

How To Give Away Your Faith

HANDOUT #5

520. In their system, faith is *not ultimately the sinner's independent* response, but it is part of God's saving work which is why Calvinists often say faith is a gift.
521. Yet we have seen many examples in the Bible, where we find individuals who are capable of exercising faith in response to God's work of grace in them.
522. *For example*, God heard the prayers of Cornelius a Gentile unbeliever & God sent the Apostle Peter to give him the message of salvation (Acts 10:30-32).
523. From what is recorded in Acts we know that Cornelius was a "**God-fearing**" Gentile & not a "**proselyte**" but he was living up to all he knew about God.
524. The distinction is important in the New Testament because not all Gentiles who were attracted to Judaism—had fully converted to it by becoming a "**proselyte**" — meaning they had formally — converted to Judaism.
525. When a "**God-fearer**" became a "**proselyte**," he formally embraced Judaism by committing to obey the Mosaic Law — undergoing circumcision (*if male*), and fully participating in the life of the Jewish community (*e.g.* Deut. 16:16).
526. A "**proselyte**" was essentially regarded as a Jew religiously, even though not ethnically (Matthew 23:15; Esther 8:17).
527. There are many examples of Gentiles converting to Judaism, like Nicolaus in Acts 6:5 — who is specifically called — "**a proselyte from Antioch**."
528. By contrast, a "**God-fearer**" was a Gentile who worshiped the God of Israel, attended synagogue services, but had not become a full convert to Judaism.
529. As such it meant that they rejected pagan idolatry, respected the Scriptures, practiced prayer and almsgiving but had not undergone circumcision and had not obligated themselves to keep the entire Mosaic Law.
530. Unlike a **proselyte**—a **God-fearer** kept his Gentile identity while worshiping Israel's God & so Luke, in the Book of Acts often describes such individuals as "**those who fear God**" (13:16, 26) or "**God-fearing Greeks**" (17:4).
531. "**God-fearing Greeks**" were often the first Gentiles to respond to the gospel because they already believed in the Tanakh & were awaiting the Messiah.
532. I emphasize this—because Cornelius was not one of the "**God-fearing proselytes**" as found in Acts 10:43, but he was simply a "**God-fearer**."
533. Without formally being circumcised as to be a "**proselyte**," Acts 10:2 says he was "**a devout man and one who feared God with all his household**."

534. Yet nowhere does the text suggest or even hint that somehow he had already been given what Reformed theology calls the “**gift of faith**” but instead Acts reveals he still needed to hear the gospel in order to believe & to be **saved**.

535. There is not a single example anywhere in the New Testament where God gives someone the so-called — “**gift of faith**” — that they might believe for even Cornelius simply heard the message of salvation and he believed.

536. Luke records for us the details of his conversion in Acts chapter ten:

43 “Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.” 44 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. 45 All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. 46 For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, 47 “Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?” 48 And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay on for a few days (Acts 10:43–48).

537. Peter is clear that Corneilius being regenerated did not precede his hearing the gospel but came after he heard the gospel and exercised faith in Jesus.

538. And lest someone think this is an overstatement—the Apostle Peter repeats the testimony of Cornelius to the Jerusalem Church indicating clearly that he had not already been regenerated or saved before he came to believe:

11 “And behold, at that moment three men appeared at the house in which we were staying, having been sent to me from Caesarea. 12 “The Spirit told me to go with them without misgivings. These six brethren also went with me and we entered the man’s house. 13 “And he reported to us how he had seen the angel standing in his house, and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and have Simon, who is also called Peter, brought here; 14 and he will speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household.’ 15 “And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as He did upon us at the beginning. 16 “And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ 17 “Therefore if God gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” 18 When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, “Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life.” (11:11–18).

539. Unlike Reformed theology, which teaches that regeneration precedes faith so that a person can exercise what it calls “**the gift of faith**,” Peter was sent to this man to proclaim Jesus, “**by which you will be saved**” (*future tense*).

540. What is very clear from this and every example in Scripture is that “**the Holy Spirit fell upon them**” not before but after they believed (cf. Eph. 1:13-14).
541. R.C. Sproul (1939–2017) —was an influential Reformed pastor, theologian, and founder of Ligonier Ministries, who was instrumental in popularizing Reformed Theology—through his preaching, teaching & many books.
542. Addressing a large Reformed audience—he explained that “**faith**” is a “**gift**” granted only to those whom God 1st regenerates, independent of any prior response by the individual — during the Q&A session — Sproul remarked:

Is faith a gift or a response? If it is a gift why are we responsible for exercising it? Yes . . . it is a response that we have to make a necessary condition for our justification. And yet we were told in the New Testament that the response that we make is because that it is a gift that has been given to us sovereignly by the Holy Spirit who when we were dead in sin and trespasses quickened us together with Christ. The defining doctrinal statement about Reformed Theology that separates us from all other schools of thought is this — regeneration precedes faith. That in order to exercise faith, in order to respond, according to the way we were called to respond in order to be saved. We have to first be born again of the Holy Spirit. The vast majority of professing Evangelicals reverse the order of that and they believe that if you want to be justified, and if you want to be saved, you first have to have faith and then you're born again. But spiritually dead people can't exercise faith. Jesus tells us that in John six. You know that, we're not able, we're not capable in our fallenness, in our death and spiritual death to quicken ourselves. It's only after the Spirit of God changes the disposition of our souls in our hearts that we hear and respond to Christ. So the necessary condition for faith is rebirth not the other way around.

543. Whether you believe “**faith**” is a “**gift**” that—God gives only to certain people, or whether you believe—everyone has the ability to place their “**faith**” in **Jesus** when aided by God—largely depends on how you answer some key questions.
544. First, are the lost so “**dead**” that they are “**unable to respond**” to the gospel unless God gives them a special gift beyond the Spirit’s convicting work?
545. Second, one must ask & answer is faith itself a “**work**” that we do?
546. And third, do any passages of Scripture actually teach that “**faith**” is a “**gift**” given only to certain individuals that God chooses?
547. At the heart of the debate are the questions: “**Does God give faith to sinners so that they are able to believe?**” (the Calvinist view) —or— “**Does God give all people the potential ability to place their faith in the gospel in order to receive the gift of eternal life (the non-Calvinist view)?**”

548. And in answering these—we must also ask—if “**faith**” is something a person exercises, does that make “**faith**” a meritorious work that earns salvation?
549. Calvinists believe God’s grace “**irresistibly**” brings a person to faith & so God guarantees the response — while non-Calvinists believe God’s grace enables all to believe — while still allowing each person — the freedom to resist.
550. For this reason — we need to study from the Bible the question of whether “**faith**” is a “**gift**” from God given to a few, or an ability activated for all.
551. Ephesians 2:8 — is typically the most often cited verse — in support of the Reformed position that argues that “**faith**” is a “**gift**” given to a chosen few.
552. However, many Bible scholars believe that Paul is not saying faith is the gift, rather, he is saying that salvation “*by grace through faith*” is “*the gift of God.*”

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

553. I would like to step through these two verses from both the Reformed point of view and the Traditionalist point of view—because the crux of the argument is in knowing which position is supported by the context & the Greek grammar.
554. Most Reformed teachers understand “**the gift of God**” in Ephesians 2:8, as referring to “**faith**” — while the rest to the entire salvation process.

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* (for the reformed person the word “that” & the italicized words *it is* refers to *faith*) the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

555. I hope to demonstrate that the word “**that**” — in the phrase, “**and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God,**” — together with — the added words — *it is*, refers back to the entire experience of salvation “*by grace through faith.*”
556. I also hope to demonstrate—that both *the immediate context & the grammar* of Ephesians 2:8–9 has as its focus not ‘**faith**’ being a **gift** but that salvation, in its entirety, is God’s gracious **gift** & can never be earned through human works.
557. Paul’s focus here is not on explaining the origin of faith—but on showing that salvation is entirely the result of God’s grace and not human effort.
558. If you knew nothing about Greek grammar, the plain reading of dozens of Bible passages—would naturally lead you—to this conclusion.

559. You do not need a knowledge of Greek to reach this conclusion, since the plain sense of Scripture leads naturally to it, *though at times a knowledge of Greek can provide additional support — for truths already evident — in the text.*
560. Though Greek grammar strengthens the Traditionalist view, confirming that Ephesians 2:8 refers to salvation as “**the gift of God**,” and not “**faith**” itself.
561. You do not need a seminary education—or a knowledge of Greek—to arrive at this conclusion, *for the plain reading of many biblical texts naturally leads to it.*
562. Once again, in solving this question as to the nature & role of “**faith**” in salvation there are three essential questions we must ask and answer.
563. As previously noted, you must determine if the lost so “**dead**” that they are “**unable to respond**” to the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ unless God gives them “**the gift of faith**” beyond the Spirit’s convicting work.
564. In many ways — we have already answered this question — as we examined the doctrine of **Total Depravity** and compared the traditional understanding with the definition embraced by many in contemporary Reformed theology.
565. Based largely on Ephesians 2:1, some argue that the word “**dead**” in “**you were dead in your trespasses and sins**” — means unbelievers are like inanimate objects—completely unable to respond—in any way to spiritual truth.
566. We have carefully examined the passages commonly cited in support of this view—and found that none of them teaches— such an inability.
567. Instead — the references to being — “**dead**” or to “**death**” speak either of physical death or of spiritual separation from God (Psalm 33:19; Luke 15:24; 1 Corinthians 15:21-22; Colossians 2:13; Rev. 3:1-2).
568. When Jesus told the parable of the Prodigal Son who was of course not physically dead but spiritually dead—he was still able to return.

24 For this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.’ And they began to celebrate (Luke 15:24).

569. Obviously, Jesus was not saying that the son was physically dead, but that he was separated from his father living in rebellion.
570. Yet Jesus says of the son that he “**came to himself**” (15:17) and that he “**got up and came his father**” (15:20) showing us that — death — describes alienation, but not the inability to turn back, especially when aided by God in this age.

571. There is not a single passage of Scripture that teaches a person is incapable of responding to the convicting and drawing ministry of the Holy Spirit.
572. On the contrary — the Bible consistently presents people — as responsible to respond, which is why Jesus concluded His invitation at the Feast of Booths by saying, “**If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink**” (John 7:37).
573. The last book of the Bible, that speaks of God’s coming wrath, concludes with a passionate invitation where John records (Revelation 22:17):

17 The Spirit and the bride say, “Come.” And let the one who hears say, “Come.” And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost.

574. Such an invitation would be neither genuine nor sincere if those being invited were incapable of responding.
575. Jesus held people accountable for their refusal to come to Him, saying, “**You are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life**” (John 5:40).
576. Likewise, when Jesus was heartbroken over the people of Jerusalem He said:

37 “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling (Matthew 23:37).

577. Matthew highlights the depth of Jesus’ grief by recording His words, “**I wanted to gather . . . but you were unwilling**” (Matthew 23:37).
578. This is perhaps the strongest parallel between Jesus’ desire & Israel’s refusal.
579. The Savior’s heart was moved with compassion and a longing to gather them, but their hardened hearts refused Him and rejected Him.
580. The tragedy was not that Christ was “**unwilling**” to receive them, but that they were “**unwilling**” to come to Him.
581. The problem is never with God’s willingness — but with man’s unwillingness, which is why Jesus tells us the reason people do not come to Him for salvation, is that they love darkness — not that they lack — the capacity to come.

**19 “This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil.
20 “For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed (John 3:19–20).**

582. In John 7:17, Jesus says — “**If anyone is willing to do His will, he shall know concerning the teaching,**” emphasizing that a person’s response to God’s truth involves the willingness of the heart.
583. Jesus highlights that unbelief is not merely an intellectual issue, but a moral response of either submitting to or resisting God’s will.
584. When Stephen describes—his unbelieving Jewish brothers—he states in Acts 7:51, “**You stiff-necked people . . . you always resist the Holy Spirit.**”
585. Stephen does not accuse them of being incapable of responding, but rather, they were actively resisting the work of the Spirit.
586. The Apostle Paul speaks of similar resistance of his own Jewish brethren in Romans 10:21 when he quotes Isaiah 65:2 saying, “**All day long I have stretched out My hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.**”
587. Once again, God’s posture is one of invitation & here Israel’s posture is that of stubborn refusal—which again shows that judgment that God brings on the lost does not come from an inability to respond but a refusal to respond.
588. When Jesus exhorts the people of His day to respond to “**the truth**” that they might find real “**freedom**” (John 8:32) — they only push back refusing to — admit their need — to which Jesus then responds:
- 43 “**Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear My word.** 44 “**You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.** 45 “**But because I speak the truth, you do not believe Me** (John 8:43–45).
589. I chose these verses because — although Jesus uses the language of inability (“**you cannot hear**”), the context shows that their inability was not a natural limitation but a spiritual condition—as they closed their ears to His words.
590. They had aligned themselves with the devil — by rejecting the truth, showing that unbelief is not mere intellectual deficiency, but a willful rejection of Jesus.
591. The Greek verb is “**thelō**” which means “**to will**,” or “**to desire**,” or “**to be willing**” tells us— that people have the ability to respond.
592. God legitimately & justly places the failure of a person to respond to His Son, not on their inability but on their unwillingness which is why in John 5:40, Jesus does not say, “**You are unable to come,**” but “**You are unwilling.**”