

On the Faith of the Gospel

By James Haldane

“He that believeth that Jesus is the Christ,” saith the apostle John, “is born of God.” This declaration can only be denied by those who reject the scriptures altogether. But many profess that Jesus is the Christ, write with great clearness on the accomplishment of prophecy, and the various external evidences of his mission, nay, celebrate the excellence of his doctrine and precepts, who yet manifest themselves not to be his disciples. In order to account for these appearances, it has been supposed that there are two kinds of faith, one saving and divine, the other merely speculative.

In defining saving faith, some have included in its essence almost every holy temper, and, by insisting so much on this faith, and giving such laboured descriptions of it, have almost inevitably led their followers to look more to their faith, than to the great object of faith; to be more occupied in attending to the working of their own minds than with that truth which reconciles the sinner to God. It is in consequence to be feared, that not a few who are reckoned orthodox are in fact trusting to their faith, and not to Christ, making him merely a minister to their own self-righteousness; for we may go about to establish our own righteousness under the name of faith, as well as under any other name.

The word of God, on the contrary, dwells on what we are to believe; and so far from giving us reason to conclude that saving faith is something else than belief of the saving truth, it asserts the contrary in the strongest terms. That ever there should have been any dispute on the subject, would no doubt appear very extraordinary to one who was taught of God, and had never read any book on divinity but the Bible. Good men have been laid under temptation to deviate from the doctrine of scripture on this subject, by the outcry raised ever since Paul's time, that faith makes void the law. They have found that the gospel appears far less offensive if the faith that saves us is represented to be something very different from giving credit to a testimony. The world in general accounts it reasonable that good people should be the peculiar favourites of heaven. The offence of the cross chiefly consists in all men being addressed as equally lost, ruined, and undone; in a righteousness being revealed unto all and upon all them that believe, making no difference between the sober and decent and those who are openly profane (Rom 3:22,23). It consists in the righteousness of faith speaking on this wise, “Say not in thine heart, who shall ascend up into heaven? (that is, to bring Christ down from above); or, Who shall descend into the deep? (that is, to bring Christ up again from the dead). But what saith it? The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth and in thy heart; that if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and believe in thine heart that God raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved” (Rom 10:6-9). Now this offence will be greatly done away, if we declare, that by faith we do not mean simply believing, but a certain temper of mind which renders us acceptable to God. The world sees a suitableness, a fitness in justification by faith when it is thus explained, because it is in fact justification by the works of the law, and not free justification by the blood of Christ.

The principal stumbling-block, however, in the way of good men, has been the profession of faith by many who plainly were strangers to Christ. To refute the pretenses of those who profess to believe the gospel, and yet are under the dominion of sin, the scriptures teach us a more excellent way, than, by our definitions of faith, to frustrate the grace of God. They inform us, not only what we are to believe, but the consequences of believing. The salvation proclaimed in the gospel is a present deliverance from sin. Christ undertakes, that every believer of the truth shall enjoy this salvation. If any man then professes faith while destitute of holiness, we have to choose between two—whether to consider him to be making a false profession, or at least to be imposing upon himself, or to conclude that Christ has failed as to the accomplishment of his promise; and surely we cannot hesitate to say, “Let God be true, but every man a liar.” The difference between a true Christian, and such an one as we have spoken of, consists, not in any difference of the act of the mind in believing, but in the difference of what they believe. The mind of the one is enlightened by the Holy Ghost who has taken of the things of Christ and shown them to him; the other, under the influence of its native darkness, mistakes the truths of God. The things of the Spirit of God are foolishness to the natural man; he receiveth them not. The truth of God is a stumbling-block to him; it must

be shaped in his corrupt mold, before he can admit it, and in this case he is not believing the truth, but his own lie.

That thousands believe the scriptures to be the word of God while they are in the gall of bitterness, is freely admitted; but there is a great difference between this and believing what they contain. One great cause of the hatred of the unbelieving Jews to Christ, was his supposed opposition to Moses, who they believed had been employed by God to speak to Israel (John 9:29); yet the Lord tells them, "Had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me" (John 5:46). In like manner, we find Paul addressing Agrippa, "Believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest" (Acts 26:27). He was persuaded that they were sent by God, and that their writings were true; but he misunderstood, and consequently did not believe what they wrote, and therefore rejected him to whom they all bore witness.

We have a striking proof of the power of the miracles of Christ on the minds of the carnal Jews (John 6). When he had fed the multitudes with a few loaves, they said, "This is of a truth the prophet that should come into the world," and they proceeded to force him to assume royal dignity, and take possession of the throne of David. Here is faith that Messiah was to come, and that Jesus was he; but alas for their unbelief as to the end and design of Messiah's coming!

In like manner, we find many believing on Jesus, but he did not commit himself to them, because they altogether mistook his character. They were fondly expecting a temporal prince, and, overcome by the miracles he wrought, and the wisdom he displayed, they concluded that he was the Christ. Yet were they in the gall of bitterness and bond of iniquity. Their faith was the belief of a lie, and hence we find many such disciples, who, when his conversation undeceived them, went back, and walked no more with him (John 6:66).

Just so in our own days there are many who believe Christ to be a Saviour, but the salvation they expect from him is perfectly different from what he has proclaimed, and consequently they do not believe the truth.

This will help us to detect another error respecting faith. It is not, say some, merely the belief of a testimony, but an act of trust or confidence in Christ. But does this remove difficulties? It is as possible to form a false notion of Christ, and to trust so in him, as to believe his history without being saved. The Socinians trust in Christ for salvation. But their Christ is not the Christ of God.

Indeed, we may go further than Socinians, and trust in him for what he has not promised. Thus many trust in Christ, that, notwithstanding their wickedness, they shall go to heaven at last. To believe in Christ, or to believe the truth concerning him, are used indiscriminately in scripture, for it is impossible to believe what is testified of Christ without placing all our confidence in him as the only Saviour.

Many talk about speculative faith, but there is no such thing as a speculative faith of the gospel. Men may speculate about the gospel, but when they do so, they do not understand, and are not believing it. The moment it is believed, speculation on that point is at end: it is felt to be supremely interesting. Speculation implies doubt and uncertainty. Sir William Temple observes, that, "this terrestrial globe was before round in speculation, but has since been surrounded by the fortune and boldness of many navigators." When we hear of a man condemned to die we may speculate upon the state of his mind, but if placed in his situation, speculation would soon be at end, and feeling substituted in its stead.

Whatever part of the plan of salvation does not affect us, we do not believe. We are interested in the whole. The Bible does not tell us of another world which rebelled and came under the curse of God, but that such is the case of our world, that *we* are rebels, that *we* are under the curse, that except *we* repent we shall perish. The scripture does as much address each individual who opens it, as if he were the only one upon the face of the earth. It makes known to him his state and the only way of recovery. And according as the one or other is believed, he will be filled with fear or joy.

We have observed that, to believe the truth and to believe in Christ, are used indiscriminately to describe a state of salvation. Thus John the Baptist: "He that believeth on the Son of God hath everlasting life; he that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him" (John 3:36). So Paul: "I know whom I have believed," i.e. whose word I have taken, "and am persuaded that he is able to keep what I have committed to him against that day" (II Tim 1:12).

While some have under-valued believing the truth, and represented saving faith as an act of trust, others appear to have gone into an opposite extreme. They are afraid to call on sinners to trust in Christ. They seem

to wish to fix the minds of their hearers on truth in the abstract. We find nothing of this kind in scripture. The apostles preached Christ, and indiscriminately urged their hearers to believe that God had raised Jesus from the dead, and exalted him a Prince and Saviour to give repentance and remission of sins, or to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, that is, to trust in him who is thus exalted. If we speak with logical precision, trust in Christ is the effect of believing the truth concerning him, and thus confidence in Christ may be said to be the effect of faith or believing; for how shall we believe in him of whom we have not heard; or how shall we trust in him of whose power and grace we are not persuaded? But such precision is not necessary in common language, and hence in the scriptures we find men called upon either to trust in the Saviour, or to believe the truth concerning him.

In like manner, if a person had made us a promise, we should either say we fully believed it, or we confidently trusted that he would accomplish it. No fault could be found either with the one or other of these expressions. They express the same state of mind. The constitution of our nature compels us to avoid misery, and to seek happiness. So soon as we are persuaded that sin will render us miserable both here and hereafter, we must desire deliverance from it; and so soon as we believe that Jesus is an Almighty Saviour who invites us to receive a complete salvation, in which is contained the greatest blessedness, we must trust in him. Many impose on themselves by imagining that the corruption of human nature will not prevent any man from giving credit to what is contained in the word of God. But both scripture and experience might convince them of the contrary. No man did ever believe the truth, until the Spirit of God enlightened the eyes of his understanding. Till this is the case, the doctrine of Christ is a stumbling-block and foolishness, and whenever a sinner believes the truth, we may therefore be assured that flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto him.

We have noticed that some, while professing faith, are only seeking to establish their own righteousness, and are trusting in their faith and not in Christ. Others appear to make their supposed clear views of faith their righteousness, and are puffed up with a vain conceit of themselves, while they despise others. Let it be remembered that the clearer our views are of the gospel, the more shall we live out of ourselves, not glorying in the flesh, nor walking in the light of the sparks that we have kindled, but glorying in the cross of Christ. The man whose faith is strongest will be most deeply humbled, and least disposed to glory in any real or supposed difference between himself and others. But our views of faith may be very clear, we may know that it expresses simply receiving the testimony of God, while we are completely ignorant of what is testified. To say that a man has clear views of the gospel, is to say in other words, that he is strong in faith, that he has much knowledge of God; but a natural man, without any divine illumination, may talk as clearly of the nature of faith as the most enlightened believer. Human blindness consists, not in rejecting the true definition of faith, but in not receiving the truth because it is foolishness to us. Clear views, then, of the nature of faith, and clear views of the gospel, are two distinct things, and not always connected.

Some who talk in a very confused manner about faith, when professing to describe it, evidently appear to have just views of the object of faith, by living near to God, simply depending on Christ as their all; whereas others, who talk clearly, not only about faith, but about various parts of the truth, as plainly prove that they know not what they say, nor whereof they affirm, by not living under the influence of the truth. When a believer falls into a backsliding state, and loses those comfortable and sanctifying views of the truth which he once enjoyed, he may still not only talk very clearly of the doctrine of faith, but of the doctrines of the gospel, although he has lost in a great measure his discernment of the truth.

We are not on this account to undervalue clear and scriptural views on the very important subject of faith. Many, from improper views, are all their lifetime kept in bondage; but on the other hand, men may talk very clearly, while the light that is in them is darkness. The only proper and unequivocal way of proving either our own faith, or the faith of others, is by observing the temper of mind and the conduct it produces. If any man say he has faith, and have not works, his faith will never save him. God will not condescend to argue the matter with him, whether his faith wants this or the other ingredient, but declares it is dead, a mere profession, like the body without the spirit. We use the words *a dead man*, to denote what it is really, only a dead body. So the scripture calls a profession of faith unaccompanied by the power of godliness a dead faith. The reason of this mode of expression is obvious in both cases. We only see the human body, not the spirit. In like manner, we only know the existence of faith by the profession that is made.

Let all beware, then, how they trifle with religion; there is indeed much speculation on the subject in this country. Some are speculating about faith as a fiducial act, and others about faith as being simply believing the truth, while both perhaps are ignorant of that glorious truth which produces love to God and man, purifies the heart, and overcomes the world. Some comfort themselves that their faith will save them because it is not historical, and their confidence is increased by their doubts and fears about their own interest in Christ, which they view as a pleasing evidence that they are the Lord's. Others are sure all is well with them, because their faith is simple belief, and because they have no doubts and fears. Yet both may be deceiving themselves. The doubts and fear of the one may arise from their own hearts condemning them for their carnality, while they are ignorant of that which gives the answer of a good conscience; and the peace of the other may arise from indifference about eternity, and light views of the evil of sin. But he that has heard the voice of Christ, and learned of him the truth as it is in Jesus, "shall come forth of them all." He neither trusts in his faith, nor in his works, nor in any real or supposed change in his heart, but the life he lives in the flesh is by the faith of the Son of God, and abiding in him he shall be filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are through Jesus Christ, to the praise and glory of God.