

## Response:

Rev. Lanning:

I am glad to read that you find between us areas of agreement. Especially important is that you can accept calling faith a ‘doing,’ though only “as long as calling faith a ‘doing’ only means that faith is an activity, but in no way, shape, or form means that faith is a work.”

You should have no fear of that. In no place have I called or labeled our faith a work. To do so, would create a confusion of categories. They are to be distinguished.

You write that we are in agreement that faith is an *activity*. I am happy to hear that.

You indicate that we can agree that the regenerated child of God is *able* to believe and that faith is the *necessary* means of salvation. That is encouraging.

You also indicate (in your third paragraph from the end) that faith is *obedience* to the gospel’s call.

Thus, in sum, we may say that you teach that 1) faith is an activity, 2) faith is obedience to the gospel call, 3) faith is a ‘doing’ (carefully defined), and 4) man actually does believe. It means we have a common basis for discussion.

That said, it becomes apparent, however, that there are still areas where we disagree. You state, “However, I still object to the teaching in your original editorial of October 1, 2018,” and then you list various statements found in my editorial and my letters of response. For instance, my statements, “If a man would be saved, there is that which he must do.” And again, “...there was something [the Jews and jailer under the conviction of their guilt before God] were called to do, and they did it.”

I found that somewhat surprising. Earlier you stated that you could accept calling faith a ‘doing’ as long as faith (our believing) was not viewed as a work; now you state that you find fault with the above statements. Evidently, you still basically object to calling faith (believing) a ‘doing,’ something that one in response to the gospel call is called to do. And apparently that is especially so if the word *doing* is found preceded by an “if” clause—“*if* you would be saved, this is what you are to do (by which the apostle would have meant, are *called* to do), repent and believe.”

You state in the next paragraph that you object because you believe that my wording “changes the message of the gospel,” which, you are convinced is “really what we are dealing with in this whole discussion.”

This brings us to the heart of the issue. However, what we differ over is not the *gospel*, which is to say, the content of the gospel; rather, what we differ over is the *call* of the gospel.

To be sure, if what I present as the call of the gospel is not Reformed and confessional, which is to say biblical, then I am guilty of having corrupted the gospel—salvation

somehow depending on a man and his doing. But if what I have presented is biblical and confessional, one cannot say that I have tampered with the gospel message. But it can be said that what you are advocating is a deficient view of the call of the gospel, refusing to allow or countenance what has confessional and biblical approval.

That is the issue.

Let us see.

As you put it in your tenth paragraph, “Is the gospel message: ‘If a man would be saved, there is that which he must do?’ I maintain that this is not the gospel. It is not the good news of salvation in Christ.”

I agree with you. That is not the gospel. But it does have to do with the *call* of the gospel. If a man would be saved, there is that which he is called to do. The question is, “What is he called to do?” He is called to repent and believe. And believing is always shorthand for “putting one’s complete trust in Christ Jesus for salvation, for the forgiveness of sins, and the assurance of eternal life.” To refer to repenting and believing as that which the hearer is called to do, is not unreformed.

Such, I maintain, is in complete harmony with the Reformed and biblical truth and manner of preaching. As is clear from his sermons on the Acts 2 passage, Calvin himself had no trouble with that language and interpretation. And Calvin is not a man we would want too quickly to charge with teaching a work-righteousness.

To guard against any misunderstanding, first, we state once again the sense in which we are speaking of salvation. As stated in earlier articles, we are not speaking of salvation in the sense of believing in order to obtain the life of regeneration or the right to enter into Christ’s kingdom. Rather, we are speaking of salvation in the sense of laying hold on the blessings of salvation for one’s self, that this forgiveness that is to be found in Christ Jesus alone is for me, and of appropriating to oneself these blessings of salvation.

And second, we are speaking of believing as a ‘doing’ in the sense that one exercises Christ’s gift of faith as required. This is in accordance with Christ’s own words when He addressed the father of the demon-possessed lad, who asked Christ if He could do anything for his son. Christ in response makes plain that the issue was not whether He had the power to heal and save this son. The issue was, “If *thou canst* believe, all things are possible to him that believeth” (Mark 9:22, 23).

Could this father of *himself* believe? Of course not, contrary to all Arminian assertions. But could *this* father believe? Yes. Because he was a born-again child of God who had the seed of this faith in himself. Which faith we confess to be God’s work. What the text is surely underscoring as well, however, is the importance

of *actively* believing, God’s gift of faith being *exercised*, as he was confronted by Christ.

What this text places before us is language that is legitimate when it comes to the call of the gospel. Christ himself used it. Christ even uses the word ‘if’, indicating that the use of an ‘if’ clause in the gospel call does not make one, by that very fact, guilty of conditional theology.

What the text underscores is that the father himself believed, doing what Christ required of him. In preaching this text, if the vital importance of faith, of one’s believing, is not stressed (be it a weak and wavering faith), one has failed to do full justice to the text. The “must” of believing—of taking Christ at His word, of embracing Christ—and that being emphasized as we preach the gospel, even to believers, is vital to biblical gospel preaching.

And if it is biblical, it in no way detracts from God’s glory or that salvation is all of grace, contrary to what some seem to fear.

As you lay it out in your tenth paragraph, the gospel is what Christ has done for sinners. “The message of the gospel is never me and my doing, but always and exclusively Jesus Christ and His doing—His complete, wonderful, saving, redeeming doing. And thanks be to God, this is what the gospel says to poor sinners such as you and me.”

With that we are in full agreement. Unless, that is, by your phrase that the gospel is always “exclusively Jesus Christ and His doing,” you mean that it is Jesus who really does the believing for us or in us. You would insist you do not maintain that. We do not doubt that is true. But the question is this, in the end does not what you object to gospel preachers having the right to say, and all that you would dare have them say, essentially lead to that conclusion? It appears that all you would permit a preacher to say in gospel preaching is, “Jesus does it all.”

My point is, that to speak of our repenting and believing in terms of what we are called to do in response to the gospel call, namely believe, and then our doing that, does not contradict the fact that we confess that Christ has done it all when it comes to accomplishing and working out our salvation. Such does not deny that it is He who provides the one only basis for our salvation, is the One who has obtained the right to regenerate us, and then grants to His sheep the gift of faith.

But as well (and this is something that is not to be forgotten), it is He who is really calling forth the faith, though it is through the mouth and words of the gospel preacher.

This is in accordance with the Canons, with its emphasis upon ‘by grace and grace alone.’ As the Canons declare, “Wherefore also, man is himself rightly said to believe and repent by virtue of the grace received.”

You ask rhetorically (in a list of parallel phrases), “Does

the gospel say this: If you want to be saved, here is the obedience you must render (by the Spirit's power, of course?) To which I reply, No, that is not the gospel. The gospel sets before sinners who Christ Jesus is and what He, through His atoning death, according to the will of a righteous and merciful God, has done for sinners.

But having set forth the gospel, namely, that the God whom we have so highly offended is yet a God of mercy, the preacher utters the *call* of the gospel. What is the proper response? This: "He who with heart-felt conviction desires to be (would be) saved, must repent and believe (in the name and work of this Lord Jesus)."

We have no reservations about the words "you *must*." In the present dispute troubling our churches it has become clear that there are those who have serious reservations about the word "*must*" when it comes to the gospel call. As though that somehow turns repentance and faith into a work, a work for which we take credit.

Not so. Why not? Because, as you point out, faith is of a unique character, different from all other forms of obedience, a word you also indicated could be properly used in connection with faith (third paragraph from the end). It is unique as to its *activity*, in that it turns away from self and one's own works and worth, and it is unique as to its *object*, casting one's self completely on the work, righteousness, and mercy of God found in Christ Jesus.

And because faith, the faith we are called to exercise and exhibit, is unique in its character, it does not fall in the category of a work, nor as something on which it can be said our salvation depends.

We call attention to that last phrase, "nor as something on which it can be said our salvation *depends*," because you continue to assert that my statements imply that the call of the gospel *suspends* man's salvation upon man's doing and activity of believing. You also asserted this in your first letter, only you used the words "depend upon" rather than "suspends."

My reply remains the same: it does not. Rather, the call of the gospel makes plain what God has most graciously joined together, namely, that the one (believing) has been made the means to the other (the *necessary* instrument, if you will), without which a man will not be saved. By this we mean, apart from faith one cannot know forgiveness and approving love, appropriating it for oneself. As long as Saul of Tarsus kicked against the pricks (the truth of the gospel and the stabbing call [command] to put away his work righteousness and cast himself completely on the mercy of God in Jesus as the Christ), he *was not saved*, which is to say, not in the sense of *conscious* union with Christ and enjoyment of all His benefits.

A parallel truth that reveals this connection is prayer.

We are commanded to pray and confess our sins. It is required of us. "If you do not pray to God, confessing that sin, you will not be forgiven!" Elders in discipline must state it that way. Does it now follow that one is teaching that God is granting us what we need *depends* (or is suspended) on one's praying? No, but only that the one—prayer—is the *necessary means* to obtaining the other: the spiritual benefits we have sought. Why? Simply because God has graciously determined that that is how He will work. Prayer does not make us worthy, and it is not something about which a spiritual man can or will boast. But pray we do. And all one can do is marvel that God is so gracious as to work that way.

So it is with faith, the faith we exercise in response to the call of the gospel, as Christ through the preacher speaks powerfully, drawing His own.

Now comes the question: What are we preachers allowed and even called to declare when we call men and women to believe in the Lord Jesus as their Savior and Lord? Is this the sum and substance of it: "*Sirs, if you would be saved, you must have Jesus Christ, the Savior*"? That, of course, is how you conclude your letter.

Is that all the missionary dares to say to an inquiring hearer?

We realize you would also be willing to say "repent and believe." But to phrase it this way? Is that the most orthodox and acceptable manner in which to describe the gospel *call*? Does that describe the repentance and faith to which a convicted sinner is *called*?

Such is inadequate. Faith as the act of believing is an embracing, a renouncing of, a turning unto, a casting of oneself upon Christ.... And the list could be added to.

Let me put it this way, brother Lanning: If you are willing to answer the jailer's question by using your own earlier definitions of faith, you would be lining up with Scripture's explanation of gospel preaching. Your answer to the jailer would be: "You must believe in Jesus; that is, you must embrace Him, come to Him, cast yourself upon Him, know Him." If you advocate hesitancy against saying such, you would leave us with a severely truncated gospel call, limiting and muzzling the urgency of the gospel call as it confronts sinners. It is not the language of apostolic and Reformed preaching through the New Testament age, to say nothing of the Old Testament prophets. They were bold and challenging. The prophets, having presented to their hearers the goodness, mercy, and righteousness of God, confronted Israel with their defilement and sins, and then in decisive terms set before the hearers what their calling was. Yes, what they were to do if they were to be spared the wrath of God. One thinks of Joel, who in the context of warning of the coming of that great and terrible day of

the LORD (“Who can abide it” [2:11]), proceeds to say “Therefore also now, saith the LORD, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping.... And rend your hearts and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God: For he is gracious and merciful...” (2:12, 13).

That is language of activity and what God’s Israel, with great urgency, was called to do. “While it is to-day!” And those who refused? Expect to perish.

Again, we return to your statement, “If a man would be saved, he must have Jesus Christ, the Savior.” To be sure, to be saved one must *have* the Lord Jesus. But the question is, *how* am I saved (consciously)? Only by

responding in faith to the call of the gospel that has declared Jesus to be the one only Savior and Lord.

What distinguishes the elect from the reprobate, the spiritual from the carnal, is that they alone are able to do such—having been made willing in the day of Christ’s power. And the saved, believing sinner is moved to give all the glory and credit to his Savior Lord.

That salvation is by grace and grace alone, and by Christ and Christ alone has not been compromised. And the urgency of hearkening to the call of the gospel has been underscored.

In interest of the fullness of gospel preaching,

*Rev. K. Koole*