

# CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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## BELIEF IN GOD

One very widespread notion is the assumption that all the various religions actually believe in the same God, they simply use different names in reference to the Supreme Being. In addition to this misconception is the equally false presumption that simply acknowledging the idea that God exists constitutes *belief* in God. "Belief in God," says Clouser, "is a wholehearted love for God that commits the believer's entire being to God in unconditional trust."<sup>1</sup> J. Gresham Machen made this important observation, "It is perfectly true, of course, that faith in a person is more than acceptance of a creed, but the Bible is quite right in holding that it *always* involves acceptance of a creed. Confidence in a person is more than intellectual assent to a series of propositions about the person, but it *always* involves those propositions, and becomes impossible the moment they are denied. It is quite impossible to trust a person about whom one assents to propositions that make the person untrustworthy, or fails to assent to propositions that make him trustworthy. Assent to certain propositions is not the whole of faith, but it is an absolutely necessary element in faith. So assent to certain propositions about God is not all of faith in God, but it is necessary to faith in God; and Christian faith, in particular, though it is more than assent to a creed, is absolutely impossible without assent to a creed. One cannot trust a God whom one holds with the mind to be either non-existent or untrustworthy."<sup>2</sup> One of the major difficulties that we encounter in our society (and within the rank and file of contemporary evangelicalism)<sup>3</sup> is the growing popularity of mysticism. Among other things, mysticism (especially the type that is around today) exalts experience at the expense of thought. Feelings are what mysticism pursues. But this is not the Biblical way. Machen correctly warned, "In particular, those who discard theology in the interests of experience are inclined to make use of a personal way of talking and thinking about God to which they have no right."<sup>4</sup> James 2:19 tells us, "The devils believe and tremble". Felix, an unbelieving wicked man, did the same (Acts 24:25). How does this differ from what is stated in Isaiah 66:2 and echoed by Paul when he tells us to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12) or Peter's words to the same effect to "conduct yourselves throughout the time of your sojourning here in fear" (I Peter 1:17). What does it mean to believe in God? Two important texts on this are James 2:19 and Heb. 11:6.

### I. DEMONIC BELIEF: TREMBLING BELIEF (James 2:18)

A. How True Belief Differs from That Ascribed to Devils. Unlike some people who deny the existence of God (atheism), the devils know better. They believe that God exists and have *never* doubted that fact, but as A.T. Robertson comments: "The demons do more than believe a fact. They shudder at it."<sup>5</sup> The idea of demonic terror does *not* correspond to godly fear and trembling

because as William Tyndale (the first translator of our English Bible) so pithily put it, “The devil hath no promise therefore he is excluded...”<sup>6</sup> Horror, therefore, is the only byproduct of the deamons’ *cognito Dei*. The demons do know that God is, but are not comforted by this knowledge. “The more they think of God, “wrote Thomas Manton, “the more they tremble”<sup>7</sup> Why? Because all knowledge of the true and living God *outside of Christ* is horrifying to sinful beings (cf. Hebrews 12:29). If God is known only as judge and not as Father, then He is viewed as an enemy. “This is the misery of devils, and damned souls and natural men, that they cannot think of God without horror.”<sup>8</sup> In the case of natural men, they either suppress the knowledge of God (Romans 1:18-21) or make a “god” of their own liking (Romans 1:25).

B. The True Character of the Believing Heart. In the case of the believer’s trembling heart, there is a *greater* fear. Why? Because it perceives the true nature of sin and justifies God in His judgment of sin (Psalm 51:4). The trembling heart fears not only the evil of sin and the judgment it brings, it fears the loss of communion with God more than anything else and is comforted by nothing short of reconciliation with God. Therefore, the trembling heart’s fear always drives it back to God. The trembling heart is very teachable. “A heart that is trembling at the Word of God is teachable.”<sup>9</sup> (cf. Acts 13:16; Proverbs 15:33).

## II. BIBLICAL FEAR

We associate *trembling* with *fear* and so does the Bible (Philippians 2:12; I Peter 1:17). But how do we square this with the words of John: “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear” (I John 4:17) or with Paul’s statement: “God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind” (II Timothy 1:7). The fear that is commended to us is “a holy self-suspicion and fear of offending God, which may not only consist with assured hope of salvation, and with faith, and love, and spiritual joy, but is their inseparable companion; as all divine graces are linked together...and, as they dwell together, they grow or decrease together.”<sup>10</sup> There are two kinds of fear – *servile* and *filial*. The trembling heart is not servile, but is, as Luther put it, “filled with a filial fear to offend... (the Christian) stands in fear of the Father, not because of threatened pain and punishment, as the Christless and also the devil do...but just as a pious child dreads to provoke his father and to do aught that displeases him. God seeks within us a fear that keeps us alert against sin and moves us to serve our neighbor as long as we live here on earth.”<sup>11</sup> This fear is joined with joy and is habitual, not merely momentary. It is a fear that subdues the heart to the power of God’s Word. There is an inseparable relationship between trembling and love. The Word of God brings both out of the believer. Devils and people like Felix may be brought to fear and tremble at the Word of God, but they will never love the Word of God. But like the Psalmist, the believer “rejoices with trembling” (Psalm 2:11).

## III. BELIEF THAT PLEASES GOD: THE OBEDIENCE OF FAITH (Heb. 11:6)

“Obedience,” said Berkouwer, “is essential to faith for it illustrates the truth that faith is not autonomous and self-sufficient – that it capitulates in total surrender.”<sup>12</sup> The writer to the Hebrews describes the nature of belief in three ways:

A. Drawing Near. The NIV trans. this “anyone who comes to him”, while the ESV renders it “for whoever would draw near.” *PROSERCHOMAI* lit. means to approach. Drawing near to God is a central theme in this epistle. (cf. 4:16; 7:25; 10:1, 22). The life that pleases God stems from man’s attitude of faith. It begins with the certain recognition of God and His character. “This attitude,” wrote Warfield, “is an attitude of faith – an attitude which could rise above the seen to the unseen, the present to the future, the temporal to the eternal, and which in the midst of sufferings could retain patience, in the midst of disappointments could preserve hope. This is

the key to the whole treatment of faith in the Epistle to the Hebrews – its definition as the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (11:1); its illustration and enforcement by the example of the heroes of faith in the past, a list chosen and treated with the utmost skill for the end in view (Ch. 11); its constant attachment to the promises (4:1, 2, 12, 10:36, 38, 11:19); its connection with the faithfulness (11:11, cf. 10:23), almightiness (11:19), and the rewards of God (11:6, 26); and its association with such virtues as boldness (3:6, 4:16, 10:19), 35), confidence (3:14, 11:1), patience (10:36, 12:1), hope (3:6, 6:11, 18, 10:23).”<sup>13</sup>

B. Expectation. Not only does genuine faith seek God, but it also *expects* God to respond. This underscores the relational aspect of faith. A transaction occurs between God and the individual who comes to Him in faith. Those who do come to God (through Christ) find mercy and grace (Heb. 4:14-16). They find in Him the source of their deepest satisfaction.<sup>14</sup>

C. Seeking. The verb *EKZETOUSIN* “to seek out, to search for.” The word in its compound form always seems to denote that the person seeking finds or at least does everything possible to find the object of his search. More importantly the context underscores the determination on the part of the seeker to find out what pleases God in terms of service to God (cf. Romans 12:1-2). One New Testament scholar writes, “It implies the recognition that human action has to demonstrate its integrity before God. The firm expectation of the reward, then, is a matter of unwavering hope in the God who controls the future. It exhibits the solid faith that is the condition for receiving recompense by God. The person who puts his trust in God finds that his faith is rewarded by the transmutation of hope into present realities (cf. 11:1a). The particular reward granted to Enoch was the attestation of being well pleasing to God, followed by the unexpected experience of translation. In nearly all of the subsequent exemplars of faith who are paraded before the congregation, there is a direct relationship between faith and reward that is deserving of notice.”<sup>15</sup>

CONCLUSION: The word *impossible* is accented in the text: Impossible that man should please God without faith! It has been pointed out that *four* impossibilities, marking the boundaries of the realm of salvation, are recorded in the book of Hebrews: (1) that anyone once enlightened and thereupon fallen away be renewed (Heb. 6:4), (2) that God should lie (Heb. 6:18), (3) that the blood of bulls or goats should take away sins (Heb. 10:4), and (4) that man should please God without faith. These “impossibilities” vary much in nature and grounds. The first impossibility (renewal after falling away) suggests a limit to the work of the Holy Spirit and the powers of the coming age. The second (that God should lie) relates to the fidelity of God, which was underscored by the swearing of an oath, so that the heirs of His promise would see more clearly “the immutability of his counsel,” i.e., the impossibility of His being false. The third is the impossibility of any purifying power in animal blood, another recollection of the continually repeated sacrificial rites of old Israel. Then follows the fourth impossibility, which touches upon the correlation between human faith and divine grace. Its reference to faith is negative, but one can read in it a positive connection between faith and the divine approval. The text is set in a context, which is concerned with that strange Old Testament figure, Enoch. “By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and he was not found, because God translated him: for he hath had witness borne to him that before his translation he had been well-pleasing unto God” (Heb. 11:5). Against this historical reference to a man who pleased God by faith, comes the statement that without faith it is impossible to please Him. The relation between faith and God’s pleasure was illustrated in Enoch’s life. All we know of the original story is what we find in Genesis 5:22, which tells us that Enoch walked

with God and that God took him, living, to Himself, so that he did not have to pass through death. The text of Hebrews is a bit more extensive than the Genesis account, through the Greek version of Genesis adds that Enoch pleased God. Hebrews, at any rate, concludes that Enoch's walk in faith pleased God and that we may therefore say that he was transported through his faith. Enoch, living in a wicked environment, stayed by the side of God, walked with Him in faith, and this pleased God. *And without faith it is impossible to please Him.* With Enoch's walk with God in mind, we cannot conclude that Hebrews 11:6 ascribes a meritorious worth to faith. It is not as though Enoch possessed a certain moral quality that God approved of. It was his whole existence, totally determined by his walk with God that was involved. He was with God; and this has nothing to do with any accomplishment in the works of the law. It was in this faith, in this walk with God, that Enoch pleased Him. Without this faith, we cannot please God.<sup>16</sup> The difference between demonic *belief* and Christian belief is found in the close association that true belief has with *obedience*. Obedience is an important fruit of faith. This is another central theme in Hebrews. Again Christ is set out as an example of obedience, and is said to have learnt obedience by what he suffers (5:8). Abraham is another who demonstrates the same quality when called to go out to an unknown place, which would be his inheritance (11:8). This writer sees obedience as a necessary prerequisite for acquiring salvation (5:9). Strong warnings are given against disobedience in chapters 3 and 4, where it is almost identified with unbelief. Obedience is therefore concerned with a personal response to God, a desire to please him (cf. 11:5-6; 13:21).<sup>17</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> R. Clouser, *Knowing With the Heart: Religious Experience and Belief In God* (IVP, 1999), p. 19

<sup>2</sup> J.G. Machen *What is Faith?* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1979), p. 48

<sup>3</sup> Richard Cimino and Don Lattin, in their highly acclaimed work *Shopping for Faith: American Religion in the New Millennium* (Jossey-Boss, 1998) documented how widespread this tendency is in much of modern evangelicalism, "These congregations are marked by flexibility. Services may have no fixed order, and they can be held in afternoons or on Saturday. The sermons are more a source of teaching than preaching. They focus on practical matters, such as family concerns and personal growth, not doctrine, sometimes mixing psychotherapeutic concepts with biblical teaching. They often emphasize religious experience. They seek to feel God's love, not understand church theology – a theme that plays well with the decreasing importance of denominational doctrine among baby boomers." P. 57

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 36

<sup>5</sup> A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. 6 (Broadman, 1933), p. 36

<sup>6</sup> William Tyndale, *The Obedience of a Christian Man* as cited by James Adamson, *The Epistle of James* (Eerdmans, 1976), p. 127.

<sup>7</sup> *The Works of Thomas Manton*, vol. 4 (rpt. Maranatha, 1978), p. 242

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Jeremiah Burroughs, *Gospel Fear* (rpt., Soli Deo Gloria, 1991), p. 52

<sup>10</sup> Robert Leighton, *Commentary on First Peter* (rpt. Kregel, 1972), p. 85

<sup>11</sup> *What Luther Says*, vol. 1 ed. E. M. Plass (Concordia, 1959), p. 510

<sup>12</sup> G.C. Berkouwer, *Studies In Dogmatics: Faith and Justification* (Eerdmans, 1954), p. 195

<sup>13</sup> B.B. Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies* (rpt. P & R, 1969), p. 418.

<sup>14</sup> The Reformed understanding of the New Testament doctrine of rewards is well presented by the Swiss Reformer Martin Bucer, who writes: "That the Lord rewards his people for their good works is not on the grounds of their righteousness, but purely from his free grace and for the sake of his dear Son (Rom. 11:6), in whom he chose us for eternal life before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4), and created us for good works (Eph. 2:10) which through him he effects in us (Jn. 15:5) and rewards so generously (Rom. 8:10-14, 26:30)." Consequently, "when God rewards our good works, he is rewarding his works and gifts in us, rather than our own works." Moreover, while the faith we exercise and the good works we perform proceed from our own free will, "nevertheless it is he who produces this good will and action in us, impelling us by his Holy Spirit (Phil. 2:13)"; thus "all the good that God does to us and the eternal life that he gives us still remain the results of his grace

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alone, so that no one should boast of himself, but only of the Lord (Phil. 2:13; Rom. 6:23; 11:5f., 36; 1 Cor. 1:29f.).” That this teaching coincides with that of the apostles had of course been recognized long before by Augustine. Referring to passages such as 2 Corinthians 4:7 (“What have you that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?”) and James 1:17 (“Every good and perfect gift is from above”), Augustine affirms that “it is his own gifts that God crowns, not our merits, even though we regard these as our own acts,” and that “if they are good, they are God’s gifts” – not,” he explains, “that the apostle meant to deny good works or to empty them of their value, because he says that God renders to every man according to his works; but he would have works proceed from faith, and not faith from works.” Thus “we have even our good works from God, from whom likewise our faith and our love come,” and God gives what he commands. As cited in Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary On the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1977), p. 460

<sup>15</sup> W.L. Lance, *Word Biblical Commentary: Hebrews 9:13* (Word, 1991), p. 388

<sup>16</sup> Berkouwer, op. cit. p. 192

<sup>17</sup> Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (IVP, 1981), p. 926