

Faith

(Preliminary note: Believing and having faith mean the same thing. In the English language we do not speak of a *faither* when referring to a person with faith: we say that he is a *believer*).

We all know how faith and belief are sometimes spoken of in a way designed to cheer people up. A wife says to her husband, "You've got to have faith", and means, "Better times could come, don't give up." Or a person says, "I'm a great believer" to show how he looks on the bright side of every situation. But while we might smile at a use of the words *faith* and *belief* without an object (faith in what or whom) there is a widespread view that faith is a kindly and good quality which can be developed to a high degree in those who pay attention to their religion. This leads to the view that faith in "the spiritual realm" is different from faith in "the secular realm." An important point of contact between "spiritual" and "secular" faith in the minds of some, but particularly religious people, is that faith has power or ability. Is there all that much difference between the man who says, "Sure it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you have faith" and the Roman Catholic who says to the Protestant who rejects the doctrine of transubstantiation, "You should pray for the gift of faith"? In both cases faith is an all important quality which produces results. The Protestant who feels that the evidence produced for transubstantiation is not convincing sees the faith that he is being asked to have as "a leap in the dark", a not uncommon definition. Even the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines theological faith as "spiritual apprehension of divine truth apart from proof."

Since faith occupies a vital place in the Christian life and in particular in teaching about salvation and forgiveness of sin it is important that we ask what faith is. The writer of this paper believes that there are serious flaws in the Roman Catholic conception of faith, flaws which, in particular, affect beliefs concerning salvation from sin.

Quotations

In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* we read that Mary the Lord's mother is the "most perfect embodiment" of the obedience of faith (144; 148), "the purest realization of faith" (149) and the "supreme model" of faith. When we ask how the faith of Mary manifested itself the chief word used is *co-operation*. "The Virgin Mary co-operated through free faith and obedience in human salvation" (511). Vatican II says, "In a wholly singular way she co-operated by her obedience, faith, hope and burning charity in the work of the Saviour" (*Lumen Gentium* 61). So faith is not simply relying on someone, it is co-operating and helping: faith is not just receiving, it includes giving.

The Council of Trent (1545-63), which set out to answer the Reformers, condemned the notion that justifying faith is nothing else than "confidence in the divine mercy that remits sins on account of Christ" (DS 1562). So the faith which saves is more than confidence or trust in God. In the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith* of the first Vatican council (1870) we read that saving faith is "co-operating with God's grace" (DS 3010).

In the explanatory notes in the *Jerusalem Bible* we find phrases such as this one on Genesis 12 and the call of Abraham: "in virtue of this same faith." So faith in God is a virtue.

On Genesis 15 we are told, "The faith of Abraham is an act of trust in a promise ... God acknowledges that this act is worthy of reward, accrediting it to Abraham's 'righteousness', namely to that sum of integrity and humble submission which makes a man pleasing to God." According to this, faith is an act worthy of reward and one which helps make a man pleasing to God.

On Romans 1 the phrase "*the obedience of faith*" is explained as "the obedience implicit in the virtue of faith." And on Romans 4 "*the righteousness of faith*" is explained as "that righteousness which is precisely the act of believing with a living faith."

Everyday conversation

These quotations from *Catechism*, councils and *Jerusalem Bible* notes tell us that faith in regard to God and salvation is different from what people in every day intelligent conversation mean by faith. In our normal conversations we do not invest faith with virtue or regard it as something

worthy of reward. Why should our thinking about faith in a religious context see faith as something different from the way we think of faith in other spheres of life?

The Bible is not written in code and so the word "*faith*", like other important words in Scripture, means in religion what it means in everyday life. If this were not so the Bible writers would have explained themselves.

We put faith in the dentist when we let him fill our teeth: in other words we trust him, we rely on him. If the dentist tells us about something which he says he can see in one of our teeth we believe him, we take him at his word and receive what he says, regarding it as true. In our everyday relationships we have faith when we trust, when we rely, when we believe what someone says: faith is receptivity, it is having confidence in someone or something.

In the dentist illustration the person with faith does not expect praise for relying on the dentist unless the dentist has a terrible reputation! All the credit goes to the object of faith, in this case the dentist. The dentist would feel insulted if the man in his chair were praised for believing what he was told about his teeth.

Another illustration involves Tom, Dick and Harry. Tom has an old car which is not going very well. Dick's car is the same make and model and just as old but it is going beautifully. Dick's car is going well because Dick entrusts it to Harry who is a genius of a mechanic. Dick has full confidence in Harry. He relies on him and follows his instructions to the letter. Dick has great faith in Harry.

When Dick in conversation hears about the poor performance of Tom's car he talks about Harry as the reason why his car runs so well. Tom hears a lot about the faith which Dick has in Harry. But when he sees Dick's car running so well he doesn't say, "Dick, I wish I had your faith." No. He says, "I wish I had your mechanic."

Faith in this illustration is not something virtuous or worthy of reward. If it were, Tom would have expressed a desire to have it. Nor is faith co-operation, for all the credit goes to Harry.

More illustrations

Some people thinking along religious lines praise faith as a virtue and point to the way people who really believe in a fake medicine can experience good effects. Such people want to praise the virtue of faith, for they say that it doesn't matter what one's religion is as long as the person believes. Look, they say, at the doctor who has a patient who so imagines that he is sick that he makes himself ill. The doctor plays along with him and prescribes some useless pills. The patient has great faith in the doctor and in the pills and in no time he is feeling better. From this it is reasoned that faith has power in itself and it doesn't really matter where it is placed for it is results that count. This reasoning is also invoked against those who are seen as spoiling the church by insisting on the importance of correct doctrine.

But the thing to note is that this illustration can be used only by those not called upon to exercise faith in the doctor and his medicine. The fact is that faith must always have an object. The outside observer may think that the patient's faith has power and that a sweet offered by a friend would do just as well. But the one doing the believing must always be convinced that his faith has no power or merit in itself and that it is the doctor's "medicine" that will do the work. Once the patient is convinced that it was really only his faith that was helping him he ceases to have faith in the doctor and may become angry with him.

One good thing about the previous illustration is that it shows how it is possible to point to the benefits of faith placed in what is false. As another illustration, consider the young mother in great need of food and who has been given a twenty pound note which she assumes is genuine but which is actually a fake. As she comes to the check-out an efficient looking lady tells her that the note is counterfeit. Is this an evil lady who doesn't want the young mother's children to be fed? Is she like those people all interested in doctrine and who spoil religion for those who have happily held errors for years? What does it matter if the twenty pound note came from the official printing press or not? Why demand that all doctrines be from the Bible? It is the results of faith which are all important (we are told).

Our illustrations have made the point. Faith must have an object and faith in what is false can have results which have all the appearance of being good. Our obligation to correct what is amiss and supply what is

lacking in the beliefs of others does not cease simply because wrong and inadequate doctrines are held by happy, peaceful people.

Scripture

The meaning of faith in the New Testament can be discovered by noticing the word with which it is contrasted. In a number of places faith is seen as the opposite of doubt. In Matthew 14 we have Peter on the water beginning to sink. Jesus says, "*O man of little faith, why did you doubt?*"

When disciples saw Jesus after his resurrection they worshipped him but some *doubted*. The Greek verb used here for *doubt* means to hold a divided opinion, to be of two minds and so uncertain. So the man of faith has a definite fixed attitude of mind, the opposite of hesitation.

In the Greek New Testament there is another verb used to express doubt and this too is presented as the opposite of faith. Jesus said, "*If you have faith and do not doubt*" (Matthew 21. 21; see also mark 11. 23). The verb here has also the quality of hesitation. The individual, unsure which way to go, is unable to reach a definite conclusion. Faith, by contrast, means an unshaken conviction.

Doubt kills trust and reliance. If there are doubts about a man he will not be believed; what he says will not be received. If faith is the opposite of doubt we have faith when we trust, when we rely. The apostle Paul says this about Abraham: "*No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised*" (Romans 4. 20, 21). About prayer, we read in the letter of James, "*Let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways, will receive anything from the Lord*" (James 1. 6-8).

When it is said that we believe in a person it means that we believe that he is reliable, that we take him at his word, that we accept his promises, that we receive what he says. When we have faith in a person it means that we rely on him; that we trust him and have confidence in him. The Roman Catholic Council of Trent would not agree. It says, "If anyone says

that justifying faith is nothing else than confidence in the divine mercy that remits sins on account of Christ ... *anathema sit*" (DS 1562)

In the parallel poetry of Psalm 78 faith is paralleled with trust in verse 22:

*"They had no faith in God
no trust in his power to save."*

In different places in the Psalms we see trust in the Lord contrasted with trust in bow or friends. *"Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is not help ... Happy is he whose help is the God of Jacob ... who keeps faith for ever ... who gives food to the hungry"* (Psalm 146).

A definition?

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (146) says that the opening words of Hebrews 11 are a definition of faith. The *Jerusalem Bible* notes say that "this verse was adopted as a theological definition of faith" Hebrews 11. 1 reads: *"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for the conviction of things not seen."*

The little word "is" can be used in a variety of ways. The person who says, "Knowledge is power" is not defining knowledge but stating what knowledge gives to its possessor. We are not defining sight when we say, "Seeing is believing." We mean that we wouldn't have believed it had we not seen it. But the writer of Hebrews says in effect, "Believing is seeing." That is, when a person is certain that God's word is true it is as if the promised blessings were a present possession.

Throughout Hebrews 11 the thing asserted is not that this or that person had faith but rather that by faith they did this or that. *"Through faith they conquered kingdoms, received promises, suffered mocking and scourging etc."* (verses 33-38). This fact makes it hard to accept the opening words of the chapter as a definition.

When Hebrews 11. 1 is seen as a definition, faith can be thought of as a mysterious spiritual sense, a kind of second sight with power to see into the future or see the unseen. Faith then is easily looked upon as a faculty in itself with power rather than an attitude of trust or confidence on a reliable object. We take the words of Hebrews 11. 1 to be a description. They tell us

about faith but not all about it and they do not separate faith from what it is not. The words are like another scriptural phrase, *"God is love"*. God is love but he is other things as well.

True faith is based on knowledge and the opening words of Hebrews 11 tell us that faith leads to more knowledge. *"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for"*. By faith future events are made to be certain: the things promised to us become, by our faith in the promise, so certain that it is as if we already had them. When the housepainter has agreed a price to paint the doors and windows he is assured that he will be paid if he has faith in the householder's promise to pay.

Faith is "the conviction of things not seen." A future thing is a thing not seen. The Christian, thinking of eternal fellowship with God, lives by faith and not by sight for heaven cannot be seen. We are convinced about heaven when we accept as true what we are told about our eternal destiny.

The vital element

Faith holds a key position in the scriptural teaching about God's relationship with sinners. In Isaiah 7. 9 we read, *"If you do not stand firm in your faith, indeed you will not stand at all."* In the New Testament the words "faith" or "belief" occur almost 500 times. The apostle Paul says that the good news of God's forgiveness is by faith from first to last (Romans 1. 17). Jesus taught that all moral actions derived their value from faith. When he was asked, *"What must we do to do the works God requires?"* he replied, *"The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."*

In 1 Corinthians 13 the apostle Paul says that love is greater than faith. Why then did Paul not preach a doctrine of forgiveness or justification by love? Why is it that on the matter of sinners seeking to be in a right relationship with God, faith or belief is the vital element? Faith is made the instrument in order to exclude human glory. Faith is the empty hand held out to receive.

Faith makes no contribution, it is merely receptive. *"Where then is boasting?"* Paul asks. It is excluded on the principle of faith. A sinner is justified by faith apart from observing the law (Romans 3. 27,28). A phrase such as "the power of faith" does not appear in the New Testament.

God has made himself known through words and especially through the Lord Jesus who is the Word of God. If God used words to reveal himself then the basic human response that he was seeking must have been faith. When people speak or write they assume that their words will be believed: it is the very nature of words, especially words of promise, to be believed if they sound convincing. Indeed, we cannot but rely on information if we are convinced of its truth. God promises eternal life. He promises forgiveness of sins, and if we believe his promises, if we take him at his word, we are exercising faith.

If we have faith when we trust or rely or when we have confidence in someone or something, then faith must be based on knowing something about the person or thing being relied upon. As well as that the information available must be accepted or assented to before there can be faith or trust. In other words the faith of a person is based on what he makes of the evidence available to him. Faith is not believing something to be true in the absence of evidence. It is a grave mistake to think of faith as being opposed to reason.

We have noted one good reason for God making faith the vitally important element of the sinner's response to his work of salvation: no praise or credit can ever be attached to faith. A person is not praised for relying on somebody else. But does the housewife not deserve credit for relying on the right man to fix her washing machine? Such praise or credit would be for knowing the reliable mechanic (praise for knowledge), but the act of faith itself cannot be praised.

The instrument

When we come to God in faith we come as repentant sinners saying that we are not worthy. The worth of faith is seen in its exclusion of worthiness. Faith is like a hand stretched out but there is no money in the hand to pay for anything. The hand comes empty and this makes it better able to receive. Faith is a looking away from self and any thought of virtue so that it might look only on Christ. When a drowning man trusts himself to the life-boat men and their equipment he is not exercising some virtue.

Sinners are said to be forgiven or justified by faith. But when it says that we are justified freely or gratuitously by God's generosity (grace) the clear implication is that faith can claim no merit. Faith justifies not because of

some virtue in itself but only because it is the instrument by which sinners are connected with or united to Christ. Writing about justification Paul says, "*The promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace*" (Romans 4. 16).

When the Israelites were bitten by serpents Moses was instructed to put a copper serpent on a pole so that those who looked at it might be healed. When those bitten looked at the copper serpent they were healed and we might say that the look healed them. But it wasn't the look as a look which did the work. If any effort were involved in looking the same effort would be required to look in the opposite direction. The healing came from God not simply by the looking but through looking at the serpent. Faith in God is spoken of as looking to God or turning to him (Isaiah 45. 22).

In everyday speech we give credit to instruments but everybody knows what we mean. We say that the hammer drives the nail when it is really the man using it who is responsible. We say that the window lights the room when we know that it is the sun in the sky that should receive the credit. In a similar way we read in the New Testament of people being healed or saved by faith when it is the person in whom they had faith who did the healing or saving. By making faith the vital requirement, rather than love or any such virtue, God was ensuring that no credit or glory would be due to the sinner exercising faith. Salvation is through faith and not by works, so that no-one can boast (Ephesians 2. 9). Faith by its very nature draws attention to its object and not to itself.

Can faith be praised?

In Matthew 15 we read of the non-Jewish woman who kept asking Jesus to heal her daughter. Jesus said that it was not right of her to ask healing for someone not a Jew: "*It is not right to take the children's bread.*" The woman, taking the position of a little dog under the table replied, "*Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs*". Then Jesus said, "*Woman, you have great faith.*"

In this story of great faith we see that the faith has no right in itself, no power in itself. Had the woman been a Jewess she might have made some appearance of a claim. But she is told by Jesus that she doesn't belong. How does she respond? She admits that she doesn't deserve to be helped. With all others who have faith in Christ she says, "*I deserve nothing.*" She received because she was in contact with a gracious Saviour.

In Matthew 8 we read of Jesus speaking about the non - Jewish centurion, "I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith." The centurion had requested Jesus to heal his servant. In Luke's account people say to Jesus, "This man deserves to have you do this." But the centurion who knew better made no such claim. He said, "I do not deserve to have you under my roof." Yet Jesus speaks of great faith. Why? The words of the centurion indicated that he believed that all the powers of nature were ready to do what Jesus would command. The centurion saw the healing of his servant as the easiest thing in the world for Jesus to do. The faith is called great because it draws attention to a great God.

The thinking behind our Lord's words is similar to that behind words spoken to the disciples when they asked for more faith (Luke 17. 5). In response Jesus spoke not of an increase in faith but of faith as small as a mustard seed. Such faith, he said, could do great things. How? Jesus is saying that it is not so much what we might call great faith in God that is required as faith in a great God. God does great things simply because the faith is in him. Faith becomes greater the more it exalts the person being relied upon.

Faith is a prominent feature of the miracle stories in the Gospels. The miracles are exhibitions of God's gracious activity which produce the mental state of trust or faith. In a miracle we see supernatural power. Man can contribute nothing to the efficient cause of a miracle. So faith is not co-operation or a contribution. A miracle depends on God alone. Yet notice in Matthew, Mark and Luke how almost the only mention of faith is in connection with miracles.

Why has God designed salvation in such a way as to make faith the vital element of the sinner's response? The work involved in bringing sinners into a friendly relationship with God is God's work and his alone. This fact is not altered by requiring faith on the part of sinners simply because faith is what it is. Faith is not a work; the person with faith cannot be given credit for it; it is the very nature of faith to draw attention to its object and away from the one exercising it.

Obedience, love, prayer, gratitude

When looking at the *Jerusalem Bible* notes we saw that Paul's words "the obedience of faith" (Romans 1. 5) were taken to mean "the obedience

implicit in the virtue of faith." If obedience is a part of faith and if obedience includes effort or skill then faith must indeed be a virtue. To say the least obedience and faith are very closely related. A patient with faith in the doctors will obey their instructions. In Psalm 119. 66 we have a phrase we don't usually use, "I believed in your commandments." When we have faith we accept God's promises as true but we also obey his commands. It seems best, however, to see obedience as distinct from faith which it always accompanies. Faith in God's word leads to a life that conforms to the will of God as it has been disclosed in his word.

When the apostle Paul writes about the obedience of faith he is referring to a command to have faith, a command which ought to be obeyed. Faith being the first of duties is an act of obedience. Unbelief is spoken of as disobedience (compare Romans 11. 23 with verses 30 and 31).

In Acts 6. 7 we read of priests who were obedient to the faith, that is obedient to the call to have faith in Christ. Paul speaks of those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus (2 Thessalonians 1. 8).

The person with faith in Christ has obeyed a command of God.
1 John 3. 23: "This is God's command: to believe in the name of his Son."

It is said that if faith is to save it must be infused by love, and in support of this, reference is made to Paul who speaks of "faith working through love" (Galatians 5. 6). But love in Paul's thinking here (like obedience) is what automatically follows an act of reliance on a God of love.

We all have faith in our chairs. But faith in the chairs to do what? We do not believe that our chairs would support the weight of a bus. We have faith in the chairs to do what the makers of the chairs designed them to do. When we have faith in a particular object our faith operates according to the information which we have about the qualities of that object. An evil man can have faith in his chair for his chair makes no moral demands. Faith in a scientific fact operates by observation and experiment but we don't say that observation and experiment are infused into "scientific faith". There can be no faith without them but they are not part of faith. Faith in a kind person will draw out a response of love. If we believe that our gracious God showers benefits on us his undeserving creatures, we will respond with warm gratitude and love. So when Paul speaks of faith working through love he means, not that faith is filled out by love, but

rather that faith in a God who loves us must be expressed by means of love. As John says, "we love, because he first loved us" (1 John 4. 19).

Like love and obedience, prayer follows automatically on faith. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews says (11. 6), "*Whoever would draw near to God (in prayer) must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.*" Belief in a God who exists and who rewards those who seek him cannot but lead to prayer.

We have said that faith operates according to the information available about its object. Faith in a holy, righteous God will be the possession only of those who love righteousness: a sinner who loves his sin cannot have faith in God who hates sin. But while saving faith is intimately connected with love, obedience and good living, we must not forget that salvation is a gift and so it is the receptive nature of faith that makes it suitable for justification or forgiveness. Since the work of salvation has been done completely by Christ, it is faith as trust or confidence in him and in his work that makes it the essential thing. There can be no faith in Christ where there is no love or gratitude or obedience or knowledge, but it is faith as receptivity or reliance or trust which connects us with the God of our salvation.

Sufficient evidence

The word "*faith*" or "*belief*" in the Greek New Testament is derived from a verb meaning to persuade or convince, and so faith and knowledge are, at least, closely connected. Theologians have debated the question as to whether knowledge is a prerequisite or an ingredient of faith and faith is spoken of as knowing Jesus Christ (1 John 2. 3).

The difference between knowledge and faith is seen when the causes of unbelief are considered. Jesus was rejected by people who were not suffering from lack of information. They knew who he was in the sense that they met him and heard him but he was the opposite of what they expected the Messiah to be and do. Their unbelief sprang from their sinful state of mind and heart.

So knowledge is not enough. God gives evidence which is sufficient and clear but it is not compelling. With all the information before them people can choose not to believe. There can be no moral conditions where

evidence is compelling. We can prove or compel belief that two plus two equals four. But then a bad man believes that. God does not give us compelling evidence about the trustworthiness of the Lord Jesus. People can be prejudiced against him. Such people are to blame, for the evidence is clear and sufficient to produce faith.

Faith must be based on what we know about the person or thing being relied upon. Faith if it is to be true must be based on evidence or, more accurately, on what we make of the evidence. A man cannot choose to have faith. If there is no evidence or if the evidence does not convince, he is unable to exercise faith. And a man cannot refuse to believe if the evidence convinces him.

If faith were a quality with power in itself then we could choose to have faith in this or that situation. But we cannot choose to have faith for faith must follow our understanding of the evidence. If we could choose to exercise faith in a particular situation then the connection between truth and faith would be broken for we could believe whatever we willed to believe: we could believe anything.

In John 20 we read that Jesus did many things which have not been recorded. But John goes on to say about his gospel, "*These are written that you might believe and that believing you might have life.*" These words show that the faith which brings life rests on evidence. We can also reason from these words that when people in Scripture are blamed for demanding proof it is for refusing to believe when there is sufficient evidence already: they are rebuked for having a prejudiced mind.

We need to be born again

As we have noted, faith, strictly speaking, follows not the evidence but the judgement of the mind on the evidence. Evidence can be misread leading to trusting the unreliable and distrusting the reliable. But there can be no faith where the mind is not convinced. If a man has no musical taste then evidence based on considerations of melody will not be convincing. Such a man needs to be born again with a musical ear. If evidence is adequate but we are not convinced by it then it is we who are at fault. If we moral beings who should know the difference between right and wrong are not persuaded by adequate evidence concerning what is right then it must be that we are immoral. We need to be born again so that what is right,

holy and good will be attractive and convincing to us.

Since faith draws attention to its object we cannot simply ask, *Have you faith?* but, *In whom have you faith?* And if it is faith in God we must ask, *Faith in God to do what?* There is no evidence to suggest that God can be relied upon to save those who simply ask but who don't want to be like him. The evidence is the other way: *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven"* (Matthew 7. 21).

A thief cannot have faith in an upright policeman, relying on him not to attend to his stealing activities. Before the thief could have faith in the policeman he would need to have a change of heart and life. Jesus said that if there were no desire for a moral change there could be no belief (John 5. 44). *"How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another, and you do not seek the glory that is from the one and only God?"* People who seek their own glory cannot have faith in One who rejects such an attitude to life.

Jesus said (John 8. 43 - 45), *"Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. . . . he is a liar, and the father of lies. Because I speak the truth, you do not believe me."* Sons of the devil hate truth and so they cannot have faith in Christ who is the truth.

If faith were a leap in the dark or had power in itself or was something which we could will or choose to exercise in this situation or that, then a devil could have true faith in God. Faith is based on evidence and a devil cannot have saving faith for he has no evidence that God will be merciful to him. It is one thing to believe that the man is rich but it is another thing to believe that the rich man will help me. Devils believe in God: they know that God exists and that he is merciful. But since devils are enemies of God (and cannot repent or change) they cannot believe that God will be merciful to them.

A common objection to the doctrine of justification by faith alone is that it leads to immorality. If God forgives simply when sinners have faith then, it is claimed, it doesn't matter how they live. Terrible sins, it is said, could be committed in the sure knowledge that God would forgive all who simply trusted in him. Faith, these objectors say, cannot be sufficient, it must be

faith plus good living before God forgives.

If faith is taken to be merely assenting to the teaching of the church it is easily seen how a bad man could do this and remain a bad man. But if faith is trust in God resting on evidence it is clear that a bad man cannot have faith in a good God. God cannot be relied upon to give what is against his nature. God is holy and longs for his people to be holy. Faith based on such evidence of God cannot expect a blind eye to be turned to sin and the intention to do evil. The sinner who is confident that God will enter into a friendly relationship with him must be a sinner who has turned from his sin: he must be a person who is born again.

Faith in God means believing what he says. Faith in God cannot mean relying on God to do whatever we might want done, for we might want God to do what he sees to be wrong. True faith in God is relying upon him to do only what is right, to do what he promises to do in his word. Bad men don't want God to do what he says he will do and so they can have no faith in him.

In any case sin has a blinding effect and a sinner cannot appreciate the evidence about God. A sinner's spiritual eyes need to be opened. The Holy Spirit must do his work of regeneration before a sinner can appreciate the evidence which produces faith in Christ.

How much information?

When we say that faith is a gift of God we mean that God enables sinners to see and appreciate the evidence of the trustworthiness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ. Faith has to be God's gift for by nature we are prejudiced against God. God enables us to see things as they really are.

Since faith comes from what is heard and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ (Romans 10. 17), questions sometimes asked relate to the amount or accuracy of information deemed necessary before a person can have faith in Christ for salvation.

The question of the amount of knowledge required is sometimes put by those anxious to discover just how little they need to learn. Such people need to be told that the Bible commands maximum knowledge. Jesus said,

"Go make disciples ... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28. 20).

It is God who brings sinners to saving faith. It is our task to present his truth as simply and as fully as we can. It is not our task to talk about the minimum.

What about wrong information?

But it is possible for people to have such wrong views about God and the message of salvation that the resultant faith is not saving faith. James in his New Testament letter (2. 14 -26) writes about those whose actions show that they do not believe that God requires his people to live loving kind lives. The information which such people accept as true and of relevance to them about God does not tell them that God makes moral demands. The faith resulting from this information which they assent to does not lead to good living. In this respect they are like demons (verse 18). The demons believe that God is one, but they see him as an enemy and so they shudder. Abraham is different for he is *"the friend of God"* (verse 23). What Abraham accepted about God led him to do whatever God would ask him to do: the works of Abraham showed that he had a living, saving faith in God. Faith without such works is seen to be a dead faith and a dead faith cannot save (verse 26).

Jesus told a parable where a Pharisee had faith which led to prayers of thankfulness to God (Luke 18. 9-14). But the prayer of the Pharisee revealed a wrong view of God. He believed that God helped people reach a certain standard of morality and religious observance and that when the standard was reached the person would be acceptable in God's eyes. Jesus said that this man was not justified.

It was the tax collector in the same parable who had the right idea. He felt that he could offer no contribution towards his salvation. *"God"*, he said in effect, *"don't look at me but at yourself for you are merciful."* The tax collector was justified by faith alone.

Irish Church Missions
28 Bachelor's Walk
Dublin 1

Phone: 8730829 Fax: 8722669

e-mail: icm@iol.ie

MOORE COLLEGE
LIBRARY