace’. Prevenient is simply an old-fashioned word for ‘preceding’.

The grace-filled act of the Holy Spirit is to prod us, to alert us to our sinfulness and need for a Saviour. While those in the Calvinist/Reformed tradition have understood God’s grace as something a chosen person could not refuse, we in the Wesleyan tradition believe that we can reject the conviction brought about by the Holy Spirit. Just as our first parents had a free will and chose sin, we have a free will and may choose to accept or refuse the wooing of the Holy Spirit.

REPROVATION TOWARDS GOD

Those who respond to the prevenient grace brought by the Holy Spirit experience an unsatisfied desire to repent. Theologian Millard Erickson said that repentance is ‘goddly sorrow for one’s sin together with a resolution to turn from it’. A sinner’s behaviour becomes distasteful to him, not because of the wrong done to God and the hurt inflicted upon him. In Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son, the son’s offence is against his father. Similarly, we understand ourselves as having offended the Father. God. We realise our offence against him both as our eternal parent and as the one who is known as ‘the judge of humanity’ (Hebrews 12:22-25). And like the prodigal son, we do not return to him with ulterior motives. We come with genuine understanding of and regret for our offences, simply hoping for mercy. Thanks be to God, his mercy is abundant (Ephesians 2:4-5).

FAITH IN OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST

The New Testament word that is translated as ‘faith’ has at least two meanings, as pointed out by Erickson. As a verb (pisteo), it can mean ‘believe what someone says, to accept a statement (particularly of a religious nature) as true’ (Bultmann, Theological Dictionary of the New Testament). As a noun (pistis), it can mean personal trust as distinct from mere credence or belief (G. Abbott-Smith, A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament). These definitions are important to our understanding of what faith in Jesus is, especially this age in which the word ‘faith’ is often used carelessly. Faith is not simply a matter of aligning oneself with Christ as opposed to another religious figure. True faith in Christ means accepting his teaching as both irrefutable and personally applicable. A true believer in Christ says, ‘This doctrine affects my life.’

Jesus taught that he was the reconciler between God and man (John 14:6). Faith in our Lord Jesus, then, requires accepting him as Saviour – the only one capable of restoring the broken relationship between ourselves and God. The repentant person finds in Christ the forgiveness he/ she craves, as well as access to God the Father (Hebrews 4:15-16).

Romans 3:25-26 says: God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood – to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had (left the sins committed beforehand unpunished – he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.’

While other concepts can be teased out of these verses, there are two key points relevant to the subject at hand: the sacrifice of Christ is to be received by faith, and faith in Christ results in God’s justification.

Theologian Donald Blosch has written, ‘We are not redeemed in fact until we rise to claim our pardon… His redemption on the cross is our redemption in fact if we are united to it in faith.’ What an amazing responsibility is ours! Christ has completed the saving act. Yet, this salvation can only be appropriated to us by our act of faith! Once we have truly believed, God grants us his justification. ‘For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the Law’ (Romans 3:28).

REGENERATION BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

The salvific work of Christ is so preeminent in our understanding of salvation that the action of the Holy Spirit is often overlooked. It is critical that we feel remorse for our sins and understand that Christ’s sacrifice is the only remedy for them. But the picture is not complete until we are actually changed. Our doctrine book says: ‘Regeneration means that we die to our old life and come alive to Christ’ (Romans 6:3-4; Colossians 3:3). The Spirit is the one who regenerates. He is the one who empowers us, bears fruit in us, and guides us in holy living. He is the one who turns our lives around.

Titus 3:4-7 puts it this way: ‘But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, to whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.’

The phrase ‘rebirth and renewal’ is simplified by the New Living Translation as a ‘new birth and new life’. In this new life, the reign of sin has ended. This is, according to Samuel L. Bregle, the point at which the ‘power of evil habits is broken, the tide of corruption is stayed, the central purpose of the will is changed, and new affections are planted in the soul’ (The Meaning of a ‘Clean Heart’, How to Obtain a Clean Heart and to Know It, as quoted by R. David Rightmire in Sanctified Sanity: The Life and Teaching of Samuel Lagen Bregle).

The Cohesive Work of the Trinity

The verses from Titus quoted above are densely packed, but they are a beautiful expression of the concerted work of the Trinity. God the Father declares us as saved, because he is merciful. The saving work of Jesus Christ – which is inseparable – enables the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. In turn, the Holy Spirit redesigns us, making us into the image of Christ. All of this is to the glory of God, prompted by his love for us. We are underserving and we are limited in our understanding of the great mystery of salvation. However, we are privileged to be the recipients.