

IN RESPONSE - WHAT IS FAITH?

by Dennis Prutow
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Last month I gave you the following definition of faith taken from an article in our local newspaper. And I said this was the secularist's definition of faith. I also said this definition is the philosophy of Immanuel Kant set forth as biblical truth! Here it is again.

Somebody once likened faith to platform diving. Faith, he said, is like standing on the platform and looking down into an empty pool. God says, 'Go ahead and jump, I'll fill it.'

So most of us run to the end of the platform and stop, looking down quickly to see if the pool is beginning to fill. Unfortunately, it isn't. Only after we jump do we discover that the pool is filled, every time, without fail. Leaping off such a platform would indeed lack logic, and to someone who has never tried it, it makes no sense whatsoever.¹

In response to my negative reaction to this definition, I was challenged to explain the biblical nature of faith in Christ. So here goes.

The Bible teaches that there are three elements to faith. Following the outline of Louis Berkhof, first there is the intellectual element. "There is a positive recognition of the truth revealed in the Word of God."² The intellect must be brought into play so that the individual has "some idea of the fundamental truths of the gospel."³ The reformers called this element of faith *notitia*. On the positive side, this intellectual element is absolutely necessary because the gospel has a certain content. It is a message! But on the negative side, when this intellectual element stands alone, we are in bad company. "The demons also believe," (James 2:19). And in

Mark 1:24 we witness an unclean Spirit testify, "I know who you are -- the Holy One of God."

And so there must be assent to the truth of the gospel. We are convicted of the truth of the gospel. "The truth grips the soul."⁴ This is the second or emotional element. On the negative side we are convicted of our guilt before God because of sin. On the positive side we are convicted of our need of Christ as the only answer for our sin. The reformers called this element *assensus*. But care must be taken because a person may know the gospel and even assent to the truth of it without having saving faith. The venerable R.B. Kuiper calls such a situation "orthodoxism." "In its absolute sense orthodoxism is an intellectual acceptance of the truth without a preceding change of heart and without a subsequent change of life. It is dead orthodoxy."⁵ We may elicit James 2:19 as a graphic example of intellectual assent, "The demons also believe, and shudder." There would be no reason for them to shudder did they not actually assent to, believe, the truth.

This means that in addition to an intellectual grasp of the gospel and an assent to the truth of the gospel, there must be trust! This is the third element and it involves the will. The reformers called this *fiducia*. This is the word from which we get the word *fiduciary*. A *fiduciary* is someone who holds something in trust! And what we are saying is this. You must know the facts about Christ. You must also assent to or accept the truth of those facts about Christ. But this is not enough. You can know the facts and believe those facts to be true, that is, assent to the facts, without being a Christian. You must also trust Jesus Christ with your life!

When Jesus says, "Come to Me" (Matthew 11:28), you must respond to and actually trust Christ.

Westminster Shorter Catechism reflects these three elements of faith in the answer to question 31, What is effectual calling? "Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel."

The point is that when a person does trust Christ and rely upon Him alone for his or her salvation, this act of faith is not a leap in the dark. Rather, faith is based upon knowledge. Not only so, faith is based upon the conviction that this knowledge is the truth. Trust then becomes the most reasonable course of action. It is not a leap that "makes no sense whatsoever."

All of this has the greatest importance for our evangelism. Without a proper understanding of faith, we are prone to err in two different directions. The first error is that of easy believism. There are those who preach that faith in Christ involves nothing more than the kind of faith exercised when believing what the President of the United States says in a speech. If we believe what Christ says in this manner, we are saved. Zane Hodges argues for this type of faith in His book *Absolutely Free*.⁶

But we have already seen that mere intellectual assent is insufficient to bring us into a saving relationship to Jesus Christ. And historic Christianity has always maintained that there is such a thing as historic faith consisting in intellectual assent only. An example is Agrippa. "King Agrippa, do you believe the Proph-

¹ The Sterling Bulletin, December 26, 1991, p. 4.

² Louis Berkhof, *Summary of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1969), p. 133.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

⁵ R. B. Kuiper, *To Be or Not to Be Reformed* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), p. 32.

⁶ Zane Hodges, *Absolutely Free* (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1989), pp. 27-29.

ets? I know you do,” exclaims Paul (Acts 26:27).

This doctrine of easy believism is a faith that is not properly founded on the power of God (1 Corinthians 2:5). As a result, those who have professed faith in Christ do not experience a change in life. This in turn has led to the doctrine of the carnal Christian. It is supposed that those who profess faith in Christ may be assured of heaven yet not produce fruit. The parable of the soils in Matthew 13 counters this false assumption. Easy believism is an error based on a false understanding of faith!

A second error is that of assuming a knowledge of theology is sufficient for salvation. There are those who maintain that if we thoroughly know the contents of the Westminster Confession or Belgic Confession and can articulate the faith presented therein, we are Christians. The rationale is that such apprehension of truth, the truth of Scripture, is not possible without the new birth.

But we have already seen that dead orthodoxy is a deadly possibility. This is the other side of the coin of easy believism. It is the same historic faith from another perspective. And this faith is not a faith which brings us into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

I am convinced that both errors spring from the modern secular view of reality which is based on the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. It is an error which has penetrated deeply into the church of Jesus Christ even among evangelicals and those who are Reformed. Perhaps I can verify this in a future “Response.” For now it should be sufficient for us to note that faith in Jesus Christ is not a leap in the dark or a leap off of a diving platform. Such a leap is not faith at all!

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