

# **We Believe: Foundations of the Christian Faith**

**Session 9: The Wesleyan Understanding of Grace and Salvation**

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# **The Confession of Faith**

## **Article VIII - Reconciliation Through Christ**

We believe God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. The offering Christ freely made on the cross is the perfect and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, redeeming man from all sin, so that no other satisfaction is required.

# The Confession of Faith

## Article IX - Justification and Regeneration

We believe we are never accounted righteous before God through our works or merit, but that penitent sinners are justified or accounted righteous before God only by faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

We believe regeneration is the renewal of man in righteousness through Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, whereby we are made partakers of the divine nature and experience newness of life. By this new birth the believer becomes reconciled to God and is enabled to serve him with the will and the affections.

We believe, although we have experienced regeneration, it is possible to depart from grace and fall into sin; and we may even then, by the grace of God, be renewed in righteousness.

# **The Confession of Faith**

## **Article X - Good Works**

We believe good works are the necessary fruits of faith and follow regeneration but they do not have the virtue to remove our sins or to avert divine judgment. We believe good works, pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, spring from a true and living faith, for through and by them faith is made evident.

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## **Article XI - Sanctification and Christian Perfection**

We believe sanctification is the work of God's grace through the Word and the Spirit, by which those who have been born again are cleansed from sin in their thoughts, words and acts, and are enabled to live in accordance with God's will, and to strive for holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

Entire sanctification is a state of perfect love, righteousness and true holiness which every regenerate believer may obtain by being delivered from the power of sin, by loving God with all the heart, soul, mind and strength, and by loving one's neighbor as one's self. Through faith in Jesus Christ this gracious gift may be received in this life both gradually and instantaneously, and should be sought earnestly by every child of God.

# The Confession of Faith

## Article XI

We believe this experience does not deliver us from the infirmities, ignorance, and mistakes common to man, nor from the possibilities of further sin. The Christian must continue on guard against spiritual pride and seek to gain victory over every temptation to sin. He must respond wholly to the will of God so that sin will lose its power over him; and the world, the flesh, and the devil are put under his feet. Thus he rules over these enemies with watchfulness through the power of the Holy Spirit.

# Three Main Questions

**Text: Ephesians 2:8-10**

- What is salvation?
- What is that faith by which we are saved?
- How we are saved by it.
- “The end is, in one word, salvation: the means to attain it, faith.”

# Alternate views of salvation

## A careful definition of terms

- Christians often use words assuming that they are in agreement about what they mean.
- “Salvation” is one of those words, along with “gospel,” “disciple,” and “faith.” Wesley is careful to define what he means, and so must we be.
- For many, salvation is about a guarantee of an eternal place in heaven at death—which is what we might call a “partial gospel”

# Wesley's Definition of Salvation

## An important distinction

“The salvation which is here spoken of is not what is frequently understood by that word, the going to heaven, eternal happiness. It is not the soul's going to paradise, termed by our Lord ‘Abraham's bosom.’ It is not a blessing which lies on the other side of death or (as we usually speak) in the other world. The very words of the text itself put this beyond all question: ‘Ye *are* saved.’ It is not something at a distance; it is a present thing, a blessing which, through the free mercy of God, ye are now in possession of.”

# Salvation begins with Prevenient Grace

## “Preventing Grace”

- The “drawings of the Father,” illuminating the way to salvation
- Prevenient grace points beyond itself to justification, regeneration, and assurance
- The first move of grace, the first move of salvation, is always God’s, calling for a human response

# Two General Parts of Redemption

## Justification and Sanctification

- Justification - pardon, forgiveness of sins, our acceptance with God procured for us through the blood and righteousness of Christ. Justification leads to:
  - Peace with God
  - Rejoicing in hope of the glory of God
  - Joy unspeakable

# Two General Parts of Redemption

## Justification and Sanctification

- Sanctification - being born again, leading to a *real* and a *relative* change
- Inward renewal by the power of God, feeling “the love of God shed abroad in our heart by the Holy Ghost given unto us.”
- Produces love for all mankind, especially the children of God
- Expels love of the world, changes the mind to the mind that was in Christ

# Sin and Salvation

## The need for sanctification

- Sin is often only “suspended” in those who come to salvation
- The tug of war between the assurance of salvation and the temptation of sin
- Sin *stirs* in the heart but it does not *conquer*
- The gradual work of sanctification enables the believer to become more and more “dead to sin and alive to God,” moving toward “perfection”

# Christian Perfection

## The “grand depositum” of Methodism

“But what is perfection? The word has various senses: here it means perfect love. It is love excluding sin; love filling the heart, taking up the whole capacity of the soul. It is love ‘rejoicing evermore, praying without ceasing, in everything giving thanks.’”

- See Wesley’s *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* for a full treatise (we’ll also explore this more in “Circumcision of the Heart”)

# What is that faith through which we are saved?

## The second question

- A number of dimensions of faith:
  - General - a divine evidence and conviction, the means by which we discern truth - belief in the evidence of God's revelation, particularly in Christ
  - Supernatural sight - the eyes of the soul opened and enlightened, seeing the spiritual and eternal world, "the glory which shall be revealed"

# Faith is also personal

## Evidence and conviction of Christ in me

- Spangenberg to Wesley: Do you *know* Christ? Do *you* know Christ?
- Aldersgate: Christ loved *me* and gave himself for *me*
- Receiving Christ in all his offices: Prophet, Priest, King
- Faith is assurance, confidence, trust, reliance, adherence
- “For a man cannot have a childlike confidence in God till he knows he is a child of God.”

# Third Question: How are we justified by faith?

## Building on the Reformation

- Faith is the only condition of justification
- But what about repentance?
- Repentance and “fruits suitable for repentance” (works of piety and mercy) are necessary, but not in the same degree as faith
- Fruits are only necessary *conditionally* “if there be time and opportunity for them.” (Example of thief on the cross)

# **But we are also sanctified by faith**

**“Everyone that believes is sanctified, whatever else he has or has not.”**

- Like justification, sanctification is a gift - but it is a gift that must be opened in order to be realized
- “It is incumbent on all that are justified to be zealous of good works. And these are so necessary that if a man willingly neglect them, he cannot reasonably expect that he will ever be sanctified.”
- “Repentance, rightly understood, and the practice of all good works, works of piety as well as works of mercy (now so properly called because they spring from faith) are in some sense necessary to sanctification.”

# **Repentance “rightly understood”**

**Different than the repentance that precedes justification**

- A conviction of our proneness to evil, of a heart bent on back-sliding
- It is a conviction of the tendency of our heart to self-will, to atheism, or idolatry; especially to unbelief
- Those who are repentant in this sense will watch continually for these things and guard against them

# Works of Piety and Mercy

## Necessary to Sanctification

- Works of Piety
  - Private, public & family prayer
  - The Lord's Supper
  - Searching the Scriptures
  - Fasting
- Works of Mercy
  - Relating to the bodies and souls of men
  - Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked
  - Entertaining strangers, visiting the sick and imprisoned
  - Awakening sinners
  - Saving souls from death

Public



Works of Piety

Works of Mercy

Private

# Faith and Sanctification

Divine evidence and conviction of:

- God's promises in Scripture
- That what God has promised he is able to perform
- That God is able and willing to do it *now*
- That God is willing and able to sanctify us *now*

# Sanctification: Gradual or Instantaneous?

Your mileage may vary!

- Wesley: It is gradual in some, but desirable that it should be instantaneous.
- Would we not want God to destroy sin in us in a moment?
- That's why we should constantly be looking for it and expect it now if we believe it is by faith.
- “Expect it as you are and expect it now!”
- You can be no worse for that expectation!

# Christian Perfection

## The aim of sanctification

- “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” - Matthew 5:48
- *Teleios* - holy, complete, mature, perfect
- “That love of God and neighbor, which implies deliverance from all sin.” - *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*
- Perfection of love and intention, not absolutely perfect performance
- “Holiness of heart and life”

# Some Additional Observations

## Salvation is *now*

- Salvation, in the Wesleyan view, is not merely future, but a saving from sins in the present and a reshaping of our lives after the image of Christ
- It is a highly expectant theology—it recognizes what God can do in us to change us and expects God to do it!
- We cooperate with God when we align ourselves with the habits and practices that lead to real change (the means of grace, works of piety and mercy)
- Faith is the catalyst for all of it and the necessary condition.

**Questions?**