

3:1 GENUINE FAITH

Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. *2 Corinthians 1:21-22*

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realise that Christ Jesus is in you – unless, of course, you fail the test? *2 Corinthians 13:5*

Am I really and truly a Christian? How can I be sure?

A budding young actress was being auditioned for the role of Juliet in Shakespeare's famous play. She very much wanted the part, but she couldn't be certain that the Director would overlook her inexperience. A friend told her, 'Don't play Juliet, let Juliet play you.' So she soaked herself thoroughly in the character of Juliet, and when the audition came, she let Shakespeare's Juliet take over. And she got the part.

Paul's relationship with the church at Corinth was a stormy one. He could never be certain that they really accepted him as Christ's accredited messenger. But instead of trying to impress them with his apostolic qualifications, he appealed to what they both had in common: the Spirit of Christ dwelling in them and assuring them that they truly belonged to God.

How do I know if I have the Spirit? Well, Paul says, examine yourself. Test yourself. Does the Spirit have you? The Spirit is the token of God's ownership, the seal or stamp that shows we are the genuine article. If we soak ourselves thoroughly in the words and character of Jesus, we don't need to play-act being Christians, we can let him take over and express himself through us.

Does the Spirit have me? Or is my faith just part of my ego-trip, my efforts to convince God and other people about how good I am? The test is, whether I am prepared to let Christ take over my life today. If there is some resistance, some withholding of full consent, ask him to work away at it from within, and he will.

3:2 JUSTIFIED BY FAITH

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. *Romans 3:23-24*

You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. *1 Corinthians 6:11*

A person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. *Galatians 2:16*

In printing terms, the paragraphs below are 'justified' – the left and right vertical margins are precisely aligned with each other. I didn't achieve this myself – I simply clicked an icon that did it for me.

In order to enter God's 'glory', eternal life in his presence, we human beings need to be perfectly aligned with the will and character of God. If we differ or dissent from it in the smallest particular, we miss out. God is good and right, and nothing that is not totally good and right can exist in his presence.

When a space rocket re-enters the earth's atmosphere, it must do so at the right angle: too steep and it would instantly burn up, too shallow and it would be deflected back into space.

'Righteousness' or 'rightness' is a key theme of the whole Bible. Being 'justified,' or put right with God, isn't an invention of Paul or anyone else, it is there from the beginning. God's plan is to make everything right, to bring the world and the human race into full alignment with himself through Christ (Acts 3:21, Colossians 1:20).

The whole Godhead is involved in this goal: the loving grace of God, the redeeming work of the Lord Jesus Christ, the cleansing and renewing activity of the Spirit, are all active in putting us right with himself. We can't do this by ourselves; we trust him to do it for us.

So what is faith in practice? It means abandoning my former attitude of self-will and self-justification, and accepting God's way of putting me right with himself. Faith is saying a thankful 'Yes!' to Christ's offer of permanent friendship, made effective by the Spirit who is holy.

3:3 RECEPTIVENESS

Our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.

1 Thessalonians 1:5

One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.

Acts 16:14

How does someone get to the point where they simply must give their heartfelt acceptance to the proclamation of Jesus Christ? Do they have to be 'religious'? Do they need a thorough training in the facts of the Christian faith? Does the speaker need great passion and oratorical skill? Or is it solely the work of the Holy Spirit?

The first person in Europe to believe in Christ was Lydia, a business-woman who dealt in the manufacture and sale of purple cloth. She was an expert judge of the quality of this material, in an industry which prided itself on the high degree of perfection in its goods. She also set herself the highest standards in her personal life. There were many temptations for a rich woman travelling alone to the Greek cities of Paul's time. She made it her habit to seek out women like herself who believed in a God of goodness, to whom you could pray for strength and guidance. So she joined this little group meeting in the cool shade of the Philippi riverside every sabbath.

What precise point did Paul make that 'opened her heart'? Was it the unconditional nature of the gospel? She might accept or reject a purple garment on the basis of its quality, but God's loving invitation to her in Christ was without any conditions. Jesus bore the sins of absolutely everybody, so that no-one would be disqualified from heaven. You don't have to qualify. Only believe!

The same Spirit who opened Lydia's heart then can do a similar work in me now. I don't qualify, but I can choose to believe God's word. Only I can't expect him to let me remain content with who I was. I don't need to pass a quality test – but I do need quality control in his service.

3:4 THE MASTER'S VOICE

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.

Acts 1:1-2

'This is what I told you while I was still with you: everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.' Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.

Luke 24:44-45

Jesus calls himself 'the good shepherd' (John 10:11), whom his sheep follow because they know his voice. This 'voice' has been speaking since the moment of creation. It has continued to be heard in the 'Scriptures', the Hebrew Bible of the Old Testament, and in the New Testament. It is the distinctive voice of God's own Son.

The famous logo of 'His Master's Voice' originated when the owner of a dog called Nipper played a speech by his brother, who had recently died, on a phonograph. The dog immediately trotted over and sat by the machine, listening intently. He knew the timbre and intonation of that voice, however primitively recorded.

The Holy Spirit faithfully transmits Jesus' voice to us just as he has always done. Even before he left the earth, Jesus 'gave instructions through the Holy Spirit' to his apostles; but it was only the end of the beginning – the Gospels record 'all that Jesus began to do and to teach' (Acts 1:1). He has never stopped this work.

Does that mean his instructions now could be different from those he originally gave? Will he contradict himself? Clearly not; but his words will always be specific to the hearers, because he has 'other sheep to bring' (John 10:16). The question is, am I listening for the Master's voice to come freshly today? Will I obey what he tells me?

How much actual communication happens in my times of Bible-reading and prayer? Or is it just a routine performance before (or after) the day's doings? Am I scared of what he might be wanting to tell me? 'This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!' (Mark 9:7).

3:5 NO-COST INVITATION

Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.

Isaiah 55:1

The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let the one who hears say, 'Come!' Let the one who is thirsty come, and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.

Revelation 22:17

Some theologians were discussing whether there was any difference between Christianity and other world religions. When C S Lewis came into the room, they asked his opinion. 'That's easy,' he replied. 'It's grace.'

Grace is God's free forgiveness for the undeserving. Paul never forgot that he had been a persecutor and man of violence. But, he writes later, 'the grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly' (1 Timothy 1:14). Peter, who knew what it was to fail spectacularly, spoke of 'the God of all grace, who has called us to his eternal glory in Christ' (1 Peter 5:10).

The water of life is free to all who come. But they have to be thirsty. Even when our own wells have run dry, the last place we think of going is to God himself. 'My people have committed two sins: they have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water' (Jeremiah 2:13).

Religion demands; grace gives. The cross of Christ isn't a stern question-mark about our credentials, it's God's signature below his offer of free pardon. This is why the Spirit and the bride join in proclaiming the invitation: the Spirit because Jesus is the forgiver, the bride because the church is the fellowship of the forgiven.

Maybe I'm hard-wired to suspect 'free' offers. Surely I'll have to contribute something – maybe all I've got? But what if I've got nothing? Surely the minimum required is faith. But faith isn't something I contribute – it's two empty hands held out to receive. 'Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to your cross I cling.'

3:6 GREAT PEACE

The mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.

Romans 8:6

Great peace have those who love your law. *Psalms 119:165*

The peace we are told about in the Bible isn't a feeling. It isn't to be worked up by psychological means. It isn't the monopoly of a particular kind of temperament. On the contrary, it can be known even by those who are constitutionally neurotic or anxiety-prone.

It is promised by Jesus to his confused, uncertain and deeply concerned disciples: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you' (John 14:27). In a few hours the shepherd is going to be struck and the sheep scattered, but this is no cause for mental turmoil or dismay; everything is under control. They have the fundamental assurance that the eternal God is their refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms (Deuteronomy 33:27). Faith isn't a waste of time, because it depends on a trustable Lord.

T S Eliot wrote: 'Teach us to care and not to care; teach us to sit still.' Thomas à Kempis taught of 'the privilege of a free mind' which enables one to 'pass amidst many cares as though one has no care, but not as though one were numb to all feeling.' This is indeed a 'privilege', an unearned gift of grace, the product and fruit of the indwelling Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22).

This dynamic and liberating sense of trust in a trustable God isn't something that comes and goes. It is permanently available to even the weakest believer. But like orchard fruit or a herbaceous border it requires constant cultivation. It is those who 'love your law', who can't have enough of God's word, who know his promises at their heart's core, that will possess truly 'great peace.'

Like Martha, I tend to be 'worried and upset about many things' (Luke 10:41). Teach me the one thing I need above all. To sit at Jesus' feet, hearing his word, drinking in his Spirit. To train my mind to trust God, to fix it like a climbing plant to the trellis of his faithfulness which will outlast time and circumstance.