

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Nicene Creed		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	2		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Romans 10:17		
Date:	January 22, 2023 (a.m.)		

I BELIEVE . . .

Mark Twain is credited with saying that faith is believing something you know ain't true. The noted atheist Sam Harris likewise affirmed that faith is completely separate from reason and in reality is the absolute absence of any kind of evidence. "Faith is nothing more than the license that religious people give one another to believe such propositions when reasons fail. . . . When we find reliable ways to make human beings more loving, less fearful, and genuinely enraptured by the fact of our appearance in the cosmos, we will have no need for divisive religious myths."¹ Notice that faith, as described by Twain and Harris is nothing more than a subjective inclination, a wishful state of mind. This is *not* faith as understood in the Nicene Creed. Khaled Anatolios, in his masterful study on Nicaea, rightly points out that it is a serious mistake "to think that to trust faith rather than rational analysis in terms of a modern conception of faith as an individual subjective disposition to accept as true what cannot be rationally justified. Rather, the faith alluded to in this context is the concrete experience of a Christian life informed and nourished by the Scriptures and performed within the ecclesial community."² B. B. Warfield informs us that "The English word *faith* came into the language under influence of the French, and is but a modification of the Latin *fides*, which is itself cognate with the Greek *pistas*. Its root meaning seems to be that of *binding*. Whatever we discover to be *binding* of us, is the object of *faith*. The corresponding Germanic term, represented by the English word *believe* (and the German *glauben*), goes back to a root meaning *to be agreeable* (represented by our English *life*), and seems to present the object of belief as something which we *esteem* – which we have *estimated* or *weighed* and *approved*. The notion of *constraint* is perhaps less prominent in *belief* than in *faith*, its place being taken in *belief* by that of *approval*. We *believe* in what we find worthy of our confidence; we *have faith* in what compels our confidence. But it would be easy to press this too far, and it is likely that the two terms *faith*, *belief* really express much the same idea. In the natural use of language, therefore, which is normally controlled by what we call etymology, that is, by the intrinsic connotation of the terms, when we say *faith*, *belief*, our minds are preoccupied with the grounds of the conviction expressed: we are speaking of a mental act or state to which we feel constrained by considerations objective to ourselves, or at least to the act or state in question. The conception embodied in the terms *belief*, *faith*, in other words, is not that of an arbitrary act of the subject's; it is that of a mental state or act which is determined by sufficient reasons . . . that is to say, with respect to belief, it is a mental recognition of what is before the mind, as objectively true and real, and therefore depends on the evidence and cannot arise apart from it. It is, therefore, impossible that belief should be the product of a volition; volitions look to the future and represent our desires; beliefs look to the present and represent our findings."³ Faith has been defined as consisting of three distinct qualities: knowledge, assent (or conviction), and trust. The Latin that lies behind our English words is summarized as follows, "the faith which is the instrument for justification (*fides justificans*) was described as *notitia*, *assensus*, and *fiducia* (in contrast to *fides historica*, the mere acceptance of the facts of faith). The knowledge (*noticia*) of faith refers to the divine Word set down in Scripture,

which the believer assents to (*assensus*). As confidence (*fiducia*) faith directs itself to the divine grace promised in Christ.”⁴

I. **THE NATURE OF FAITH.**

A. **Knowledge.** It might seem very confusing to say that faith is knowledge. For is it not one thing to know, another thing to believe? This is partly true. Sometimes we must distinguish between faith and knowledge and place them in contrast to each other. But there is a knowledge that is indispensable to faith. As pointed out last week, knowledge of our sinful condition is absolutely necessary. If we are ignorant of our plight we will see no need for redemption. J. Gresham Machen wisely pointed out, “the consciousness of sin was formerly the starting point of all preaching, but today it is gone . . . Christianity is the religion of the broken heart . . . it begins with the consciousness of sin. Without the consciousness of sin, the whole gospel will seem to be an idle tale.”⁵ In our ordinary human relations do we trust a person of whom we know nothing, especially when that for which we trust him is of grave importance for us we must know a good deal regarding his identity and his character. How much more must this be the case with that faith which directed us to Christ; for it is faith, against all the issues of life and death, of time and eternity. We must know who Christ is, what he has done, and what he is able to do. Otherwise faith would be blind conjecture at the best and foolish mockery at the worst. There must be apprehension of the truth respecting Christ. Sometimes indeed, the measure of truth apprehended by the believing person is very small, and we have to appreciate the fact that the faith of some in its initial stages is very elementary. But faith cannot begin in a vacuum of knowledge. Paul reminds us of this very simply when he says, “Faith is of hearing, and hearing of the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17).”

B. **Conviction.** Faith is assent. We must not only know the truth respecting Christ but we must also believe it to be true. It is possible, of course, for us to understand the import of certain propositions of truth and yet not believe these propositions. All disbelief is of this character, and the more intelligently the import of truths concerned is understood, the more violent may be the disbelief. A person who rejects the virgin birth may understand well what the doctrine of the virgin birth is and for that very reason reject it. But we are now dealing not with disbelief or unbelief but with faith, and this obviously implies that the truths known are also accepted as true. The conviction which enters into faith is not only an assent to the truth respecting Christ but also a recognition of the exact correspondence that there is between the truth of Christ and our deeds as lost sinners. What Christ is as Savior perfectly dovetails our deepest and most ultimate need. This is just saying that Christ’s sufficiency as Saviour meets the desperateness and hopelessness of our sin and misery. It is conviction, which engages, therefore, our greatest interest and which registers the verdict: Christ is exactly suited to all that I am in my sin and misery and to all that I should aspire to be by God’s grace. Christ fits in perfectly to the totality of our situation in its sin, guilt, misery, and ill desert. W. G. T. Shedd, one of the great systematic theologians of the 19th century made the following analysis.

1. “Christianity is moral and historical truth, not axiomatic and mathematical. Consequently, it demands the assent of faith in distinction from assent to a self-evident proposition. Its founder said, “Repent and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:15). This command implies that Christianity can be disbelieved. Axiomatic or self-evident truth cannot be disbelieved, and neither can it be believed. Geometry is not a matter of faith. It is improper to say that we believe that the whole is equal to the sum or its parts, or that two and two make four. We perceive these truths but do not believe them. They

do not rest upon testimony and are not accepted on account of testimony, like historical truth. The assent of faith is therefore different from the assent of intuitive perception. We do not intuitively perceive that Christ rose from the dead or that the Logos was born of a virgin, any more than we do that Alfred the Great was King of England. Intuitive knowledge is direct perception either by senses or by the reason. There is no possibility of doubting a sensuous impression or a mathematical intuition. Each is self-evident. But for moral and historical truth there is not the certainty of self-evidence but of probability, more or less. Consequently, in history and in morals there are degrees of certainty, but not in mathematics. In morals and historical truth there is a sufficient reason for believing the truth or the fact, though not such a reason as renders disbelief impossible. We may therefore doubt or disbelieve in regard to religious truth, because while it is credible by reason of testimony and other kinds of evidence, it is not self-evident like an axiom or a physical sensation. Faith is reasonable, in case there are more reasons for believing than for disbelieving. It is necessary that there should be such evidence as overwhelms all objections and renders the absurd, in order to evince the rationality of faith. The preponderance of evidence justifies the act of faith and condemns that of unbelief. A criminal is sentenced to death in a court of justice not by reason of an absolute demonstration that admits no possibility of the contrary but by reason of a preponderance of testimony, which conceivably might be erroneous.

2. The belief of Christian truth is voluntary; the perception of mathematical truth is involuntary. A man "yields" to the evidence for moral and historical truth, which implies the possibility of resisting it. His will, that is, his inclination, coincides with his understanding in the act of faith. But a man assents to geometrical axioms without any concurrence of his will. This is the act of the understanding alone. He does not yield to evidence but is compelled by it. "Moral truths," says Ullmann (*Sinlessness of Christ*, 50), "do not force themselves upon our mind with the indubitable certainty of sensible objects or with the incontrovertible evidence of mathematical demonstration. Their reception into the mind is to some extent an act of self-determination." Faith therefore has a voluntary element in it. The doctrine of divine existence, for example, is not assented to passively and necessarily from the mere mechanic structure of the intellect as the axioms of geometry are, but actively and freely. Axioms are not matters of proof; divine existence is. The individual believes in the existence of God partly because he inclines to believe it and not because it is absolutely impossible to resist the evidence for it and to sophisticate himself into the disbelief of it. He yields to the proof presented for the doctrine. "A man's creed," says Byron (*Life* 4.225), "does not depend upon himself; who can say *I will believe this, that or the other?*" But this depends upon the amount of evidence in the case. A man cannot say that he will believe Gulliver's Travels because there is not sufficient probability in them and testimony for them. But he can say that he will believe Caesar's Commentaries, because there is sufficient probability and testimony to warrant this decision. At the same time, there is not such a degree of evidence for the truth of Caesar's Commentaries as to render disbelief impossible."⁶

- C. **Trust.** Faith is knowledge passing into conviction, and it is conviction passing into confidence. Faith cannot stop short of self-commitment to Christ, transference of reliance upon ourselves and all human resources to reliance upon Christ alone for salvation. It is a receiving and resting upon him. It is here that the most characteristic act of faith appears; it is engagement of person to person, the engagement of the sinner as lost to the person of the Saviour able and willing to save. Faith, after all, is not belief of propositions of truth respecting the Saviour, however essential an ingredient of faith such belief is. Faith is trust in a person, the person of Christ, the Son of God and Saviour of the lost. It is entrustment of ourselves to him. It does not simply believe him; it is believing in him and on him. Along

similar lines, the late Robert Reymond points out “that the Bible’s heart is semantically equivalent not to one’s emotions but to one’s deepest self with a preponderant emphasis even here upon the intellect of the self, argues that even *fiducia*, as well as *notitia* and *assensus*, is essentially intellectual. With this I concur, but I would urge that this intellectual *fiducia* includes affective and volitional dimensions, since Paul insists that the saved must not simply know about and believe in but also *love* the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 16:22).”⁷ It is to be remembered that the efficacy of faith does not reside in itself; Faith is not something that merits favour of God. All the efficacy unto salvation resides in the Saviour. As one has aptly and truly stated the case, it is not faith that saves but faith in Jesus Christ; strictly speaking, it is not even faith in Christ that saves us but Christ that saves through faith. Faith unites us to Christ in the bonds of abiding attachment and entrustment and it is this union, which insures that the saving power, grace, and virtue of the Saviour become operative in the believer. The specific character of faith is that it looks away from itself and finds its whole interest and object in Christ. He is the absorbing preoccupation of faith.

CONCLUSION: Shedd once again helpfully observes, “Saving faith is far more certain than historical faith. It is a mental certainty that is produced by the Holy Spirit. He originates an immediate consciousness of the truth of the gospel; and wherever there is immediate consciousness, doubt is impossible. Saving faith implies a personal feeling of the truth in the heart; historical faith is destitute of feeling. This makes the former far more certain than the latter and less assailable by counter-arguments. When an inward sense and experience of the truth of the gospel is produced by the divine Spirit in a human soul, as great a mental certainty exists in this instance as in those of sensuous impressions and axiomatic intuitions. A dying believer who is immediately conscious of the love of God in Christ Jesus is as certain in regard to this great fact as he is that fire pains the flesh or that two and two make four. When St. Paul said, *I am persuaded that neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor powers nor things present nor things to come nor height nor depth nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Rom. 8:38-39), he was as sure of this as he was of his own existence. And this, because of his immediate consciousness of the redeeming love of God.”⁸

ENDNOTES

¹ Sam Harris, “Science Must Destroy Religion,” *Huffington Post*, May 25, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sam-harris/science-must-destroy-reli_b_13153.html[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sam-harris/science-must-destroy-reli_b_13153.html].

² K. Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Baker, 2011), p. 227.

³ B. B. Warfield, “On Faith In Its Psychological Aspect,” *Biblical and Theological Studies* (rpt. P&R, 1968), pp. 375, 377.

⁴ Bengt Hagglund, *History of Theology* (Concordia Publishing House, 1966), p. 319.

⁵ J. G. Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Macmillan, 1923), p. 56.

⁶ W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology Third Edition ed. Alan Gomer* (P&R, 2003), p. 136.

⁷ Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Thomas Nelson, 1998), p. 728.

⁸ op cit., p. 137.