

FAITH

D.B. Knox.

"THE PROTESTANT FAITH"

Some years ago President Eisenhower addressed a group of churchmen of which I was a member on the theme of "Faith". It was a safe subject to eulogise to such an audience, but it must be remembered that faith in itself is no virtue, but takes its value from the object towards which it is exercised. If this object is false, then faith is sin. Thus faith in an idol is wrong because its object is worthless. It is misplaced faith. There is a good deal of this misplaced superstitious faith in our community these days, such as touching wood, or wearing a lucky charm or praying to the saints or consulting the stars. Such faith is wrong because its object is unworthy of faith. Sometimes, although it may be right to exercise faith, it is not right to exercise complete faith in our object, thus it is good to have faith in human nature and in our fellow men, but it is foolish, and indeed wrong, to have blind faith which ignores the possibility of let down.

But when we turn to Christian faith, we recall that the object of faith is God Himself. He alone is the absolutely trustworthy object of faith. Faith in Him is always good and indeed our duty. Such faith should always be absolute, never partial. Indeed to have anything else than complete faith in God is a reflection on God's character. It is a form of sin; yet it is a sin characteristic of humanity. For in practice we do not put that faith in God which His perfections - His love, His power and His wisdom demand that we should exercise towards Him. Men and women say they believe in God; but they don't trust Him; they don't obey Him; they don't seek Him. This is our essential sin. For it is grossly insulting, to say nothing worse, that we should acknowledge God as good, wise and powerful, and yet ignore Him and fail to trust Him. Is this your sin? How different the world would be if we could overcome this sin. It should be our deepest desire that the world should acknowledge and trust God and to do this for ourselves should be our supreme aim. The prayer that Jesus taught us begins, "Hallowed be Thy name"; that is, that God's character might be recognized by mankind for what it is, and that the world might react in conformity to this character of love, power and trustworthiness, in short, that God might be honoured as God.

Lack of faith in God is humanity's basic sin, and we see this sin reflected in the story of man's origin in the book of Genesis. You will remember that the setting of the Genesis story is the Garden of Eden. There God had provided for man every blessing. The garden was full of trees of which man might freely eat: one alone was forbidden

and that for a very good reason, for God had told Adam "In the day you eat of it you will certainly die". The Devil's temptation took the form of doubting God's truthfulness, and impugning God's motives of goodness and care. The serpent told Eve "You will not certainly die" and went on to suggest that the reason for the prohibition was not man's welfare, but rather God had His own interests in mind; the Devil said "God knows that when you eat of it you will be like Him, knowing good and evil". The temptation was accepted; God's Word was disbelieved and His character of goodness and love denied by the action of disobeying His command. By disobedience Adam showed that he did not trust God, but rather he felt bound to look after his own interests himself, by following his own wisdom, rather than in faith obeying the clear commands of His Creator.

Since then, humanity has been cursed with this same contradictory attitude, of believing in God (at least in theory) while ignoring Him and disobeying Him in practice; by such disobedience we make clear that we do not believe that God is trustworthy. This is our fundamental sin; this is the grossest of insults that we could offer to our loving Creator, to acknowledge Him as God, but at the same time to withdraw our trust from Him. Of all men who have ever lived only Jesus Christ has been completely free from this sinful lack of faith. Jesus' life was characterized by perfect faith and trust, expressed in perfect obedience, even though this obedience led along the bitter path of Calvary. As St. Paul put it in Philippians "Jesus Christ became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross". This obedience was the result of unflinching faith, a faith illustrated perhaps most clearly in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus prayed most earnestly that the cup of the cross might be taken away from Him, but added in perfect faith, "Nevertheless not my will but thine be done"; and a little later this same faith was expressed in His words to His disciples "the cup which my Father hath given me shall I not drink it?" (John 18:11). By exercising perfect faith Jesus has become for us the "author and perfecter of faith, who, for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is now sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high". (Hebrews 12:2). We are to look to Him and imitate His faith as we run the race of life.

Chronic lack of faith in God, leading to continual disobedience, characterises the world's present state and brings us all under the wrath of God. Perfect obedience, leading to the victory of Calvary, where Christ died in our stead, becoming a curse for us as He bore our sins, and which was crowned with the triumph of the resurrection, is God's answer to man's sin. Our disobedience is matched by Christ's obedience of faith. We are not, therefore, surprised that the way we obtain salvation is through faith. It is "from faith to faith". This is constantly reiterated throughout the New Testament; "Only believe" were our Lord's words to the centurion in Mark 5:35, and when the prison warden at Philippi asked the Apostles how he could be saved, the reply was simply "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved and your house" (Acts 16:31). The way of salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ: faith in His sin bearing death for us, faith in His Lordship through that death, faith in Him as the coming King. In short, the way of salvation is through our own personal faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour who won our salvation through His faith. There is no other way of curing our radical sinfulness or avoiding its condemnation. God in His Word holds out to us the promise of forgiveness in Christ; what is required of us is to believe this promise and so accept it. "Come unto me" said our Lord, "and I will give you rest". We believe Him by coming to Him. Faith is not merely an assent that Jesus said these words, but rather a belief in their truthfulness and this will involve a response to the invitation of "Come unto me." So saving faith is more than mere assent, it is committal; and the reason is simple, Christian faith is exercised towards a person, not merely towards a dogma or an impersonal fact. If we put our faith in a person, this means that we both obey him and love him, so Christian faith brings with it obedience to God's commands and love to God and also to our neighbour; for when we trust our loving Heavenly Father and experience His goodness, then His love flows out from our life, to be shared with others.

As I said earlier, faith takes its character from that towards which it is directed. If it is directed towards something superstitious, it is valueless; if to something unreliable, it is uncertain; but Christian faith is exercised towards God and so is characterised by complete certainty, as well as by personal committal to Him. The

object of Christian faith is God as He has revealed Himself in His Word. Only God's Word is completely trustworthy; and indeed, as we hear God's Word, His Spirit evokes faith in our hearts, because otherwise we would continue on in our unbelieving attitude to that Word as Adam did. Faith in God is His gift to us, which He brings into being through our hearing His Word. That is why it is so important to read and to preach God's Word.

Faith initiates the Christian life, and faith characterises the Christian life throughout its continuance. In this respect faith takes the form of patience, not dogged patience, but the confident patience of waiting for God, trusting His wisdom. As the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it, we are to "run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and perfecter of faith". Every day brings its opportunities of trusting God, of exercising Christian faith in Him and so of honouring God by showing that we know that He is trustworthy, and this is Christian worship.

The controversy of the Reformation turned on this question of the place of faith in the Christian life, and in particular the place of faith in obtaining salvation. The Reformers insisted that faith, that is to say, trust in God's promises and in His provision of forgiveness in Christ, was the way we were to be saved. Their opponents insisted that salvation was won by good works. Thus Cardinal Bellarmine wrote (De Justificatione V,5) "The work of Christ not only deserved of God that we should obtain salvation, but also that we should obtain it by our own merits"; and the Council of Trent (Session 6 Canon 12) anathematized those who "affirm that justifying faith is nothing else than confidence in the divine mercy by which sins are forgiven for Christ's sake". Against such teachings the Reformers quoted St. Paul: "By grace have ye been saved through faith and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God: not of works, that no man should glory" (Eph. 2:8); and "We reckon that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law." (Rom. 3:28); and "no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, ... for, The just shall live by faith." (Gal. 3:11). And there are many similar Bible passages.

One of the reasons why the Reformers' opponents failed to do justice to these biblical truths was a defective idea of what faith was.

The faith of which the New Testament speaks is directed towards God and His promises; it takes its saving character from its object, God himself. But the Catechism of the Council of Trent defined faith merely as assent to the dogmas which the church taught. Thus its opening paragraph speaks of "faith by which we yield our unhesitating assent to whatever authority our holy mother, the church, teaches us to have been revealed by God." So defined, faith is merely assent, an initial step to be augmented by religious activities such as attendance at the sacraments and other good works. But in the New Testament faith looks to God Himself, made known to us in His gracious promises, and does not stop short at any point less than this, and the Scriptures make clear that such a look to God in faith brings us salvation, as well as all the other graces of our Christian life. The Christian life is a life of faith, that is, faith in God. To take one example, we are to cast all our cares on God because we know that He cares for us. And in trouble or disaster we are to humble ourselves under His mighty hand, knowing that He will exalt us in due time (1 Peter 5:6). Jesus Himself has told us that by looking to Him in faith we are saved. He said (John 3:15,16) "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believes in him may have everlasting life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes on him should not perish, but have eternal life." So put your faith in Jesus by believing and acknowledging him as Lord and accepting him as your own boss and commander. For Jesus is saviour and will save you now and for eternity.

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