

**1 Timothy No. 3****1 Timothy 1:12-20****February 10, 2013****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

In verse 11 of chapter 1 Paul had referred to the gospel of God with which he had been entrusted. He now embarks on an explanation of the gospel and his calling to be a servant of that gospel. The situation in Ephesus is still front and center in Paul's mind. This isn't simply an aside; this is instruction for Timothy directly related to the challenge he is facing in the Ephesian church.

**Text Comment**

- v.12 In these verses the pronoun "I" occurs some eight times. In his letters Paul often uses his own experience to illustrate gospel truths and that is what he does here.

But what does he mean by saying that the Lord "considered [Paul] faithful"? He can hardly mean that God chose Paul, out of all the people he might have chosen for salvation and for service, because Paul was such a faithful man, because he is going to say in the very next phrase that he was a deeply sinful man when the Lord summoned him.

Augustine understood Paul's remark this way: "God does not choose anyone who is worthy, but in choosing him renders him worthy." [Cited from *Con. Julian*, V, 3 in Spicq, *Les Épitres Pastorales*, 40] The Lord knew what sort of man he would make of Saul of Tarsus!

- v.13 In the book of Acts we have the record of Paul's persecution of Christians and his collaboration in the murder of Stephen if not some others. (We don't actually know if Paul was guilty of the murder of other believers.) Paul admits the fact of his crimes as he does elsewhere, but, perhaps even more impressively, he adds a personal evaluation of himself with the epithets "blasphemer" and "insolent." Blasphemer is something no Jew would ever want to describe himself to be. In speaking against "the way," that early name for the Christian movement, he was in fact speaking against God and what God was doing in the world: that's blasphemy. And as to the attitude with which he did such things he looks back upon himself and sees only a cruel know-it all; an insufferable jerk. That is how revolutionary God's grace is: that it can make a once proud and cruel man recoil from what he was. Do you know this verse of F.W.H. Meyers concerning the apostle Paul?

Saint, did I say? With your remembered faces,  
 Dear men and women whom I sought and slew?  
 Ah, when we mingle in the heavenly places

How will I weep to Stephen and to you.

[F.W.H. Myers in *Autobiography of Wm. Barclay*, 70-71]

When Paul says that he acted “in ignorance” he is not excusing himself. But he is admitting that his rebellion against the Lord Jesus Christ was not in defiance of what at the time he knew to be true. Peter said a similar thing to the Jews in Jerusalem in Acts 3:17, “you acted in ignorance” in rejecting Jesus and braying for his crucifixion. Paul said a similar thing to the Athenians, if you remember, in Acts 17:30. Speaking of the past generations of Greek civilization he says, “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.” He is not saying that their past unbelief and disobedience didn’t matter or wouldn’t be punished; but he is saying that because they acted in ignorance they are susceptible to salvation. The same thing might not be said of those who rejected the Lord after coming to the knowledge of the truth, such as Hymenaeus and Alexander who will be mentioned at the end of the chapter as having made shipwreck of their faith. They did *not* act in ignorance.

Remember the context: Paul is invoking his own experience to remind Timothy and the Ephesians what salvation *is* and how it *comes* to a person. Salvation is the result of God’s grace, not some exertions of the law or some spiritual program like that the false teachers were recommending.

- v.15 Paul now summarizes his own experience with a general observation that was likely commonplace in the church. There are five such “faithful sayings” in the Pastoral Epistles and, interestingly, the formula occurs nowhere else in the NT or in Jewish literature. But in each of the five cases, the “saying” sounds like a saying, a well-known form of words likely familiar to Christians. [Knight, 99] Something short, pithy, and memorable.

Paul then personalizes the saying adding: “of whom I am the foremost.” Perhaps we shouldn’t make too much of Paul’s claim to be the worst of sinners. It is the way a man, under conviction of his great sins -- and Paul was a murderer and a persecutor of Christ and his church -- is accustomed to think and to speak. Could there be any worse sinner than I? But I love this explanation provided by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his spiritual classic *Life Together* [96-97]:

“There can be no genuine acknowledgment of sin that does not lead to this extremity. If my sinfulness appears to me to be in any way smaller or less detestable in comparison with the sins of others, I am still not recognizing my sinfulness at all. My sin is of necessity the worst, the most grievous, the most reprehensible. Brotherly love will find any number of extenuations for the sins of

others; only for my sin is there no apology whatsoever. Therefore my sin is the worst...”

I don't know if that was what Paul was thinking, but it's what he should have been thinking (!), because Bonhoeffer has gone to the bottom of that thought. In any case, it is a good thing, a proper thing, a true thing for a man to acknowledge the true wickedness of his heart and life. We don't have to act like we are worse than we are, because the Bible is sure that if we judge ourselves honestly and accurately, we are going to be a lot worse than we think. We *are* worse, much worse, if only we could see it and admit it. The more honest a man or woman becomes in facing facts about himself or herself, the wiser and greater he or she becomes.

One thing I always write down in the margin of my Bible is the role a particular verse played in the life of some noteworthy Christian. Thomas Bilney was one of the earliest of English reformers, and earliest to be martyred for his faith in 1531, during the reign of King Henry VIII and before Henry became somewhat unwittingly more friendly to the Reformation.

“I chanced upon this sentence of St. Paul (O most sweet and comfortable sentence to my soul!) in 1 Timothy 1; ‘It is a true saying, and worthy of all men to be embraced, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am the chief and principal...’ This one sentence, through God’s instruction and inward working, which I did not then perceive, did so exhilarate my heart, being before wounded with the guilt of my sins, and being almost in despair, that...immediately I...felt a marvelous comfort and quietness, insomuch that ‘my bruised bones leaped for joy. After this, the scriptures began to be more pleasant to me than the honey or honeycomb.’”

- v.16 So Paul’s salvation serves as a supreme example of salvation by grace. If he could save a man like Paul, an active, intransigent enemy of the Gospel of Christ, and make Paul into the gospel’s foremost champion, then there is hope for anyone and everyone in the world who wishes to be saved.
- v.17 It is not uncommon for Paul, after he has reflected on the grace, mercy, and love of God, or some other divine attribute, to offer, as it were spontaneously, a doxology, an outburst of praise to God. Think of the end of Romans 11, for example, where, after a long discourse on God’s plan of salvation, Paul breaks off: “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” [Rom. 11:33] As in Romans 11, an “Amen” concludes the doxology, adding emphasis and formality.

For those of you who would be interested in such things, it was this verse, 1 Tim. 1:17 that made Jonathan Edwards a Calvinist!

So follow Paul's argument. The false teachers were claiming that their new insights into the meaning of the law, the secrets they were teasing out of it, their rules for living, were the key to salvation. Paul has already argued that these men have seriously misunderstood the nature and purpose of the law of God. Now he reminds Timothy to remind the Ephesians that salvation is by grace and by Christ, not by human achievement of any kind and certainly not by the program these new teachers were recommending. Paul's point can be put simply: I came to Christ not *although* I am a sinner, but *because* I am a sinner, and being a sinner only God could save me, and it was God who did save me by his grace through faith in Jesus Christ!

- v.18 We pointed out before that it seems that the Lord had by prophecy designated Timothy to be Paul's apostolic assistant.
- v.20 Paul's point is that neither of these two men were tricked into denying the faith and substituting another gospel for the gospel of Christ. They did all that with their eyes open! These are the men Paul mentioned generally in 1:6. We hear of Hymenaeus again in 2 Tim. 2:17 as one who claimed that the resurrection had already occurred.

By refusing to concede that these two men had done what they did in good conscience Paul as much as says that false teaching is usually caused by moral rather than intellectual considerations. Sinful desires and pride, more than we know, lie at the bottom of intellectual movements in the church and in society.

Now I want to treat this text as an assertion of gospel exclusivity, by which I mean that there is but one name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved. There is only one way of salvation: faith in Jesus Christ and his saving work. Actually, though the context provides a variety of applications, this is the bottom thought of Paul's argument in this paragraph. He will make it more explicit in the next paragraph when he says outright in 2:5

“There is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus.”

As Paul will say there and as he has already said here, it is *that message* that he had been appointed to proclaim to the world. In the larger context of Paul's thought this message is what he teaches everywhere and by every means. It is not only that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, but that he and he alone can save sinners, and that his salvation is available only to those who believe in him. *That is what makes the errors of the false teachers so perilous: they*

*were leading people away from the one way to salvation.* The divine grace that saved Paul out of his life of hatred and blasphemy did so by making him a believer in and a lover of Jesus Christ. And so it does and must for all people. It is this point that I want to ring the changes on tonight, so that I can give full attention next time to the important statement in the first verses of chapter 2 that God desires all people to be saved and that Christ gave himself a ransom for all.

You are, of course, well aware that herein lies one of the principal scandals of our faith. People would not mind were we to say that Jesus Christ is *one* way to God and to heaven. They wouldn't even take much offense if we were to insist that as Christians we believe that Jesus Christ and faith in him is *the best* way to God and heaven. What our age is quite unwilling to accept, however, is that Jesus is the *only* way to God and heaven.

Now, to be sure, there are some Christians who have argued that Jesus Christ is the only way to heaven, but that he saves many who are not Christians in the sense of being believers in Jesus. He is the savior of sinners, without him there can be no salvation, but it isn't necessary in every case that someone must actively and consciously trust in the Lord Jesus and his death on the cross in order to be saved.

That view has been held in a great many different forms through the ages. In early Christianity there were those who thought that Plato might have been a Christian *in such a sense*. He knew nothing of Jesus Christ, of course, living centuries before, and knew nothing, so far as we know, of the promise of a Jewish messiah. But he had some sincere belief in God and, so it was thought, perhaps that was all that God would require to grant him the benefit of Christ's saving work.

Nowadays you will hear people say that if a person lives according to the light that he has, or if he is a true seeker after God, or if she is the sort of person who *would have* believed in Jesus if she had only known about him, God will consider such a person a Christian and Christ will be his or her savior though he or she knew nothing about him. Karl Rahner, the influential 20<sup>th</sup> century Roman Catholic theologian, spoke famously of "anonymous Christians." Anonymous Christians, in Rahner's thought, were people who have never heard the Christian Gospel but nevertheless were saved through Christ. Non-Christians could have, he argued, "in [their] basic orientation and fundamental decision, accepted the salvific grace of God, through Christ, although [they] may never have heard of the Christian revelation." Actually some standard Reformed theologians have, through the centuries, held at least to this possibility.

But this does not seem to be Paul's position, nor that of any biblical writer, which is why when these views are taught they are virtually always taught as inferences and never as the explicit teaching of the Bible. The argument that no one can be saved apart from faith in Jesus Christ, the argument against the contrary idea in all of its variations, is found right here in the paragraph we read this evening. It comes in three parts. The first two are almost universally accepted in evangelical theology. The last one less so.

1. First, salvation is and must be by faith in Christ alone because it absolutely requires deliverance from sin.

This is how Paul describes his own salvation -- as deliverance from his sinful past -- and it is the burden of the trustworthy saying he repeats to Timothy: "Christ Jesus came into the world *to save sinners*." The human predicament is sin, sin as guilt or liability to punishment, and sin as a power corrupting and darkening human life. Salvation in the Bible and in Paul in particular is always deliverance from sin. Our problem is not our finitude or our creatureliness. The Bible never says that. Our problem is not the world in which we live, the confinement of our spirit in this material prison. The Bible never says that either. Our problem isn't our ignorance and need of education. The Bible never says that. Still less is it that others mistreat us or that we suffer from institutional and systemic injustice. The Bible never says that. Other religions and philosophies see our problem in such terms, but it is never described in those terms in the Word of God. Our problem is that we -- all of us -- are sinners, disobeying God, incurring the penalty of his law, and we are sinners comprehensively, constantly, and unrepentantly. *That* is what we need to be saved from.

Other problems may exacerbate our great problem, but sin is *the* problem and the one that must be solved if we are to be right with God, reconciled to him, and made fit for heaven. You are tempted to take this for granted, but the fact is *nobody else but biblically oriented Christians conceives of the human predicament in these terms*. If they think of sin -- by which we mean culpable moral failure -- as a human problem, they rarely or never think of it as *the* human problem and they never think of salvation as having to do with the removal of sin and its effects. The eastern religions don't; Islam doesn't; secular views of salvation virtually ignore human sin altogether; even heretical forms of Christianity don't think of salvation in terms of deliverance from the guilt and power of sin.

But that is always the way the Bible speaks of salvation. What Christ achieved for us on the cross was *propitiation*, the turning away of God's wrath on account of our sin; *redemption*, our deliverance from bondage to sin and its guilt; and *reconciliation*, restoration of harmony with God that had been broken by our rebellion and sin. As Isaiah said to his contemporaries: "Your sins have separated you from your God." [59:2] And this is what Paul assumes here. He thought he was a very religious man. He thought he was with God, but then he learned that his past was a far bigger problem than he had supposed. And his present wasn't any better. He was a great sinner. Here lies the problem with Dante's question put to the eagle in Canto 19 of the *Paradiso*.

A man

Is born on Indus' banks, and none is there  
 Who spoke of Christ, nor who doth read nor write;  
 And all his inclinations and his acts,  
 As far as human reason sees, are good;  
 And he offendeth not in word or deed:  
 But unbaptized he dies, and void of faith.  
 Where is the justice that condemns him?

The problem with that complaint is *there is no such man*. Men are sinners through and through. And so the poet is taught his lesson. The eagle replies.

None ever hath ascended to this realm,  
Who hath not a believer been in Christ,  
Either before or after the bless'd limbs  
Were nailed upon the wood.

Robert Traill, the Scottish Puritan, summarizes the biblical and the Christian position in this quaint way:

“The greatest quarrel that ever was in the world, or ever will be, is that betwixt God and sinners, taking up of which is the greatest difficulty; the quarrel is just on God’s side, for he is offended; the quarrel is unjust on man’s side, for the fault is his; the parties are mightily unequally matched, the Almighty God and a frail worm. But our Lord by death made up this quarrel, and there was no way of making it up but only this.” [*Works*, iii, 190]

That is, if sin is our problem, atonement is the only possible solution. And that is what Christ came to provide. He came to save sinners by dying in their place.

Salvation requires, in the nature of the case it absolutely requires, a solution to our sin problem. It is precisely this that Christ came to provide. No other religion or philosophy can offer a solution to this problem because there is no other solution, no solution that is, that respects both the enormity of our sinfulness and the perfect holiness and justice of the God who will judge our lives.

2. The second reason why there can be no other salvation except that by Christ and through faith in him is the nature of the good news itself: the extraordinary things that were done to save us from our sins.

Paul says here and apparently he was quoting a familiar saying, Christ Jesus *came* into the world to save sinners. Did you catch that? Christ was somewhere else first and *came* into the world. That isn’t the way we talk about our children; that our children came into the world. It is a way of speaking unique to the incarnation of God the Son. God became man, came into the world as a man, to secure our salvation. The most extraordinary thing that has ever happened in the world happened precisely because only by this means could men be rescued from themselves. What did the angel tell Joseph:

“You shall call his name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.” Or,

“When the fullness of time had come, God *sent forth* his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law...” [Gal. 4:4-5] Or,

“The son of man *came* not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” [Mark 10:45] Or,

“In this is love; not that we loved God but that he loved us *and sent his Son* to be the propitiation for our sins.” [1 John 4:10]

There was no one else who *could* deliver us but God himself, and he could not do it by any other means than becoming a man and laying down his life in our place for our sins. Of only Jesus Christ could it be said that

“for our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

But, surely, it is obvious that if God, the creator of heaven and earth, the maker of every human being and the Judge of all men, came into the world to suffer and die for sinners in order that they might be saved, there is not some other way, some easier way, some less complicated and demanding way by which sinners might be saved. If salvation took nothing less than the humiliation, suffering, and death of God the Son, then we may be sure that there is no other way to heaven for sinners than that way opened for us by Jesus Christ, who loved us and gave himself for us. This was Archbishop William Temple’s point when he said of the good news of Jesus Christ, “Either it is true for all, [he means either this is the way of salvation for every single human being] or it is not true at all.” [Cited in Stott, *The Incomparable Christ*, 125]

When we hear Paul praising God in v. 17, bursting into praise after thinking again about the salvation of sinners by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, it is more than faintly ridiculous to imagine that there are other ways to God than this, other routes to heaven than that marked by the bloody footprints of God’s own Son.

But, perhaps, it will always be the cross that saves, Jesus Christ who will be the savior, but not necessarily always through faith in him.

3. So, in the third place, faith in Christ is the only way of salvation because Christ’s saving work can be appropriated only through faith in him.

So here Paul talks about his former *unbelief* in v. 13, his *faith* in Christ in v. 14, those who *believe* in Jesus in v. 16, and, in vv. 19-20, how failing to hold fast to Christ makes shipwreck of a Christian’s *faith*. And so it is throughout the letters of Paul and throughout the Bible. The Ephesians to whom Timothy was presently ministering were all once *unsaved*, but then they heard the gospel, believed and were saved. They were, as Paul says in his letter to them, “far off,” but now they had been brought near. How? By “grace through faith,” as Paul famously says in Eph. 2:8-9. The provision made for salvation is never separated from but always held together with the faith that relies on that provision. In the Bible it is never the cross without a sinner’s hope and confidence in its power. It is never Christ apart from trusting and loving Christ. It is never the accomplishment of salvation without the proclamation of salvation.

This is the great significance of Pentecost and of the emphasis everywhere in the New Testament on our faith as a missionary faith. The reason our doctrine of salvation is called “good news” is precisely because news is something that we proclaim, shout from the housetops, something that



spreads from mouth to mouth. Otherwise, why all the terrible suffering, the sacrifice, the risking of life and limb, the martyrdom that has always accompanied Christian missions from Paul's day until now? People must hear the good news no matter the cost to us, they have to hear it because only by believing it can they be saved!

And so Paul's careful argument in Romans 10. Faith, he said, comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord -- "calling on the Lord" is a way of describing faith -- will be saved. But how will they call on whom they have not heard; how can they hear without preachers; and how will they preach unless they are sent? Notice the logical connection of each thought. There is nothing anywhere in that chain that allows for salvation apart from the hearing of God's Word and believing it. There is nothing anywhere in Paul or in the rest of the Bible that suggests that one might be saved *without* faith. Faith is an essential link in the chain of salvation.

Before Paul the Lord himself tied the world's salvation to the spread of the good news. This message, he said, must be proclaimed throughout the world; only then could the end come. He told his disciples that they must be his witnesses to the four corners of the earth. He said, "I have other sheep not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice." And in his great high-priestly prayer in John 17, he said to his heavenly Father, "I do not ask for these only, but also for those *who will believe in me* through their word." What we are being asked to believe by some is that there is another category of human beings that Jesus simply left out of his prayer, *those who are saved without believing in the Word*.

The fact is, apart from the infant children of believers who die in infancy, the Bible never suggests in any way, shape, or form that someone might be saved by Jesus Christ who does not believe in Jesus Christ. In fact, the Bible suggests that such covenant children *are* believers in disposition if not yet active understanding and behavior. That is how essential faith is to salvation: God put it in the heart of John the Baptist before he was even born. The great calling of the church to evangelize the world is predicated on the requirement that sinners believe in Jesus in order to be saved.

"For God so loved the world that he sent his only son that whoever *believes* in him shall not perish but have everlasting life."

History is full of accounts of the Lord making himself known in the most remarkable ways to people who otherwise would not have known him. If so, why is there any need to invent a category of people who are saved without the knowledge of Christ or his saving love? This is why Paul was appointed to serve the gospel in the Gentile world. The Gospel is what people must know to be saved and to go to heaven. It was this connection between faith, a faith proclaimed and nurtured by the church, and salvation that led the church father, Cyprian, to say, "You cannot have God for your father unless you have the church for your mother."

Now, why is this important to believe and to teach our children? Certainly one reason is that it keeps us and them from imagining -- as the sinful soul wishes to imagine -- that faith and the Christian life are not so big a deal after all. Why? Because many will be saved who never lived as Christians. You don't *have to* follow Christ to go to heaven. That is what everyone *wants to*

believe and if given the opportunity, what everyone *will* believe. That view has always had a fatal effect on the faith of Christians and their evangelistic and missionary zeal. If salvation doesn't necessarily depend upon my personal, active faith in Jesus Christ working through love, my heart will not bother to trust the Lord Jesus in that active and personal way. And if others can be saved without my effort, I will cease to do that very hard work of sharing my faith with others.

Show me today or show me in history a church that believed that folk could be saved without believing in Jesus that actually preserved Christian faith and life in herself, much less continued to be zealous to make Christ known to others. I do not know of one.

Another reason why this is so important to know and to believe is the one that Paul accents here. If one must know Christ in that living and personal way to be saved, then to know him is an astonishing gift and privilege. If we can't get to heaven apart from trusting Jesus to take us there, then how kind and how merciful God must have been to lead us to Christ and grant us living faith in him.

You sit here, you and I, calmly considering these things, when, in fact, a shudder ought to be going up and down our spine at the thought that sinful as we were and are, God's grace might *not* have overflowed to us. It hasn't to great multitudes, but it has to us. Extraordinary! Stop and think about that long and hard enough and you will find yourself breaking into praise:

“To the King of the Ages, immortal, invisible,  
The only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen”