The gift of faith

Text: Ephesians 2:8

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Romans 10:14-17; Genesis 17:9-11; Romans 4:1-12; Ephesians 2.1-9

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] ‘By Faith’, 34, 436, 27, 256

**Series:** Heidelberg Catechism (LD25)

**Theme:** Faith is a gift that comes from God the Holy Spirit through the preaching of God’s Word and is strengthened through the sacraments which are holy, visible signs and seals instituted by God

**Proposition:** Humbly thank the Lord for His gift of faith

**Introduction**

When people like you and me believe the promises of God, we exercise faith. ‘*faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*’ (Heb 11:1). The Heidelberg Catechism provides a more extensive, Scripturally based, and very helpful definition of faith in Lord’s Day 7: “*True faith is not only a knowledge and conviction that everything God reveals in his Word is true; it is also a deep-rooted assurance,* ***created in me by the Holy Spirit*** *through the gospel that, out of sheer grace earned for us by Christ, not only others, but I too, have had my sins forgiven, have been made forever right with God, and have been granted salvation.”*

Here the catechism draws on our text from Ephesians 2:8 “*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing****; it is the gift of God***”. When you exercise faith, it is most certainly your faith, living in your heart (the centre of your being), that drives your love for, and trust in, the Lord God.

Some people think, and many evangelical churches teach, that the faith a person has is self-generated by themselves in their own heart. That is not an unreasonable idea. You and I cannot make another person believe something. We cannot gift, or infuse any belief into someone else – we can’t make another person believe if they do not want to. Belief comes from within ourselves so it is not difficult to see why some people think that we produce our own faith in God’s promises, just as we produce our own beliefs about other aspects of life, like: the suitability of a political party, what makes a good book or movie, or whether a toothpaste tube should be squeezed or rolled.

The truth is that the origin of saving faith is not like other beliefs that we have. Faith is ‘*not of our own doing; it is the gift of God*’, as the Apostle Paul explains to the Ephesians under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Saving faith is granted to some, but not all, people by God, but how is it delivered into the human heart? This is the question answered in Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 25. Based on Scripture, the Catechism identifies the Word of God and the sacraments as two means of God’s grace in connection with the gift of faith. These two instruments are used by the Holy Spirit to work faith in the human heart. They operate in complementary, but different ways. Faith is worked in the heart through the Word and

Faith is strengthened in the heart through the sacraments. Let’s look at each of these in turn.

1. **Faith is worked in the heart through the Word**

We know that human words can be very powerful. Military leaders and politicians have greatly influenced nations down through history, sometimes for good, sometimes for evil; through powerful, eloquent, persuasive speeches.

Speech can convince people to be brutal and oppressive, provoking them to hate and fear. For example, listen to these words: “*At the time of my struggle for power it was in the first instance the Jewish people who only greeted with laughter my prophecies that I would someday take over the leadership of the state and of the entire people of Germany and then, among other things, also bring the Jewish problem to its solution.”* Who said that, where and when? Adolf Hitler addressing the Reichstag (German parliament) on 30th January 1939.

Speech can inspire people to be kind and generous. For example, listen to these words: *“even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal”.* Who said that, where and when? Martin Luther King Jr at the Lincoln Memorial, August 28th, 1963.

Human words can powerfully affect others at a national level, but also individually. Our words to one another can build up or tear down. The Proverbs wisely remind us of this abiding truth: “*A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger*” (Prov 15:1).

Human words can be very powerful, but the Word of God is more potent than any word of mankind. It was God’s Word that created this universe (Heb 11:3). It is God’s Word that sustains this world, including you and me (Heb 1:3). It is God’s Word that has the power to impact us more than any mere human speech can do. The writer to the Hebrews puts it this way: “*For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart*” (Heb 4:12).

The Word of God is the **means** that the Holy Spirit uses to work faith in people. The instrument He usually uses is the preaching of the gospel, as Paul explains to the Romans, quoting Isaiah 52:7. “*How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!*” (Romans 10:15). And then writing “*So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ*” (Romans 10:17). Whilst we hear the Word of God from preachers and teachers, it is the Holy Spirit that enables the human heart to receive the Word by faith (1 Cor 12:3). The Christian ministry of different people is used by the Lord to bring a person to saving faith (e.g. 1 Cor 3:6), but ultimately it is the Holy Spirit that produces that faith, not the gospel workers who serve the Lord.

This is what the Apostle Paul explains to the Corinthian church, writing **“***I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but* ***only God who gives the growth***” (1 Cor 3:6-7). Here Paul uses an agricultural analogy. Whilst farmers on a large scale, and home gardeners on a smaller scale, plant seeds, they do not actually cause the seed to germinate. God has so designed seeds that they respond and germinate only when water is applied. So, somewhat similarly, the Word of God, through the supernatural operation of the Holy Spirit, causes faith to grow in human hearts. However, just as not all seeds germinate, but some remain lifeless, so not everyone who hears the Word of God responds in faith.

It is possible to understand many of the intricacies of the biochemical processes that take place in a germinating seed, but the details of operation of the Holy Spirit in transforming a spiritually dead heart into a living one are entirely a mystery. Jesus revealed it this way to Nicodemus: “*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God*” (John 3:5).

To continue the seed analogy, water is not only necessary for germination by also for ongoing growth of the plant. Faith grows in substance and strength through the ongoing ministry of the Word, especially through preaching, but also through teaching, personal reading, study and meditation on the Scriptures. Faith is also strengthened in the heart through the sacraments, which brings us to our second point:

1. **Faith is strengthened in the heart through the sacraments**

We do not find the word ‘sacrament’ in the Scriptures. It comes from the Latin word “sacramentum” meaning “sacred thing”; a translation of the Greek word ‘mysterion’. The Heidelberg Catechism defines sacraments as ‘holy, visible signs and seals…. instituted by God’. The sacraments are holy – they are set apart by God for a special purpose. Their purpose is to strengthen and nourish faith by providing physical representations of spiritual truths. The sacraments are visible – we can see them with our eyes.

The sacraments are signs – they point to spiritual realities that are not visible. God said to Abraham (and through him to his descendants): “*You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a* ***sign*** *of the covenant between me and you*” (Gen 17:11). Physical circumcision was not the covenant itself, but **pointed to** the spiritual reality that true circumcision is a spiritual condition of the heart when it is changed by the Holy Spirit (Rom 2:29).

The sacraments are seals – they assure us that the promises which God makes in His Word about our salvation are true. The Apostle Paul explains to the Romans the confirmation of God’s promise to Abraham through his physical circumcision. This is what he wrote: “*He {Abraham} received the* ***sign*** *of circumcision as a* ***seal*** *of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well*” (Rom 4:11). The Greek word translated ‘seal’ was used for engraving objects with a mark to denote ownership. It was also used when heated wax was attached to a document or letter and then marked with a seal. The seal both made the document secure, served as a guarantee of the correctness of the contents, and also indicate authenticity and ownership.

The sign and seal of circumcision did not make Abraham righteous. It was his faith in the promises of God that were credited to him as righteousness (Gen 15:6). Circumcision confirmed the reality that by grace, God would provide the necessary righteousness to be justified. Abraham died without seeing how God would credit the perfect righteousness of Christ Jesus to him. He ‘*died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar*’ (Heb 11:13).

Going back again to the agricultural/gardening analogy of plant growth – the sacraments can be understood to be a little like fertiliser. They do not cause a seed to germinate, nor can they produce growth by themselves, but together with water, they help to nourish the development of the plant. So it is with the sacraments, together with the Word of God they strengthen faith and help faith to grow strong and secure.

This is not the official understanding and teaching of the Roman Catholic church. A Latin phrase “ex opere operato” (which literally means “from the work done”) underpins the Roman Catholic teaching that the sacraments automatically infuse grace into those who receive them. This is why attendance at Mass, even apart from any faith, is seen as beneficial by many Roman Catholic church members.

In 1545-1563 the Council of Trent met in response to the Protestant Reformation. This ecclesiastical meeting was held in city of Trento in northern Italy. There was a great emphasis on the sacraments at this Council. The seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church were reaffirmed: baptism, confirmation, mass, penance, marriage, holy orders, and last rights. The Mass, or Holy Communion, was confirmed as a true propitiatory sacrifice. This is what the Council wrote: “*If anyone say that grace is not conferred by the sacraments* ***ex opere operato****, but that faith in God’s promises is alone sufficient for obtaining grace, let him be anathema*”. An anathema is “*a person or thing accursed or consigned to damnation or destruction*”.

This background to the Roman Catholic defence of an unscriptural view of the sacraments led to significant emphasis on this topic in the Heidelberg Catechism (Lord’s Days 25-30) when this document was written by Zacharius Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus between 1559 and 1576. The Roman Catholic church was in serious error. The sacraments had effectively become idols: automatic dispensers of grace apart from faith that had been first worked in the heart through the supernatural operation of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God.

Christ instituted two sacraments: baptism and Lord’s Supper, which are foreshadowed by two holy, visible signs and seals in the Old Testament, circumcision and Passover.

Praise the Lord for His gracious gift of faith created in the hearts of people like you and me through the Holy Spirit as He supernaturally applies the Word of God to our innermost being.

Praise the Lord for His gracious strengthening of faith through the physical experience and witness of baptism and Lord’s Supper. “*For (brothers and sisters) by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God*”.

AMEN.