



Lesson 2

Embarking on the Journey Our Response to the Gospel

The gospel tells us that God has acted through the person and work of Christ to save us from our sins and remove the barrier that exists between God and ourselves. The gospel is therefore objective; it is a matter of history. It is what Christ did for us; no matter how we feel, the ground of our salvation never changes. We are therefore not to look inward for the reason why God saves us, but upward and outward—to the Savior who died for us.

However, salvation is not somehow “automatic.” The gospel comes to us as news, and it is news to which we must respond. After Christ died, rose from the dead, and ascended to heaven, He sent the Holy Spirit to a group of believers in Jerusalem, thus giving birth to the church. On that day, in response to the preaching of the gospel by Peter, the hearers were pierced to the heart and asked the perceptive question, “What shall we do?” All who come to Christ must face this same question. And our answer to that question will determine whether we truly embark upon the journey of faith in Christ.

I. Our Response to the Gospel

The appropriate response to the gospel has two components, which are often summarized under the term “conversion.”

“Conversion is our willing response to the gospel call, in which we sincerely repent of sins and place our trust in Christ for salvation.” —Wayne Grudem

Although repentance and faith are spoken of separately, they always work together in conversion. There is no true repentance without faith, and no genuine faith without repentance.

A. Repentance

The biblical words for repentance have at their core the idea of turning around or changing direction. To sin is to rebel against God and His rule over our life. To repent is to turn back to God and to embrace Him and His rule and authority over our life.

1. Repentance is a command of God. All people are commanded to repent and believe the gospel.

Acts 17:30: “...now he commands all people everywhere to repent...”

This repentance has three primary aspects:

- a. **Mind:** an awareness of the holiness and majesty of God, of our sin and guilt, and of God's mercy and readiness to forgive
- b. **Emotions:** a heartfelt sorrow for sin and joy at the prospect of forgiveness
- c. **Will:** a willingness and steadfast purposing to turn away from all sin and to turn to God in obedience

"The New Testament word for repentance means changing one's mind so that one's views, values, goals, and ways are changed, and one's whole life is lived differently. The change is radical, both inwardly and outwardly...Repentance means starting to live a new life." —J.I. Packer

2. Repentance is a gift from God. It is the grace of God that enables us to repent.

2 Timothy 2:25: "correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth,"

B. Faith

Faith is the instrument through which the saving benefits of the cross come to us. Salvation is "by grace"—grace is its ground, but it is "through faith"—faith must be exercised before salvation is received (Eph. 2:8). It is both a gift of God and an act of our will. God gives us faith, but we are responsible for exercising it.

1. What is faith?

The New Testament word for faith, when used in the context of salvation, means a true commitment of oneself to God, an unwavering trust in His promises, and a persistent loyalty and obedience.

Saving faith has three elements:

- a. **Knowledge:** We must have certain information—the gospel—revealed to us.

Romans 10:14, 17: "But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ."

- b. **Assent:** We must believe that what is revealed is true.

Hebrews 4:2: "For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened."

- c. **Trust:** We must place trust in what is revealed, being willing to stake our life on it. This will find expression in our obedience and commitment.

James 2:17, 22: "So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works."

2. We are saved by faith alone, but true saving faith will be validated by a lifestyle that testifies to the reality of faith. True saving faith will always lead to obedience.
3. Faith is a gift from God, not a work that earns us favor with God.

Acts 16:14: "The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul."

C. Water Baptism

1. We respond to the gospel with repentance and faith in the finished work of Christ. Having been converted, believers are also to respond by obeying the command to be baptized.
2. Baptism is an obedient response of someone saved by grace. In baptism, we identify with the Lord who has saved us. Baptism cannot contribute to or bring about salvation. Baptism doesn't save us—Jesus saves us through faith.

Acts 8:12: "...when they believed...they were baptized, both men and women."

3. Baptism is an outward sign of an inward work which has already taken place. Therefore, only those who have believed the gospel and repented from their sins should be baptized. For this reason, we do not baptize infants.
4. Water baptism is a sign and symbol of the believer's union with the Lord in His death, burial, and resurrection.

Romans 6:4: "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."

We practice baptism by immersion, which vividly illustrates the believer's identification with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection.

5. Baptism is a landmark moment in a believer's life, publicly marking one's identification with Christ and entrance into His body, the church. It is therefore our wonderful privilege as a church to celebrate these times together. We set aside specific times for the baptism of new believers (or those who haven't yet been baptized), enabling us to rejoice together and to welcome new believers into the life of the church.

II. What Makes Our Response Possible?

In the previous lesson, we spoke about the pervasive, corrupting effects of sin. Sin is not only what we do, but who we are: apart from God, we are sinners by nature. So if we're truly "dead" in our sins (Eph. 2:1) and powerless to change, how is it that we are able to respond to the gospel at all? It is here that the gracious nature of salvation becomes even more amazing: God acts, so that we can act.

A. Chosen in eternity past

God's actions began in eternity past when He chose us and determined that He would save us. This is often referred to as "election."

Eph. 1:4-6: "even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved."

B. Effectively called

God's choosing of us eventually results in His calling us and drawing us to Himself.

1. God's drawing us to Himself is often called "effective calling". This occurs when God invites and draws sinners to Himself by His Spirit through the proclamation of the gospel.
2. While God is the one who draws, this does not mean that a person is somehow saved apart from their own willing response to the gospel. Through the grace of God, the "divine summons" of God brings about the response it requires.

Romans 8:30: "And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified."

John 6:44: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him."

C. Regenerated ("born again") by the Spirit

When God calls us, He then changes our heart so that we can freely respond. This change is called "regeneration."

In regeneration, God acts to change our inner nature and impart spiritual life to us. As a result, we become spiritually alive and are then able to believe the gospel and repent of our sin.

Colossians 2:13: "And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him..."

D. The supernatural nature of conversion

Given what Scripture teaches about sin, it is not surprising that God must do a supernatural work in our hearts before we can be truly converted. Such an understanding of our conversion is important for our spiritual health.

"Scripture is clear in teaching that we are not all journeying toward God—some having found Him, others still seeking. Instead, Scripture presents us as needing to have our hearts replaced, our minds transformed, our spirits given life. We can do none of this for ourselves. The change each human needs, regardless of how we may outwardly appear, is so radical, so near our roots, that only God can bring it about. We need God to convert us." —Mark Dever

"I believe in the doctrine of election, because I am quite certain that, if God had not chosen me, I should never have chosen Him; and I am sure He chose me before I was born, or else He never would have chosen me afterwards; and He must have elected me for reasons unknown to me, for I never could find any reason in myself why He should have looked upon me with special love." —Charles Spurgeon

E. We must act, but God gets the glory

Recognizing God's grace does not eliminate our responsibility to repent and believe. All people everywhere are commanded to do this (Acts 17:30). However, when we reflect back on our salvation and recognize that it was God's prior actions that drew us to Him, we are humbled and exult all the more over God's amazing, undeserved, and glorious grace. We realize that, in the end, the difference between ourselves and someone who is unsaved is not our own superior goodness, intelligence, spiritual aptitude, or anything within ourselves at all. The only difference between us and them is the mercy and grace of God.

III. “Essentially Reformed”

These biblical teachings are often put under the heading of “Reformed theology”.

- A. The Reformed view of salvation places emphasis on the activity of God and the glory of God in saving sinners.
- B. At Sovereign Grace Church, we refer to ourselves as “essentially Reformed.” This means that we embrace the general, informing components of Reformed theology that we see as eminently biblical. Our loyalties are not to a man-made system of theology, but to the Scriptures. Our goal is to think biblically in order to know God truthfully, respond to Him appropriately, and glorify Him most fully.
- C. In calling ourselves “essentially Reformed,” we imply that we do not necessarily hold to all of the doctrines that some Reformed churches do (for example, our view of water baptism, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, etc., differ from many who would call themselves Reformed).
- D. We never want to focus on more narrow aspects of Reformed theology at the expense of biblical truths that are central, and that we share with many other Christians. The gospel itself is what unites all true believers, and it is the gospel that matters most.