

## COMING TO FAITH



All Christians should be prepared to share their faith with the end in view of making disciples of others. Peter said, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have. But do this with gentleness and respect ..." (1 Pe. 3:15-16). However, Christians sometimes approach disciple-making with an over-emphasis on technique, and this is unfortunate inasmuch as there is no precise technique given in the New Testament. At the same time, there are some common elements in the "coming to faith" of New Testament believers. These may be summarized as hearing the gospel, internally believing and committing oneself to it, and outwardly affirming one's faith in its truth.

### HEARING THE GOSPEL

The gospel should always be focused on Jesus—his life, death and resurrection. There is an important background for the gospel, however, which makes it relevant, and this background is the fact that the human race is at odds with God.

Everyone innately knows that there is something wrong with the world. The Bible informs us that all persons have lost their way back to God. In fact, as far as God is concerned, they are like sheep wandering in the desert.

*Like sheep we have all gone astray (Isa. 53:6).*

But God determined to seek those who have lost their way. He has sent Jesus, his only Son, into the world in order to bring men and women back to himself. Jesus is the way back to God, as he himself said:

*I am the way (Jn. 14:6).*

In his life, Jesus both lived and explained the way in which believers ought to live so that they might please God. This is why John says about Jesus, "In this world we are like him," and "Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did" (1 Jn. 4:17; 2:6).

There is a problem with this as far as we are concerned, however. Men and women are not able by sheer willpower either to come to God or to live for God. They are in slavery to their own desires. Thus Paul says:

*What I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate, I do (Ro. 7: 15).*

And Jesus also says:

*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him (Jn. 6:44).*

In his death and resurrection, Jesus liberated from their slavery to self and sin all who would put their faith in him. His death was on our behalf, so as Paul says it:

*When we were still powerless ... Christ died for us (Ro. 5:6-8).*

He forgave our sins and took away the accusation which was against us, "nailing it to the cross" (Col. 2:14). In the great judgment, when history has come to an end, the death and resurrection of Jesus on our behalf will stand in our defense.

*Jesus was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our acquittal (Ro. 4:25).*

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead was God's way of verifying that he truly died for our sins, since "he always lives to intercede for them" (He. 7:25).

This, then, is the good news about Jesus. Jesus is the Savior, the Son of God, and "by believing you may have life in his name" (Jn. 20:31).

### **BELIEVING IN YOUR HEART**

Paul said that if you would "confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Ro. 10:9). The question is entirely appropriate, "But what does it mean to believe in my heart?"

The important distinction to be made is between believing "in your heart" and merely believing "in your head." The latter is only an intellectual agreement with the bare facts about Jesus, that is, admitting that he was born, that he lived as a rural teacher in Palestine, and that he died by being crucified on a cross. It is the sort of thing one might believe about Julius Caesar or Napoleon Bonaparte.

Believing "in one's heart," however, is much more. It has to do with the intensity with which one accepts the good news about Jesus. It is "welcoming the message with joy" (1 Th. 1:6) and "accepting it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God" (1 Th. 2:13). To believe in one's heart means to believe that Jesus not only died, but that he is truly alive today. It is to put the maximum value on the resurrection of Jesus, as Paul says:

*If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins (1 Co. 15:17).*

To believe in one's heart means to dedicate one's life to following Jesus—to become a learner whose life is shaped every day by the life and teachings of Jesus. It is to answer Jesus' call, "Follow me!" It is to accept the unpopularity of faith and to reject the self-centeredness that characterizes all humans.

*If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it (Mk. 8:34-35).*

### **CONFESSING WITH YOUR MOUTH**

The central affirmation of faith for Christians is the confession, "Jesus is Lord!" Paul says:

*For us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live (1 Co. 8:6).*

This confession, which is orally expressed in the words "Jesus is Lord" and is visibly affirmed in the ritual of water baptism (Ac. 2:36-38), can only be truly made by God's help.

*No one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit (1 Co. 12:3).*

This oral expression is the affirmation to one's friends and to the Christian community that one has become a Christian. Paul reminded Timothy, a young Greek whom he led to Christ, of this public statement when he wrote to him:

*Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses (1 Ti. 6:12).*

Coming to faith in Jesus is only the beginning of the Christian life. Becoming a Christian is not so much like taking up residence in a new house as it is like beginning a journey down a new road. That is why the earliest Christians were called "followers of The Way" (Ac. 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). It is indeed a "way"—it is, in the words of Paul, a lifelong commitment to "take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me"—to forget what is behind, and to press forward to what is ahead, the reward of eternal life with Jesus Christ, our Lord (Phil. 3:12-14).

In the meantime, the Christian life is a life of devotion to the teachings of the Bible, to fellowship with other Christians, to prayer, and to living a new life shaped by the Holy Spirit and the risen Christ (Ac. 2:42-47).



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