

For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable

Romans 9:1-5

A Sermon for the Season of Pentecost

Commentators on the Epistle to the Romans are divided in two ways, depending on how they deal with 1) Romans 9-11, and 2) Romans 10:4.

#1: Romans 9-11. Romans 9:1-5 points out that the Jewish people did not accept Jesus Christ as the Messiah and Savior. How is that possible? Paul was one of the Jews. The question then in the Epistle to the Romans is: Is this section 9-11 a case study, an example of how God works. (By far the majority of commentaries on Romans see 9-11 in this way, that is, as a case study.) For others the point of chapters 9-11 is to bring out how the Jews are included even though they did not accept Christ.

Paul is on his way to go through Rome to Spain so he is writing to the people in the synagogues in Rome who are both Jewish and Christian in order to sort this out.

It is not a new idea to say, as most scholars do, that chapters 9-11 are a case study. Scholars point out that Romans 9:1-5 states that the Jewish people have the covenants, they have the promises, they are chosen, and God doesn't change his mind. In fact, when we look at Romans 11:29, it says: "For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable." (See also Romans 9:15.) (The argument is made by some scholars that there are two ways of salvation, two covenants, but in Galatians 6:16 Paul refers to the church as "the Israel of God.")

#2: Romans 10:4: Romans 10:4 states: "Christ is the end of the law." Does "end of the law" mean "termination" or "goal"?

In Romans 7:1-6 Paul has already answered this question using the example of marriage: When one spouse dies, the other spouse is no longer bound by the law of marriage. That is the same with the whole matter of the law. It really means "termination."

In Romans 11:32: "For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he might have mercy on all," Paul gives a definition of election. He has stated the same conclusion in Romans 5:18 where it says: "As one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal for all men." Paul's point in Romans 11:32 is not new.

In the middle of these three chapters, 9-11, Paul writes about salvation in 10:5-17, especially verses 9-10:

“If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved.”

How God works salvation comes into focus in 10:17, where it says: “Faith comes by hearing and hearing comes by the preaching of Christ.”

We already know from Romans 3:24 that faith is a gift. Then Romans 5:1 states: “Therefore, since we are justified by faith [It is all done.], we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

We review these questions about salvation because often in discussion or argument with others who teach that faith means we must make a decision for Christ, they will say to Lutherans: “Remember it says in Romans 10:9-10 that if you confess with your lips and believe in your heart, you will be saved.” Then in the next verse the same is stated in a different way.

Paul is using material in Romans 10:6-10 from Deuteronomy 30:11-14. He is following the sequence set forth there. When it says: “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord,” it is referring to something that happens in a public assembly, a worship service.

This confession, “Jesus is Lord,” is also found in 1 Cor 12:3 and Philippians 2:9-10. This is like confessing the Nicene Creed or Apostle’s Creed. Then in parallel (In Hebrew thinking, “parallel” means stating the same thing in a different way.) it says that “if you believe in your heart that he is risen from the dead,” (the confession that he is risen from the dead is found in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4), and all of this is in the passive voice. It is being done to you; it is being done for you. The passage goes on to say that those who call on the name of the Lord will be saved. Again that is done in the public worship service. It is not individualistic. Paul is not saying that if you believe fervently and privately in your heart, then you are saved.

What does it mean to believe? There are all kinds of variations in the New Testament about this. In Matthew 14:31 Jesus chides Peter who tried to walk on the water but sank: “O man of little faith.” In Matthew 17:20 it says: “If you have faith as a grain of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move.” In Luke 17:6: “If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you

could say to this sycamore tree, 'Be rooted up, and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.'" We don't know of people who have walked on water, moved mountains or sycamore trees this way, and we ask ourselves: What is this about? What does it mean?

Sometimes in the New Testament there are degrees of faith. We've already seen in Matthew 14:31 that when Peter failed to walk on the water, Jesus says: "O man of little faith." In Matthew 28:17 when the Eleven are gathered with Jesus after the resurrection, it says: "When they saw him they worshiped him; but some doubted." There is faith and doubt, and of course there is Doubting Thomas. There is the faith that fails. Paul writes about this in 1 Corinthians 10:12. And there is weak faith in Romans 14:2. How does it all work?

There are also those passages that talk about "in the heart" or "in your heart." We read our way of thinking into this. We think that "the heart" means that you are really serious, really earnest about it. But both in the Old and New Testaments, "the heart" means "the whole person."

There is the idea that faith means making a decision, as it says in Mark 6:16: "Believe and be baptized," (There is a textual problem.) so we are supposed to make a decision. The same with Thomas in John 20:25 where Thomas says: "If I can touch him, then I'll decide."

Another variation is found in Hebrews 11:1: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

Over against all of these variations stands the key verse in Romans 10, Romans 10:17: "Faith comes by hearing and hearing comes by the preaching of Christ." It is the Word of God that comes to you and creates hearing. There is a parallel in 1 Peter 1:23 where it says: "You have been born anew, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God." (See also 1 Thessalonians 2:9, 13.)

It is the Word that does it. We mistakenly think we have to have faith in faith.

There is also the problem that words mean different things in different contexts. For example, think of the word "box." It means a kind of fighting. It also means a container. If you look in the dictionary, it also means "squaring the compass." There are three other meanings used less often. Words mean various things, and they don't fall into neat patterns.

Each Christian tradition has its own way of sorting things out. In the Lutheran-Orthodox dialogue one of the Eastern Orthodox scholars said to the Lutherans: "What's wrong with you? Don't you know your Greek? It says in James 2:26: 'Faith without works is dead.'" Then he waved his Greek New Testament. Of course, the Lutherans knew that.

Or in the International Lutheran-Baptist Dialogue, the Baptist scholars were discussing the issue of making a decision for Christ, and they were very confident in saying that many five-year-olds were capable of making a decision for Christ, even some three-year-olds. Of course this raises the question of what kind of understanding of "sin" and "decision" is meant here.

In the same Dialogue one of the Baptist scholars acknowledged to the Lutherans: "We see these places, such as John 6:44 and 6:65, where it says: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him," and one Baptist scholar said: "We see 'election' is there, but we kind of read past those passages."

The answers to these questions are basic to the very nature of what salvation is about.

The first answer: What about the cross? Is this a cross that you can make it mean whatever you want it to mean so that you diminish what it is? No, because it is the finality and importance of God dying on the cross and rising again for you and me. Are we going to take that at less than what it is so that we can bring in other things?

The second answer: What about sin? Is sin something that we figure out and we can handle? Or is sin so enormous that only the cross tells you and me what it is about and how the Lord has handled it. Have you done enough? Have you done it right? Have you believed the right way and sincerely and fervently? Or if you think you have, you find yourself caught in spiritual pride, and then you end up in spiritual despair.

Our certainty does not lie in anything we feel or experience or in any person or any church. It lies in him. Then we have certainty that is truly certain.

That is why Romans 10:17 focuses on what God has done: "Faith comes by hearing and hearing comes by the preaching of Christ." He's done it.

We have confidence because Christ has done it and is doing it. As Luther states in the Small Catechism in the first sentence of the explanation to the Third Article of the Creed: "I believe that I cannot by own reason or understanding believe, but the

Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.”

As Paul writes: “For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable” (Romans 11:29).
Amen