

THEOLOGY FROM SCRATCH— WEEK 7



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The cover picture is Paul in Athens, by Raphael (1483–1520),
on display at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.*

Week seven wraps up how the gospel glorifies God. We show how salvation by faith alone undergirds how Christian charity glorifies God.

Then we get into details about various levels of faith and various kinds of faith—particularly “faith in something.”

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Theology From Scratch — Week 5

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Dialogue 31 — The Glorious Plan

John 17:1–5 (ESV)

When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.

So, I come back to my basic question—how does all this glorify God?

Since we cannot see beyond this universe, we cannot really know. Thus, our best clues must come from scripture. Two well-known references are Psalm 19: 1 and John 1:14.

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. (ESV)

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (ESV)

But the strongest example, and the one I want to zoom in on, is His glorious plan of salvation, AKA the gospel. I think the way all the pieces fit together has an impressive elegance. It definitely looks more glorious than the alternative. Here’s the key quote.

When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you,” — John 17:1 (ESV)

This is from the prayer that Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane before He went to the cross. It points to a fact that many Christians miss—Jesus’s main reason for going to the cross was God’s glory, not our getting into heaven.

But isn’t the cross the key to Christians getting into heaven?

Yes, but that’s not the ultimate purpose; God’s glory is. Let me show you how the dots connect, and you’ll see why I think it’s glorious. The plan of salvation is what makes Christian charity actually charitable, enabling it to glorify God.

What? How is this connected to charity?

I’ve explained how confessing fealty to Christ is how one becomes a Christian; it’s a profession of faith. The other part of that plan of salvation is that this faith is how one gets into heaven. Jesus’s death on the cross “pays a price” that is our ticket.

The “secret sauce” is that this is the only payment that counts. Our acts of charity, or any other good work, do not, in any way, contribute to our getting into heaven. This is what is known as salvation by faith alone (*sola fide*). It’s the key to how we can glorify God.

I don't get it. How does that glorify God? How is that the secret sauce?

Well, consider the alternative. Suppose God was keeping score with our works, and we were trying to earn enough "points" to get into heaven. What happens then?

We'd work as hard as possible to get in.

Yeah, but is it charity? Does it glorify God? Or are we just working for our own benefit?

But aren't we glorifying God by doing glorifying things? What's wrong with that?

What's wrong is that it's all about me. It glorifies God more if the things I do aren't for selfish reasons. That's my point; what's most glorious is charity that's actually for others. Consider this. Why do I put birdseed in my bird feeder?

So the birds won't starve.

Right. (Maybe it's so the squirrels won't starve, but let's not go **there**.) I might do it so I can watch the birds, but I mostly feed the birds for the birds' sake. It's not about me. This is what I call simple charity—charity for charity's sake. My point is that simple charity glorifies God more than charity that actually helps me.

What's so glorious about that?

It's not the actions; it's the transformation behind the actions. The external focus at the heart of simple charity—caring about someone other than yourself—is what's glorious. This is what Paul was driving at in Romans 12:2

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (ESV)

Okay, but how does that glorify God? There's nothing external to this universe in this. Didn't you say that ultimate glory has to be external?

But there is something external—God's own sacrifice. Yes our transformation into selfless people is internal to this universe, but Christ's sacrifice behind it is God Himself. That isn't entirely internal to this universe. Thus, it has a greater potential to glorify God.

Creators suffering for their creations is often hailed as glorious. William Tyndale suffered greatly for translating the Bible into English. It isn't true that Walt Disney lived in his car to finance the bigging of his studio, but the legend is often told because it's glorious.

But that doesn't prove that the plan of salvation glorifies God.

You're right. It only looks—to us—glorious. It makes sense; it's plausible, but it's not proof. The plan of salvation—sola fide—only looks more glorious than the alternative. I still need to clarify one aspect of this sola fide thing. See you tomorrow.

Dialogue 32 — Faith

Hebrews 11:1–2 (ESV)

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation.

Okay, so clarify sola fide for me.

I quoted Romans 10:9 before—*because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* (ESV)

I just want to nail down that “believe in your heart” means certainty. This is the faith that saves. This is spelled out clearly in Hebrews 11:1–2. Here’s the old NIV translation. It’s my favorite even though it has a technical error.

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.

What’s the error?

Faith is a noun. While the NIV explanation is clear—it describes faith with perfect accuracy—it translates a noun as a verb, and that’s not kosher.

Still, I think “being sure” is the best way to say it. Note how this understanding of what faith is makes sense of Matthew 17:20.

He replied, “Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.” (NIV)

Being sure can move mountains.

That’s what the first Christians had. They knew who Jesus was because of the fresh facts of His life, death, and resurrection. They were sure.

Did any mountains move?

Not literally, but, yes, boy did they move mountains. By the end of the first century, there were a million Christians. That happened despite the withering persecution of Christians by the Roman government. As Tertullian wrote to Caesar,

“We are but of yesterday, and yet we have filled all the places that belong to you — cities, islands, forts, towns, exchanges; the military camps themselves, tribes, town councils, the palace, the senate, the market-place; we have left you nothing but your temples.”

<https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/staff/gyaccp/geography%20and%20religion.pdf>

http://www.tertullian.org/articles/irenaeus_philopolis.htm

Okay, so explain the line, “*This is what the ancients were commended for.*”

The ancients of Hebrews 11:2 deserve to be commended because they were far away from the incarnation and the resurrection. They couldn’t see how this would play out, yet they had faith (certainty!) about it. John 20:29 note the importance of this.

Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” (NIV)

We might be similarly commended, as we’re far away too. We want to be sure. Solid faith is exciting. Life without it is meaningless.

Why do you say that? Life is meaningless? Says who?

Says Solomon—the wisest man who ever lived. He had everything that secular life has to offer, and he saw that it had no meaning. So he wrote the book of Ecclesiastes.

“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher.

“Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” — Ecclesiastes 1:2 (NIV)

But you think faith gives life meaning, right?

Exactly. The ultimate meaning is God’s glory, but each member gets the glory of being part of something meaningful.

And faith is being sure. That’s why I made such a big deal about the crucifixion and resurrection—because that’s what we must be sure of. The divinity of Christ and the reality of His kingdom give ultimate meaning to the whole enterprise.

And you think your obscure way of presenting all this helps?

Yes. I prefer to give the logical foundations up front. In studying mathematics, you grind through a lot of proofs. Later, even if the details of a proof are forgotten, you remember that you proved it.

Just for kicks, you might revisit a particularly interesting proof—such as Euler’s outrageous proof that the sum of $1/n^2$ ($1 + 1/4 + 1/9 + \dots$) is $\pi^2/6$ —but you don’t need to. You know in your heart that it’s true—because you checked it out once—and you can use it confidently.

My goal has been to lay the foundation for rock-solid faith—the kind of faith that conquered the world.

I suppose, but I’ve got another objection.

No surprise there. See you tomorrow.

Dialogue 33 — Sanctification

Hebrews 5:12–14 (ESV)

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

Okay, I have a tougher question. This might even take a while to explain.

Fire away. You should get a long turn at some point.

Imagine that you're a defendant in court and you know you're guilty.

Hmmm. I already see an analogy building.

Suppose further, you get off on a technicality. You're free to go; your guilt is erased.

I definitely see an analogy.

Okay, good. Here's my problem. I can imagine two polar-opposite reactions. One is you say, "See ya," and walk out—free as a bird. Your guilt is gone.

Makes sense.

The other is that your sense of guilt is made worse by your acquittal. You've missed out on a sort of catharsis, and your conscience is now screaming at you.

You're describing Martin Luther.

I didn't know that. Let's keep going.

My problem is that the gospel is presented to appeal to the "see ya" mentality. It's described as you getting off scot-free despite being guilty, and you're just supposed to sing and dance and celebrate.

That contradicts everything you've been saying about how Christianity is properly understood. Fealty to Jesus as Lord means not taking His Lordship lightly.

Furthermore, how can that "se ya" attitude possibly glorify God?

My good friend, you have just wandered into the topic of sanctification—how newborn Christians grow into mature Christians. You're right to think that this method of evangelism doesn't glorify God—a least not immediately. If I may quote the Wicked Witch of the West, "These things must be done delicately."

Christianity isn't like your fairy godmother showing up, and, with one wave of her wand, "ding!" you're now a glorious saint. Christianity is presented to beginners with a beginner's lesson. Advanced topics are for later. While I do agree that the gospel is sometimes "sold" a little too sugar-coated, we must always begin teaching Christianity from the beginning.

For example, here is Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:2–3 explaining his treatment of beginners.

I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? (ESV)

Sounds like he's hitting them pretty hard.

Yes, but he's couching it in gentle terms. A young person, or a person who's young in the faith, can be corrected but with the caveat that his weaknesses are normal given the stage he's at. Here's an example of an even stronger criticism.

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. — Hebrews 5:12–14 (ESV)

Sounds like the author is saying that they're a bit behind schedule.

Yes, but do not miss what they're behind schedule on. It's that they're "*unskilled in the word of righteousness.*" This makes them unready for solid food, because *solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.*

The key word here is practice. Christianity is, in that way, like just about everything else; nothing beats experience.

And experience prepares you for more advanced lessons?

Exactly. Advanced lessons can be confusing to beginners. In that way, Christianity is like any curriculum. You have to get through the beginner's courses before you're ready for the advanced ones. However, with Christianity, teaching an advanced course to someone who isn't ready is worse than doing that with, say, mathematics. Advanced lessons in Christianity won't just be confusing; they can be harmful.

How's that?

A beginner's faith can be attacked before it's mature enough to handle the stress.

More on this tomorrow.

Dialogue 34 — Help My Unbelief

Mark 9:20–27 (ESV)

And they brought the boy to him. And when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. And Jesus asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.” And Jesus said to him, “If you can! All things are possible for one who believes.” Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, “I believe; help my unbelief!” And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, “You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.” And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, “He is dead.” But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.

So, I take it that you think a believer’s faith grows over time, even though salvation is by faith alone, and faith is being sure. Can your “sureness” grow?

Yes. Think of it as faith maturing to adulthood. Consider Mark 9:20–27. The father of a demon possessed boy appeals to Jesus to heal his son. He expresses weak faith when he says, “*But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.*” Jesus responds credulously, “*If you can! All things are possible for one who believes.*”

Then the boy’s father cries out, “*I believe; help my unbelief!*” Jesus responds by casting out the demon, which heals the boy.

So what does that mean?

Well, needless to say, after Jesus cast out the demon, the father’s unbelief was “helped.” Seeing the supernatural solidifies your belief in the supernatural. Jesus granted the father’s request perfectly. If faith is being sure, this guy now has vastly increased faith.

But, do not miss that his faith was well short of mature before the healing. What was his faith based on?

He must have heard of Jesus and of His reputation; that’s why he came to Him. He believed something about Jesus, maybe even that He’s the Messiah.

Right, and Jesus casting out the demon sealed the deal. It’s all true!

What is true?

Good question. For this guy, what he realized is that the rumors he had heard about Jesus are true. He doesn’t have an accurate, or complete, understanding of Christian theology though. Concepts like incarnation are presumably completely foreign to him.

And Jesus doesn't go on to say anything about whether this guy's faith gets him into heaven. It's all just an example of his movement up the faith ladder.

Most importantly, this passage is a beautiful portrait of one of the ways faith can be strengthened—personal experience of the presence of God.

Wow. That's pretty bizarre. You're claiming you can personally experience the presence of God. Explain that one.

If you want to experience the presence of God—and who doesn't?—the key is prayer. Prayer, especially prayer that seeks direction, is a “lens” through which you can see God. Without prayer, things just happen. With prayer, things happen in context.

I've used Gideon's prayer about the fleece before. Let's look at it from a different point of view. What if Gideon hadn't prayed for God's guidance?

Then Gideon said to God, “If you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said, behold, I am laying a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said.” And it was so. When he rose early next morning and squeezed the fleece, he wrung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water. Then Gideon said to God, “Let not your anger burn against me; let me speak just once more. Please let me test just once more with the fleece. Please let it be dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground let there be dew.” And God did so that night; and it was dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground there was dew. — Judges 6:36–40 (ESV)

Without his prayers, Gideon would have thought the unusual dew patterns were bizarre, but they would be meaningless.

But, in context, they were profound, faith building insights. Gideon's “lens prayer” allowed him to see God's hand in what was right in front of him. That made all the difference.

But you already said that that was an extraordinary event.

Oh yeah. Experiencing the presence of God is definitely an extraordinary event. It doesn't happen often, but when it does, it sticks.

I still don't get how this fits into the sola fide thing.

Salvation comes from membership in the kingdom. Membership comes from professing fealty to its king—Jesus Christ. That, in turn, comes from faith.

But faith grows. You can memorize, and sincerely believe, that parachutes work, but your faith in them is different after you've actually survived jumping out of an airplane.

That makes sense for parachutes. I'm not sure about it for theology. Let's talk more tomorrow.

Dialogue 35 — Apologetics

Acts 17:22–23 (NKJV)

Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription:

TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.

Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you:

I still don’t understand what faith is and isn’t—especially saving faith.

Faith can be divided into three levels—none, faith in something, and faith in Christ. Many non-Christians would say that they don’t believe that Christianity is true, but they believe that something is true. They’re convinced that the universe isn’t random. Something else is going on; they’re just not sure what. These people can be close to being Christians, yet they’re definitely not there yet.

These are the kind of people Paul preached to in Acts 17. His sermon begins on their terms. He compliments the men of Athens for their faith in “the unknown God.”

In verse 23 he finally gets to the point.

“Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you,”

Still, he just talks about their faith in something until verse 31.

But even with all this excellent lead-in, the crowd reaction to his mention of the resurrection is remarkably close-minded. Some even mocked him. So Paul left.

However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them. — Acts 17:34 (NKJV)

Obviously, you like this approach. You definitely didn’t start out this series with the gospel. You only started talking about “graduating” out of this universe on day 16 of our dialogue. It felt like you were “sneaking in” the gospel.

It’s good to start on someone’s own familiar ground. For the men of Athens, that was the inscription on their altar. For 21st century Americans, it could be almost anything. Christians need to listen to folks for a while to find out what they already believe. If it’s that something is true, then start from there. If they don’t even believe that, then I’d start where I started this series—explaining how we can know that something is true.

That’s why I often use science. This Steven Hawking quote from *A Brief History of Time* is one of my favorites. I’d say it supports the view that something is true.

The laws of Science, as we know them at present, contain many fundamental numbers, like the size of the electric charge of the electron and the ratio of the masses of the proton and the electron. ... The remarkable fact is that the values of these numbers seem to have been very finely adjusted to make possible the development of life. ... One can take this either as evidence of a divine purpose in Creation and the choice of the laws of science or as support for the strong anthropic principle.

Time out. He used the word “*adjusted*”? That sounds like he’s a believer.

Yeah, but a believer in what?

So, you think he just believes that something is true.

Absolutely. Hawking would later co-author *The Grand Design*, which I’ve already explained my disagreement with. I don’t know if that creator is the “something” he was thinking of when he wrote *A Brief History of Time*, but I kind of doubt it. I think the word “adjusted” implies a sentient creator.

Yeah. The “nothing” that is the creator in *The Grand Design* doesn’t sound capable of making adjustments.

Right, but note that my way of presenting theology, which mirrors the tactic used by Paul in the Areopagus, is extremely uncommon nowadays.

I think the belief that something is true is an underappreciated part of our belief that Christianity is true. For example, just yesterday, I talked about experiencing the presence of God and how that strengthens our faith.

But it’s really the underlying belief that something is true that’s strengthened. We’ve already figured out that the something is Christianity.

Curious. I never thought about it that way.

So, when anyone senses God’s presence, or sees His hand in things, they’re sensing that something is true. This can make them ready to hear about God. They should be wondering, “What just happened?”

We should just tell them. To paraphrase Paul’s line in Acts 17:23, “Therefore, this something you suspect is true without knowing, Him I proclaim to you.”

I suppose if something like that happened to me, I’d be more interested than I am.

Of course. You’ve been a remarkably gentle skeptic; some would call you a seeker. I’ve now finished covering Christianity in theory and Christianity in fact. I’d like to move on to Christianity in practice. That means walking through the book of James. You game?

Sure. See you tomorrow.