

“An Infant’s Faith and Yours” Luke 1:39-45 April 27, 2025
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I don’t remember becoming a Christian. So far as I can recollect, I have always been a Christian. I grew up in a Christian home and grew up in Christ. So did my father; so did my grandfather; so have my children. And so have a great multitude of Christians that I know, or know about, and so have many of you. It is a wonderful thing when someone from an unbelieving family, from a non-Christian milieu is converted, becomes a Christian in the middle of life, as a teenager, or in his or her twenties, thirties, forties, or, even, in the case of one woman in the congregation I pastored, in her eighties. But *my* experience is more common than that of such converts. *Most Christians have become Christians as I did.* Indeed, I suspect that a great majority of Christians throughout the ages have become Christians as I did.

Now, we are rarely told that, and still less rarely is that fabulously interesting and important feature of Christian life and history explained to us. It is a fact everywhere you look in the Bible, but it rarely surfaces in Christian teaching. Indeed, notwithstanding both biblical teaching and the experience of so many Christians, there have been many through the ages who have supposed that no *one can* become a Christian in the way I did and many of you did. They will argue, they have argued, that if you don’t know *when* you became a Christian, you probably are *not* a Christian. They would insist that there must be *a conscious before and after* in your Christian experience. There must be a moment when you left your unbelief behind and chose or received or confessed Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. *That* is how one becomes a Christian.

But not only does the Bible never teach that; not only do you not find in the Bible the illustration of that in the case of children born into Christian homes, it is simply not the spiritual experience of vast multitudes of earnest followers of Jesus Christ. Indeed, from earliest times we encounter well-known Christians among the fathers of the church who said that they had been Christians *all their lives*. This is what makes so surprising the fact that this spiritual history is so little discussed, so little acknowledged in Christian theology and preaching. It is the way most Christians in the history of the church have become Christians. They grew up in Christ. They received Christ, as the church father Jerome said he had, with their mother’s milk.

But does not the Bible say that without faith it is impossible to please God? Do we not read that we are justified by faith, that is, we receive the forgiveness of our sins *by faith*. And does not the Bible teach us that faith comes by hearing and hearing from the Word of God? Certainly, no one thinks an infant believes because he has heard the gospel read to him, understands what he has heard, believes it, and acts upon it.

Well, consider John the Baptist. Still in his mother's womb he responded to the presence of the Savior, *who was still in his mother's womb*. His response, says his mother Elizabeth, speaking while filled with the Holy Spirit, was that of joy. Read the words: he leaped for joy in his mother's womb. Now can anyone rejoice in the presence of the Lord without faith? Isn't faith the master wheel that moves all the graces in a believing heart: love, peace, and joy? Can you rejoice in the presence of Jesus Christ without faith?

I was studying this text recently and was struck by how little commentators reflect on this remarkable moment. I think they are unnerved by it. It isn't what they think a baby in the womb could do. But, as a matter of fact, this is hardly the only place in the Bible in which statements are made that suggest that spiritual life, life in Christ, has begun either in the womb or very early in an infant's life. No one should think that what John the Baptist did, no other child has ever done. Indeed, we gather from this text that Elizabeth rejoiced in what her baby had done. But there is nothing in the text to suggest that she was flummoxed by it, that she had no idea that such a thing were possible, or that she regarded it as a virtual miracle.

Did not the Lord Jesus say of the little children whose parents brought them to him to bless, that the kingdom of God belonged to them (Luke 18:15-17). And those children were very young, young enough for Jesus to take them up into his arms. And Luke, in describing these children, uses the word that explicitly means baby or infant ($\beta\rho\epsilon\phi\omicron\varsigma$). And did not Paul remind Timothy that he had known the Scriptures from his *infancy*? The English translations of 2 Tim 3:15 regularly translate the word Paul used as "childhood." But it is the same word used of the children Jesus took into his arms. The standard dictionary of NT Greek defines the term as either "unborn child" or "baby" or "infant." So, when used in the phrase Paul used in 2 Tim. 3 :15 it means "all one's life." *All* one's life! Timothy had known the Scriptures from his *infancy*.

But this is not an unusual way of speaking in the Bible *and Elizabeth would have known that*. The faithful Obadiah, a member of evil king Ahab's court, told Elijah that he had *feared the Lord all his life*. David says, in Psalm 22, that God had been his God from his mother's womb, and that he had trusted in God from his mother's breasts. The author of Psalm 71 says the same thing. The Lord had been his trust all his life. He leaned upon the Lord from before his birth. "Trust" and "lean on the Lord" are synonyms for faith!

However we understand these statements, they all paint a similar picture. Infants, in the womb or very early in life, when they were still babies, were *already believers* in the Lord Jesus. All of these were, of course, the children of believers, and is this not what God has always promised his people. "I will be your God and the God of your children after you." And here are various people in the Bible saying that this was their own personal history: Christians from the beginning; the people of God before they knew how to explain what it meant to be God's son or daughter.

Now, how are we to explain this? How are we to relate the faith of an infant in his or her mother's womb, or from his birth, with the faith of an adult convert who was first an unbeliever and then, by the Spirit of Christ, was convinced that Jesus Christ really is the King of Kings and really is the Savior of sinners, so put his or her faith in Christ and began to follow him?

Well, little as you may have heard or read of this, the question has long been explored in Christian theology, though different answers to it have been given, as you might expect. Let me tell you what I think Holy Scripture teaches us to believe about an infant's faith. We cannot deny that there is such a thing, since the Bible says there is. Nor should we be tempted to deny it since such vast multitudes of faithful followers of Jesus Christ have said that such faith is what had been given to them so early in their lives that they have no recollection of ever living without it.

Our Reformed theologians, though there were Christian thinkers still earlier who thought similarly, spoke of infant faith *as a seed or a root*. That is, God planted faith in John the Baptist's heart while he was still in his mother's womb, but only the seed of faith. It was now there, and was at work, but it would have to grow over time into faith such as we know it

when we are older. The typical definition of faith ascribes three parts to it: *scientia* or knowledge (the truth about Christ and the gospel), *assensus* (agreement with that gospel), and *fiducia* (personal trust and commitment to Jesus as one's Lord and Savior). But no one denies that a tiny infant, either in the womb or recently born, lacks intellectual understanding and the willpower to act on that understanding. Those powers only gradually develop in a human mind and heart. *But if the seed of such faith is already there, it will very soon begin to develop and grow.* And this is what explains the spiritual history of so many Christians. They cannot remember a time when they did not know Jesus as their Savior. As their powers of thought, understanding, and will developed, faith was already there, God's salvation already something they possessed and believed in, ever more intelligently as they grew older. That was certainly my experience, and I expect many of you would say the same of your own personal history with Christ.

The Latin term used in Christian theology for what John had, what David had, what Timothy had, and what I had as an infant, is *habitus*. It means a disposition, a capacity, a condition. Thomas Goodwin, the Puritan, speaks of "an instinct" for Christ. In other words, God has created, early in the life of hosts of the children of his people, a disposition to believe in Jesus, a disposition or a capacity that others do not have. A disposition or a capacity that will, over time, inevitably develop into what we know as faith: knowledge, agreement, and trust or commitment. This, I think, is not only the best way to think about John the Baptist's experience in his mother's womb, and about the other statements found in the Bible that identify infants or babies as *believers*, it is really the only way. How else would you explain those statements? And how else would you explain the millions upon millions of earnest believers who have lived and died in the faith of Jesus Christ, but who have no recollection of ever stepping out of darkness into light? As far as they knew, as far as they could say, they had been Christians *all their lives*.

That has been the testimony of so many through the ages. When in the middle of the second century, the proconsul before whom Polycarp was arraigned insisted that he curse Christ and pay the customary vow of loyalty to Caesar as Lord, he received this reply: "Eighty-six years I have served him, and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" With "eighty-six years" Polycarp was telling the proconsul how old he was. It was a commonplace of patristic Christianity

to confess oneself a Christian from his or her birth. Jump forward many centuries to Donald Cargill, the seventeenth century Scottish Presbyterian martyr. Cargill told his accusers, "I have been a fearer of God from my infancy." In fact, I could give you a host of examples of this kind of confession of Christian faith. It was the spiritual history of most of the church fathers and of a majority of Christian believers ever since.

A few months ago, a member of the board of trustees of Covenant College took a moment to tell me that the ministry of *Young Life* had been instrumental in the salvation of his own family. He told *me* that because my Uncle Jim, my father's brother, was the founder of *Young Life*. But Uncle Jim came to faith in Jesus Christ the same way I did, the same way his brother, my father did, as a little child in a Christian home who could remember no *before and after* in his life. He remembered no time when he wasn't a Christian followed by the time when he became one. To be frank, I doubt my uncle ever reflected on this fact or thought much about how his experience of salvation was so different than many of his converts. Few have and few do.

But if you stop and ponder this reality of infant faith, even if only *the seed* of that faith, I think you will come to see that it is not, after all, something so difficult to understand. For anyone to have faith, as Jesus says famously in his remarks to Nicodemus in John 3, the Holy Spirit must do something within that person, must make of him or her something new. Paul says, in effect, we Christians are and must be *new creations*. If you are born again, if you are a new creation, over time that new life will express itself, it will begin to bear fruit, more and more fruit as time passes. And that is what happens when the seed of faith is implanted in an infant's heart. The great change has already taken place, and now, gradually, the fruit of that change will begin to appear. Since it is the secret work of the Holy Spirit, who's to say when he might plant that seed and change that heart?

You can also think of it this way, especially given John's joyful response. For John to rejoice in his mother's womb in the presence of the King of Kings, even if Jesus was still in *his* mother's womb, is another instance of the phenomenon, of which apparently reborn adults are likewise capable, of the spirit (that is, the human spirit, the heart) acting without the contribution of the mind. You will remember that the Apostle Paul regards the gift of tongues or languages as the work of the Holy Spirit in the soul. One speaking in tongues – that is, other human languages he or she had

never learned – was doing so by the supernatural activity of the Holy Spirit within him or her. But, Paul says, that Holy-Spirit-inspired utterance in another language occurred, apparently always occurred, without understanding on the part of the speaker. That is why the gift was not to be used in public if a translator was not present. Taking together everything we read about the gift of tongues, one of the supernatural demonstrations of the presence of the Holy Spirit, it seems clear that the disciples on Pentecost who preached the gospel in other languages had no idea what they were saying. The people who heard them understood what they were saying because they were speaking their language. The disciples made perfect sense to the people who spoke those languages. They didn't need anyone to translate what was being said. But the disciples themselves had no idea what they were saying.

As we suspect in regard to the disciples on Pentecost, and as Paul says explicitly in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14, the Holy Spirit provided for the speaker – who was uttering sounds that meant nothing to him or her – a powerful and wonderful experience of the Spirit's presence and power. They felt something glorious in their spirits. They were thrilled by their sense of the power of the Holy Spirit at work in them. But they had no idea what the sounds coming out of their mouths meant. Without translation – the English Bible translations call it “interpretation,” but the word is the ordinary term to describe the translation of one language into another – or without the presence of someone who actually spoke that language, such utterances would produce no understanding for either the speaker or his or her hearers. It was a wonderful experience, Paul said; one felt something glorious, but he or she had no idea what the sounds coming out of their mouths meant in another language. In such cases the human spirit was acting without the cooperation of the mind. *That seems to be what happened in John's case.* His spirit was alive to the work of God within him, he *felt* the joy of the Lord. But his mind, yet unformed, had no idea what was happening. He certainly couldn't explain the feeling to himself or to others.

This primal or subconscious manner of spiritual experience was real, but real in the way of feeling, not of understanding. The Lord was there; John was the new creation; implanted in his heart was the seed of faith, and so his joyful response. By the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth explained that the baby in her womb *rejoiced* in the presence of the Lord. But, years later, I'm sure, John would have had no recollection of that experience.

It is hardly inconceivable to believe that faith might be present as a seed in the heart of an infant, a seed that could produce such a response when prompted by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the more you think about this, the more you may come to think, as I do, that *this seed of faith*, this *habitus*, this disposition to believe, this inclination to trust in the Lord, this instinct for Christ, implanted by the Holy Spirit, is the first and *essential ingredient of living faith in every Christian life, throughout his or her life*. After all, are we believers in Jesus Christ when we are asleep? When we are dreaming the ridiculous and sometimes even sinful dreams we dream? We are certainly not then actively “believing,” “rejoicing,” or “hoping” in the Lord. When asleep, our faith is as dormant as our bodies.

Are we believers when in a coma, or when suffering dementia? How do we remain believers in the Lord, in such conditions and at such times? Perhaps more to the point, are we believers when we are sinning against God; when, alas too often, we are doing what we know very well he has forbidden, when we are actively and willingly giving ourselves over to doing his displeasure? Are we believers even then? We certainly cannot claim to be believing in the doing of such things!

When David was backslidden, during the nine months between his adultery, the murder by which he covered it up, and the birth of his son by Bathsheba, *was he believing in the Lord?* Where was his faith before, as he wrote in Ps 32, he “acknowledged [his] sin to you,” and while his “strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.” *When for some time the author of the magnificent 73rd Psalm was wallowing in his doubts*, complaining of the unfairness of life, envying the wicked, and on the cusp of turning his back on Yahweh, was he believing? When Peter denied the Lord three times, was he believing then? Or in these cases, is true and living faith, *at that moment*, much more that God-given, Holy Spirit implanted, inclination toward or disposition for the knowledge of God that neither sleep, sickness, nor willful sinning can ever expunge?

Surely faith is first and foremost the capacity that makes possible the Holy Spirit’s continual reawakening of our faith when it has grown weak or the truth has lost its appeal. It is the *habitus*, not our confidence and commitment, so often weak and virtually invisible, that at last tells the tale. For the *habitus* remains, through thick and thin, no matter the depths of doubt, of sin, or spiritual apathy into which even the most earnest

Christians sometimes allow themselves to fall. John had that instinct for Christ already in his soul while in his mother's womb and over time it produced that magnificent life that opened the way for the Son of God. I'm sure that John, like all of us had his moments of doubt – the Gospels say he did – and of spiritual indolence or indifference. No one could speak of sin so knowledgeably who did not himself know its power.

Is the life of faith not, in this way, similar to the life of our bodies? So much of our life's most essential functions lie beneath, out of sight and out of mind. We do not direct the beating of our heart or the motion of our lungs. Still less do we direct the processes by which the kidneys, the liver, and other organs sustain our life. All of that goes on within us day after day without us.

So it is with much of the work of the Holy Spirit within us. That too is done in the depths; done without our active engagement. Living faith must surely be his work as well, preserving it when we are utterly careless of it; protecting it from destruction by the Devil when we have relaxed our guard. And so the first and most essential part of the Spirit's work is implanting within us that instinct for Christ that makes everything else possible.

Is it not the unassailable fact of Christian experience that faith, everywhere and always, lies on a continuum? However sometimes, at our best, it is a living power, happily controlling what we do and say, making us powerfully aware of our union with Jesus Christ. But at other times it is, alas, virtually invisible, undetectable, dormant. What little faith we so often have! How little do we live fully awake to the spiritual world in which we live, to the issues of eternity pressing upon our lives at every moment. How often we forget the presence of the Lord who hears all that we think and say, and sees all that we do, and who will bring our lives, part and parcel, into the light and into his judgment on the Great Day. How little we rejoice in the forgiveness of our sins and the gift of eternal life. How little we thrill to the knowledge of the Almighty's great love for us, unworthy and unlovely as we are.

If faith is a seed or a root in the heart of an infant, how often is it scarcely more than that in our hearts, no matter how long we have walked with God? This is, after all, the heartfelt confession of the Christian ages. And does that not mean, must it not mean, that what separates you from the

unbeliever most profoundly is this seed of faith, this habitus, this permanent capacity for faith, this inclination to believe, without which faith would never appear in the first place, and eventually would wither and die? How often must every follower of Jesus Christ pray the prayer of the father of the boy with the unclean spirit, “I believe, help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24)? And how often must the Holy Spirit then “bear witness with our spirits that we *are* the children of God” (Rom 8:16)? His witness bears its fruit because we are disposed, inclined, prepared to believe it.

Justin Martyr’s conversion in the mid-2nd century, occurring upon the conclusion of a conversation with a Christian man he spoke to once and never again, he described in this way. “But straightway a flame was kindled in my soul; and a love of the prophets, and of those men who are friends of Christ, possessed me. . . .” A flame, if at first in Justin’s heart. But what Christian will not admit that his or her faith, while sometimes a flame, is, at least sometimes, an almost invisible pilot light, still smoldering, but needing the addition of fuel or wind to reignite the flame. So the author of Psalm 73! Awakened from his doubts in that worship service in the temple, his faith suddenly in full flood, he left church that day six inches off the ground. But his faith, however overcome by doubt as he admitted it had been, however seemingly lost to him, had, in fact, never been extinguished. The seed of it, the root had remained all along.

In other words, given the biblical witness and the experience of the Christian ages, it is and must be the fact that faith, true faith, saving faith is always first and foremost a *habitus*, a disposition, a capacity and only then, and, alas, only inconsistently and imperfectly, the settled, reasoned conviction of the mind, the deep emotion of the heart, and the inflexible determination of the will. When the Lord asked his disciples, “Where is your faith?” he was certainly not denying that they were believing men. But he was observing that their faith at that moment was neither visible nor bearing its expected fruit. *And that must mean that faith exists in some fundamental way, even when its characteristic and visible features are absent.*

How little do we know of the work of the Holy Spirit within us, whose work is invisible to us and only recognized in retrospect, and often not even then. Who can say what the beginnings of faith amount to in the heart of a little child, in those days of which we have no memory. Mysterious as this may be, it remains the incontestable fact that multitudes

of Christians will confess that their spiritual life, their life in God, their faith in Christ indeed, was an unbroken development from their earliest childhood, from before their conscious recollection. What one of his friends said *apropos* the spiritual history of Charles Hodge, the 19th century Presbyterian theologian, could be said of so many Christian believers.

“Though all must be born again to enter the Kingdom, it is not laid upon all *to pass consciously* through the throes that some natures have to suffer in the day of their regeneration: and what minister does not know that among his flock some of the most devoted and living members – those in whom...the image of Christ is seen and the power of Christ’s resurrection manifested – are they in whom, for [anything] that they themselves can tell, the new birth was contemporaneous with the old?”

Or, as in John’s case, the new birth occurred before his physical birth. That is a fact of salvation history. Multitudes of Christians have no recollection of becoming followers of Jesus Christ. They always were, so far as they know. Christ was with them, as he was with David and John the Baptist, very early in their lives. That is a profound demonstration of the nature of salvation. It is a work God performs, a work of new creation, a work in us and for us; *his work, not ours*. Infant faith is salvation history’s greatest demonstration of that fact! As Samuel Rutherford once observed,

“...Christ steals in upon some souls from the womb, so that they can say, here He is, but how he came in I cannot tell.”

The church obviously needs both ways of salvation. Conversions to Christ in the middle of life illustrate for us the power of God in salvation and remind us what salvation is. But growing up in Christ spares multitudes from the damage that years of living in sin can often cause and provides the church a constant supply of new members who, having grown up in the faith, both know the gospel well and know how to practice it in their daily lives. Sometimes I’m tempted to envy those who are converted in the middle of life, who have that tremendous experience of great change, of meeting the Lord Jesus and being drawn into his love. But then I remember that it was his will that most of our Heavenly Father’s children

he called in their infancy. Conversion is wonderful beyond words, but infant faith may be better still!