

## Vision Casting: inclusivity and Gospel-centeredness

This is Alpha Talk #4: How Can I be Sure of My Faith?

- Have you ever been in love? It's a dizzying feeling that causes you to do all sorts of silly things.
- When I first met Booyeon in New York City we dated for two weeks until she moved to Tokyo for her career. I remember my brother living with me at that time and being subjected to my mushy, long phone calls while in our small apartment. But he knew that something was different with me—something had changed.

Paul writes to the Christians at Corinth (2 Corinthians 5:17 (The Living Bible)). He said:

“When someone becomes a Christian, he becomes a brand new person inside. He is not the same anymore. A new life has begun!”

What does it mean to become a Christian? What is a Christian?

- Some people refer to a person as a Christian if that person is nice person. Some people act nice and all and they equate that with being a Christian and going to heaven.
- Some refer to a Christian as someone born into a so-called Christian country. But being born in a Christian country does not make you a Christian as much as being in a McDonald's would make you a hamburger. It doesn't follow.
- Others say, I believe in God. But this is not enough. St. James says even the devil believes in God. That's not enough.
- A Christian is someone who has Christ in them. Someone who follows Christ. Someone who has a relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

- Relationships are exciting. And our relationship with God ought to be the most exciting relationship of them all. Imagine a relationship with someone who's always there to listen to your problems. Always there to party with you. Always there to cry with you. They're never late (though you might have messed up the time). They turn water into wine and party into the night. Yet they also take time to go on a walk through the mountains with you and listen while you vent. Wouldn't that be a great relationship? A relationship with God is the most exciting thing.

How do we get into a relationship like this?

- How this happens varies enormously.
  - For some, it's a very sudden thing. They know the exact date. Before that, they weren't a Christian.
  - Others, it's a gradual process. They don't know when it happened but they know now that they are Christians.

C.S. Lewis put it like this: Some people go from Paris to Berlin by day. They know exactly when they crossed the border. Others travel by night, and they wake up in Berlin. They don't know when they crossed the border. The important thing is that they know they are in Berlin. It doesn't matter that you can't put your finger on the exact moment. The important thing is that you are there.

And, yet, many people are unsure of whether they're in a relationship with God or not.

- At the end of an Alpha course, we pass out a questionnaire to people about the course. One of the questions we ask is this: "Would you have described yourself as a Christian at the beginning of the course?" Here are some responses to surveys done at other churches:
  - Yes, but without any real experience of a relationship.
  - Sort of

- Not sure
- Ish
- No, a semi-Christian
- Yes, though looking back possibly no.

Let's say you go up to my wife Booyeon and ask her: "Are you married?" And she says,

- Yes, but without any real experience of a relationship.
- Or sort of.
- Or not sure.
- Or Ish.
- No, but semi-married
- Or Yes, though looking back possibly no.

## **II. God wants us to be sure about our relationship with him.**

- **How is it possible to be sure?**
- **Well, our confidence is based on a three things. Think of a video camera being supported by 3 legs of a tripod:**
  - **The Word of God**
  - **The Work of Jesus**
  - **The Experience of the Spirit**

### **A. First leg of the Tripod is the word of God.**

- Our confidence is based on fact. Not just on feeling.
- If you asked me how I know that I am married, one answer is this. Here is my marriage certificate **(Slide 1)**. This is proof that we were married on September 3, 2006. It's a document that I can point to.
- In a similar way, if you asked me how can I be sure I'm a Christian, I would point to this book, to this document, it is the word of God that gives us this knowledge.
- Our feelings are changeable. They can go up and down.

- The story of my love for the Dallas Cowboys. My faith in the team goes up and down based on my feelings on whether or not they're playing well. If they win, I wear my Cowboys sweatshirt proudly. If they lose, I hide from being a fan. I go up and down.
- Our lives are often like that. We go up and down.
- And if we based our faith on that and say "Are you are Christian?" Oh, yes, I am a Christian. Following day: "Are you a Christian." And you say, "no, I feel terrible. I am not a Christian." It's not like that. It's based on facts. It's based on the word of God.
- God makes promises to us in this Word, just like a marriage certificate is a promise of sorts—recorded in history at a specific date and time with witnesses.
- The Word of God is a written record of all God has done for His people and all he plans to do in the future.
- There are days where one can feel more or less connected to their spouse—but it doesn't change the marriage certificate one bit.
- The Word of God stands independent of us, authored by God, and shows us how we are to be in a relationship with God.

How are we to be in a relationship with God?

**For example, would you like to turn to Revelations 3:20. (Slide 2)** This is one of the many analogies that the Bible uses to describe how we come into a relationship with God. The picture here is that Jesus is standing at the door of the church (and the church is composed of individuals and so it applied to every single one of us). And Jesus says this. Imagine that your life is like a house. Jesus says this:

- "Here I am. I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, and I will come in and eat with him and they with me."

- Holman Hunt, the Pre-Raphaelite painter, inspired by this verse, painted “The Light of the World.” **(Slide 3)**
- In this painting, the door is overgrown with weeds and ivy. This door is the door to someone’s life.
  - Jesus is knocking and standing at the door and waiting.
  - Jesus wants to have a relationship with this person.
  - Someone said to Holman Hunt: you made a mistake. You forgot to put a handle.
  - He said, no. it’s not a mistake. The handle is on the inside only.
  - In other words, we have to open the door and let Jesus go inside. He is not going to force himself in. He gives us the freedom.
- But if we do open the door and invite him in, he promises to come in and eat with him.
- That is what God promises in his Word to everyone who put their faith in him. He writes in a document which came long before us with promises that are still true. There are facts about the way God’s interacted with people throughout time.
- We are put keep our eyes on the facts, not to constantly look at our feelings.

That’s the first thing: the Word of God. That’s how we know that we have a relationship with God.

## **B. The second leg of the tripod is the work of Jesus.**

The work of Jesus is done and not to do. It is all about what Jesus has done for us.

- If you were to ask me again, how do you know you are married, there is a second answer I could give. **(Slide 4)** That is, “I know I’m married because an event took place in Anaheim on September 3, 2006 (I better not forget that day!) It’s an event in history you can point to.

- If you say to someone, How do you know you're a Christian, they can say, because of an event in history, because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That's what assures us. This is a gift that helps us know God is still there.
- Would you like to turn to Romans 6:23? **(Slide 5)** We focused on the first part of the verse last week. I want to focus on the second part of the verse this week. Paul says:
 

“For the wages of sin is death *but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” As many versions put it, the “*free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*”
- I don't know what you think when you hear about free gift. I am very cynical when it comes to free gifts. I get these types of offers all the time in my email—a free cruise, a free trip to the Bahamas or that dude in Africa promising you part of his inheritance. (Don't laugh, that was my cousin....) I think: I bet there's a catch.
- And so, we suspect that there must be a catch. It can't really be free. This gift is free but it's not cheap. It's not cheap because it cost Jesus his life to make it available to us. Would you like to turn to 2 Corinthians 5:21 **(Slide 6)**:
  - Paul goes one step further in this verse:
 

“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us. so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” God made his own son dirty with the filth of our lives because it was the only way we could give us a clean gift with a nice white bow in a nice white package.
  - How do we receive the gift?
    - We receive it by repentance and faith.
    - So, what is faith?
      - Faith is basically trust. It's putting your trust in a person.
      - Marriage is an act of faith: putting your trust in another person. It's something that we do. It's a choice that we make.
      - But faith isn't just analogous to marriage. It's putting your money where your mouth is. Faith is taken in each step of your day—you take it on faith that when you go to sleep, you'll wake up. You take it on faith that driving here to church means that others are going to obey

the traffic laws—which is probably a bigger leap of faith than Christianity ☺

- Let me illustrate from the life of Charles Blondin. His real name was Jean-Francois Gravelet and he was a tightrope walker, acrobat who lived in the last century.
  - And his trick was to walk on tightrope across the Niagara Falls. He used to walk 1100 foot, 160 foot above the Niagara Falls, on this tightrope.
  - And what he would do is to walk across and sometime he would put a man on his back and carry him across, sometimes he would stop in the middle and cook himself a fried egg and eat it.
  - Crowds would come a watch him. At one time, a royal party from England came to watch, including a Duke.
  - What Blondin did on that occasion is to walk back and forth and then he took a wheelbarrow, and he wheeled that back and forth. Then he took a sack of potatoes and he put the sack of potatoes in the wheelbarrow and walked that back and forth. The crowds loved it. They thought it was absolutely fantastic.
  - Then he went up to this group, the royal party, and he said to the Duke: “ you’ve seen me do it with a wheelbarrow and with a sack of potatoes. Do you believe I could put a human being in here and wheel them across and wheel and back?” The Duke said: “Yes, I believe. I’ve seen what you can do.” And he said “Hop in.”
  - That is faith, hopping in! It’s one thing to say I believe and another thing to hop in.
  - There are very good reasons why you wouldn’t want to hop into that wheelbarrow because you might not necessarily trust Blondin. But Jesus is trustworthy and there are very good reasons for us to hop in and put our trust him.

So, that is the second leg of the tripod—the work of Jesus. It is a free gift of God based on when Jesus died on the cross outside of Jerusalem approximately 2000 years ago and rose from the dead 3 days later to cosmically defeat sin and death.

**C. The third leg of the tripod is the witness of the Holy Spirit.**

- To go back to the question, if you were to ask me how do I know I am married? I can point to the certificate, I could point to an event that took place here; but also I could point to 1.5 years—and trust me, you can pack a lot into a year and a half—in **the experience of marriage. (Slide 7)** Trust me, there have been many more good times. Booyeon is amazing.
- And if you asked someone how do you know you are a Christian, they can point to the Bible, they can point to what Jesus did for them on the cross and through the resurrection. They can also speak about their experience of a relationship with him.
- We looked earlier at that verse in Revelation 3:20: Jesus standing at the door and knocking. If anyone opens the door he will come in. He comes in by his Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit comes to live within us. And it's the Holy Spirit that gives us the experience of God.

1. What the Holy Spirit does is to begin to change us from within. I know sometimes people are very worried about that and they say “I don't really want to change. What will I become?” Paul tells us. Would you like to turn to Galatians 5:22-23? **(Slide 8)**

What would happen to us if the Spirit of God lives within us?

“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

Paul says you will become more like these characteristics. The fruit of the Spirit. This is what will grow in our lives. It doesn't grow over night.

- When I learned to play guitar I felt awkward, clumsy and stupid. No way was I going to be able to look like a the sexy, ultimate, hardcore rock star **(Slide 9)** and

impress Booyeon (which is why I learned to play guitar). I was told by the person teaching me “Relax, it takes time. Soon, you’ll turn around and you’ll look like a rock star without even noticing it.” Little did he know it would be 6 years later and I still look like a dork when I play guitar.

- What Paul is saying that gradually we will become more like these characteristics.

Our relationship to God will begin to change as well.

- You know, I don’t know whether anyone here has noticed a change even in the last couple of weeks. How you feel about God?

And then our attitude to others will change as well.

This is not just a selfish thing, though. The whole point is that we should go out, to serve, to help. The needs of the world are so great. What happens when the Holy Spirit begins to live within us is that he gives us an increasing desire to do something about that.

**Slide 10 is omitted. Skip to slide 11**

### III. Conclusion (Slide 11)

- We know that we have a relationship with God because of the Word of God. We know that if we ask him in, he will come in.
- We know it because of the work of Jesus—that Jesus died for us, to make it possible for us to have a right relationship with God.
- And we know it because we experience his Spirit telling us, changing us within and prompting us to grow in our lives

May we pray?