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A study in the nature of faith

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A Study in the Nature of Faith.

It is not the object of this essay to establish any previously stated, dogmatic proposition. The object is rather to arrive at a correct notion of the nature of faith by a series of steps - to begin with defective notions and by showing their deficiency pass on to a higher and truer notion.

It is certainly a matter of great importance that some such investigation should be made. Among the doctrines of Scripture that of faith is one of the most important and one of the most frequently referred to. One can scarcely read a page of the New Testament without finding some reference to this oft repeated doctrine, if not in one form, then in another. And even the Old Testament

has very many references to it, especially in those parts which give voice to the experiences of religious souls.

Yet the doctrine is nowhere in the Bible fully and satisfactorily explained or defined. There are very different views of it expressed by the different inspired writers - nay even the same writer after uses quite different language in referring to it.

Again, if we look into theological literature we are met by widely divergent views. One writer flatly contradicts the statements of another; and the more one works this mine the more confused he becomes.

If we seek an explanation of faith among the rank and file of the Christian church we find the most confused ideas possible. The fact seems to be that very many people never stop and seriously

propose to themselves the question "What is faith?" And this is not to be wondered at. For very many of the most common principles of every-day life are the least understood. We become so familiar with them that we suppose ourselves to understand them. While on the contrary if we come to question ourselves about them we learn two things. First that we actually know very little about them. And secondly that it is very difficult to get an accurate understanding of them.

What then is the nature of faith? - the faith that saves the soul, or rather the faith which is the instrumental cause of the soul's salvation. Surely an instrument which will accomplish such an end as the salvation of an immortal soul must be one of vast importance and of an interesting structure. The attempt

will be made in this essay to contribute something toward the investigation, the analysis of this important instrument. And while it would be folly to expect to bring any very great light to bear on the subject, yet it is honestly hoped that some insight into the subject may be obtained as a result of the study, at least by the author of it.

For two or three years the question has been ringing in the present writer's ears, "Why is faith the instrument of salvation? what is its nature that such importance is attached to it? why can the demand for its exercise not be made equally as well by other religions as by Christianity? - if Christianity were an imposture could it possibly have invented a more subtle means of deceiving the world than by demanding faith as its sole mean

of salvation? if Joraster or Buddha had demanded faith would they not have been as successful as Christianity? To these last questions the answer of the heart has ever been most emphatically, no. What then is the reason for the hope that is in us? Let us give as best we can the answer of the head as well as the answer of the heart.

A full answer to half of the above questions will of course not be attempted. But it will be attempted to lay down in outline the foundation on which the superstructure might be built.

Let us then without further preliminary take up some of the inadequate and indefinite views of the nature of faith and proceed step by step to the most accurate view which it is possible for us

to attain.

Faith is belief.

This idea takes different forms owing to the object of the belief. It also assumes different phases as determined by the nature of the evidence on which the belief is founded.

There is belief which arises from mathematical demonstration. But this kind of belief is out of the question in religious matters. Religion cannot be demonstrated like a problem in geometry. The methods of the calculus, mechanics or even of quaternions can never be applied to the matters which relate to the life and death of the soul. In fact the range of subjects to which this kind of demonstration can be applied, while large in itself, is exceedingly small when compared with the whole circle of human

Knowledge and activity.

Then there is belief conditioned on human testimony. This kind of evidence is of very wide application and is the basis of vast transactions. Indeed what would the world come to without belief of this kind? We cannot stop to discuss this interesting and broad question. We must pass it with the observation that this kind of testimony cannot meet the demands of the religious nature. We are all men together; and no one of himself has any superior light which can be communicated to others and so passed on down the ages by merely human testimony. What good would it do me to know that Sir Isaac Newton believed in the existence of God or in the genuineness of the Bible? How would

or law could this save my soul and relieve me from the burden of sin which presses upon me? It cannot avail. Neither can any truth which can be established by human testimony.

If human testimony is insufficient then perhaps divine testimony will suffice. God has sealed on our hearts certain beliefs and it is only by a process of spiritual suicide that we can get rid of them.

It will be readily admitted that divine testimony is sufficient to establish the truth of any proposition to which such testimony can be applied. But so far we do not seem to have made much headway; for it is admitted that human testimony is sufficient to establish the truth of certain propositions. The question is whether the

certain belief of any such proposition can save the soul. We see then that it is necessary to turn from the nature of the evidence which establishes the proposition we are to believe to the proposition itself. Let us see then whether there is any proposition or propositions whose belief will save the soul.

First then let us try the existence of God: Will the belief that God exists save the soul? Let us see. It will not take long to find the answer to this question. There are perhaps thousands of men and women in Boston to-day who have no doubt at all that there is a God and yet their souls are unsaved; and they are going on in sin and getting further and further from salvation every day of their lives. Surely if there is any magical power in the belief of this

proposition there ought to be some visible effects. Again there are and have been unnumbered thousands of human beings on this earth who have never heard of one supreme eternal God and yet whose souls, we believe, are saved. If this is not true then surely the tragedy of humanity is more dark and awful than most pessimists have dared to believe. But if these things are true it must be pretty plain that simple belief in the existence of God, with however much warmth of imagination it may be held is not the faith by which alone man can be saved.

Let us then try some other proposition. Take that of the sinfulness of man. Alas! unnumbered millions believe and know this to be true; and in very many cases

instead of leading to salvation, it leads to discouragement and the very opposite of salvation. Nay, even many who have been truly converted find this fact one of the most discouraging in pressing toward the mark of the prize of our high calling which is of God in Christ Jesus. Surely simple belief in this fact cannot save the soul.

Will belief that the Bible is Gods Word to Man, that it is true, that it is inspired, save the soul? It seems almost unnecessary to ask this question. There are facts all about us which compel us to give a negative answer the moment the question is proposed. There are many people who make no profession of religion and yet who believe all this concerning the Bible. Men may be ever so profane and sinful and yet have a

higher opinion of the divine authority of the Bible than many who are saved. There are difficulties and doubts besetting this question which the average human being can never fully investigate; and if the salvation of our souls were conditioned on right views of the inspiration of the Bible we might well ask, who of us all could be saved?

It is useless to pursue this enumeration further. It might be extended by examining belief in such propositions as the divinity of Christ and of the Holy Spirit, the doctrine of His atonement, and many more. But as was said before about the inspiration of the Bible there are numberless difficulties besetting all these questions and it is indeed comforting to know that the poor woman who leans her

bread by daily toil and who never dreams or knows of these profound themes, can yet equal if not surpass us all in the realization of pardon and communion with the God.

From what has already been said it seems clear that mere belief in any proposition, however true in itself and however important it may be, cannot be the faith which is the instrument of salvation.

Is faith trust?

This is a very common definition of faith. But it seems to be unsatisfactory. In the first place it is very difficult to obtain a clear idea of what is meant by trust. If we accept this definition, therefore, we do not seem to be much nearer a solution of our problem than we were at

the start. Again let us try to analyze the idea of trust. Trust, humanly speaking, requires a degree of intimacy or union before it can be exercised. For example one man cannot trust another unless there is a degree of sympathy between them. If they are separated by any antagonism it is impossible that they should trust each other. Moreover if one loves the other and his love is not reciprocated it is impossible for the second to exercise trust toward the first. In other words I may love my neighbor but if he does not love me he cannot trust me in the deepest sense of the word. But let us apply this truth to the case of God and man. It is admitted that they are separated by the yawning chasm of sin. How then, when they thus stand apart, is it possible for man to trust God? God may love man

yet man if he does not love God cannot trust him.

From this analysis it would appear that trust is something which follows the first exercise of faith and is not itself a part of the faith which saves. Hence in saying that faith is trust we lug into our experience something which does not properly come till after the exercise of faith. So then we conclude in the second place that trust cannot be what is meant by faith. Trust may be and surely is a very important element in a Christian's experience but it does not come till after the reconciliation between the soul and God has been effected.

Faith then is not belief. Neither is it trust. What then is it? The answer that faith is faith and cannot be defined by any other word.

In order to get a more clear idea of its nature let us pursue the following line of thought.

God and man were, at the creation of man, in fellowship. They were united. But by transgression the soul has become alienated from God. Hence separation expresses now the natural relation between man and his Creator. So long as this state of separation exists man is undone; and if this state is not changed to that of union with God man must be forever lost. Now God sees the helpless and hopeless condition in which humanity finds itself. His love is drawn out for man and His heart goes out to him. But man is a free being. Hence it is not possible for God arbitrarily to snatch man from his helpless condition and drag him into heaven. The

primitive union of God and man cannot be restored in this way. Neither can man by any power in himself escape its penalty of violated law and vault up to his original state of union with God. What then is to be done. Simply this. God makes it possible for man to be reunited to himself by its use of the religious nature with which he is endowed. Man has the power either to use or not to use this religious nature. God holds out to man the offer of salvation. It is possible for man to accept salvation if he will or to reject it if he will. His religious nature is such that by letting go of himself and by letting his religious faculties exercise themselves in going out toward God the soul is reunited to God. This exercise of man's religious nature whereby he becomes

reunited to God is saving faith. and if this is true what wonder is it that faith brings about such remarkable results? Christian teachers can no longer be charged with teaching that man can believe himself into heaven - that the doctrine of faith is an absurdity - that no matter what one's works may be God will pardon everything if he simply believes.

It now appears that one may believe very little of the dogma commonly taught and still be saved. A man may have the most vague idea of God but if he is only true to his own religious nature his salvation is assured. He may not have sufficient knowledge to give an intelligent assent to a single doctrine of the Christian scheme, and yet his soul be in harmony with the will of his Creator.

What then, some one will ask, becomes of the doctrines of the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, the inspiration of the Scriptures and a host of others? The answer that a belief of them is not necessary to its salvation of the soul. But is this all - are they of no use? To these questions we reply that they are of great and important use; but they are not so all-important to man's religious welfare as some of us have been accustomed to think.

Those of the race who have the Bible in their hands and have reason to know that it is God's word would be untrue to themselves and to God if they refused to learn from it every lesson which it teaches. When this light has come to a man it is his duty to use it. And when we learn in the Bible so much that must have forever remained in darkness -

without it we are bound to spread our knowledge and publish our light to the world. The Bible reveals to man the way of salvation so clearly that it is an untold blessing to those who have it. It is an almost indispensable guide to every struggling soul on God's footstool. Hence it is our duty to learn its lessons, teach them and proclaim them to the world. We do not therefore underestimate one of the glorious doctrines which it contains. But we do say that faith - saving faith - may exist and has existed where the Bible and many of the dogmas deduced from it were utterly unknown.

With the heart man has faith unto salvation - not with the intellect alone. Faith is the instrument by which man appropriates salvation; it is the

soul's outreaching to the great Father from whom it has been alienated. The soul reaches out and grasps the Father in Christ. The Father welcomes the soul back to his own bosom. And so the prodigal is no longer a prodigal and a wanderer, but one of the eternal household of God.

W. V. Jeffries.