

# SUNDAY ARTICLE

ST DAVID'S PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ♦ 30 OCTOBER 2016



## Faith Is a Gift

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Any theological system worth its salt affirms that faith is a gift from God rather than the exercise of some innate power of the human soul. But that affirmation can be misleading, particularly if our notion of “gift” is determined by the culture of gift-giving and gift-receiving that we currently inhabit.

In our day, we tend to think of gifts as something we may or may not want, and may or may not actually keep. The assumption that gifts can be refused is so engrained in our modern way of life that we include “gift receipts” with gifts given in order, rather bizarrely, to facilitate their rejection on the part of those to whom we give them.

The danger, then, is that in speaking of faith as a divine gift, we think of it as something analogous to those argyle socks that Aunt Gertrude sends us every Christmas. Argyle socks may appeal to some (personally I’m a fan), but many are likely to return the socks in favour of a DVD or some fancy accessory for their smart phones. But Faith isn’t that kind of a gift.

Faith is the kind of gift that transforms its recipient into one who deeply values it (because he supremely values its object) and henceforth longs for more of it. Genuine, saving faith is not given or received with a “gift receipt.” There are absolutely no returns on the faith that God gifts to those upon whom he has set his saving affection before the foundation of the world.

Faith, in other words, is entirely unique in the genus of gifts. If anyone else has discovered another gift that by its very nature renders its recipient desirous of it, please, please, let me know – I’d like to order whatever it is for my wife well in advance of Christmas.

Because faith is unique compared to presents we might give or receive, we must define our terms very carefully when speaking of it as “gift.” Fortunately, our Christian tradition is rather rich in resources for doing just that.

Three individuals/resources stand out to me for how they properly clarify faith’s character as gift: Augustine, the Canons of Dort, and Francis.

### **Augustine on Faith as Gift**

The late fourth/early fifth century Church Father Augustine unambiguously names faith as a divine gift in his work *On the Predestination of the Saints*: “Faith, then, as well in its beginning as in its completion, is God’s gift; and let no one have any doubt whatever, unless he desires to resist the plainest sacred writings, that this gift is given to some, while to some it is not given.”

Augustine describes the transformative nature of this gift in numerous writings. So for instance he notes in *The Gift of Perseverance* that “[God] himself...gives to...unbelievers the gift of faith, and makes willing men out of those that were unwilling.”

And again in *On the Predestination of the Saints* he writes concerning faith: “This grace, therefore, which is hiddenly bestowed in human hearts by the Divine gift, is rejected by no hard heart, because it is given for the sake of first taking away the hardness of the heart.”

### **The Canons of Dort on Faith as Gift**

The Canons of Dort similarly identify faith as a divine and transformative gift: “Faith in Jesus Christ...and salvation through him is a free gift of God...The fact that some receive from God the gift of faith within time, and that others do not, stems from his eternal decree...In accordance with this decree God graciously softens the hearts, however hard, of the elect and inclines them to believe, but by a just judgment God leaves in their wickedness and hardness of heart those who have not been chosen.”

The transformative nature of God’s gift-giving to his people is re-emphasized further on in the Canons: “When God...works true conversion [in his elect], God not only sees to it that the gospel is proclaimed to them outwardly and enlightens their minds powerfully by the Holy Spirit so that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God, but, by the effective operation of the same regenerating Spirit, he also penetrates into the inmost being of man, opens the closed heart, softens the hard heart, and circumcises the heart that is uncircumcised. He infuses new qualities into the will, making the dead will alive, the evil one good, the unwilling one willing, and the stubborn one

compliant; he activates and strengthens the will so that, like a good tree, it may be enabled to produce the fruits of good deeds.”

### Francis on Faith as Gift

With all due deference to Augustine and Dort, no individual has influenced or informed my understanding of faith's nature as gift more than Francis. Not Francis of Assisi. Not Rome's current pope. But Mike Francis, senior pastor of Immanuel Presbyterian Church (PCA) in DeLand, Florida.

Mike has influenced and informed my understanding of faith's nature as gift less by his teaching (though also certainly by that) than by the events of his own life.

My wife and I moved from Scotland to Central Florida in the summer of 2013. We began attending Immanuel Presbyterian Church the week we arrived, and were blessed to sit under Mike Francis's teaching for nearly two years. Mike is hands down the best preacher I've ever heard. He's also the most faithful shepherd of a congregation's souls that I've ever met. Until the day I die, Mike will stand out in my mind as the model of what a Christian pastor should be.

In May of 2015 Mike suffered a heart attack while cycling several miles from his house in Deland. His heart stopped beating. He was subsequently revived. Fourteen minutes elapsed between the point at which he climbed or fell off his bicycle at the side of the road and the point at which the paramedics revived him.

Mike suffered an anoxic brain injury as a result of his heart attack. When he awoke from a coma and eventually spoke in the weeks after his injury, it became evident that Mike had lost much of his short-term and long-term memory. Close friends and members of his congregation – individuals Mike had prayed for, preached to, wept and rejoiced with – were strangers to him.

When Mike first returned to the corporate worship of Immanuel Presbyterian Church, he would approach individuals after the service and introduce himself with these words: “I'm Mike. Have I already spoken to you today?” Ten seconds after the conclusion of such a conversation, Mike would have no memory of it. There was every possibility he would return to you in minutes, saying “I'm Mike. Have I already spoken to you today?”

It's a terrible thing to witness an individual's loss of memory. One realizes in such situations just how substantially memory is central to friendships and identity. In a very real sense, Mike was stripped of both by his accident. He was surrounded by persons who loved (and still love) him, but the fundamental bond of human friendship – shared (and remembered) experiences – was broken. He knew his name, but the narrative that was his life – the narrative that defined him to himself and others – was lost to him.

But Mike retained one thing fully intact despite the loss of so much that defined him: his faith that Jesus Christ has lived and died for him, and so secured his inheritance of eternal life with God and with God's people.

Several weeks after his accident, Mike awoke from his coma a confused man but a strong believer in Jesus Christ. I visited Mike in the hospital when he was in a semi-comatose state, and I wondered whether Mike would ever fully awake.

I visited Mike in the hospital after he awoke, and I wondered if he would ever speak. Six months after his accident Mike stood up at a congregational gathering of our church and admitted to his congregation that his entire life had changed as a result of his accident. He then added, with more than a spark of the enthusiasm and passion that characterized his preaching for so many years, that one thing had not changed: His relationship with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, a relationship founded on the saving work of God the Son incarnate for him.

Faith is a gift, and truly “the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom. 11.29). That reality became increasingly clear to me as I witnessed Mike's life and conversation following his accident. Stripped of nearly everything that defined him, Mike still had faith. Mike still had faith because his faith was never a product of his own intellect or volition. It was God's gift to him.

The reality that faith is God's gift became, in fact, one of the most powerful lessons Mike ever taught his congregation. He taught that lesson unwittingly, and with a childlike simplicity and beauty that words cannot obtain. Indeed, he's still teaching that lesson to the members of Immanuel Presbyterian Church. And I suspect that God has many more lessons yet to teach his people in Deland and beyond through Mike Francis.

Please pray to God for further healing and peace for Rev Mike Francis, comfort and endurance for Mike's immediate family members, and wisdom for the session of Immanuel Presbyterian Church as they chart a forward course for Mike and the congregation.



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