

# WHAT IS FAITH? MYSTERIOUS ACT OR HEART-RECONCILIATION?

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One wonders if anything has ever been talked about so much and yet understood so little as what faith is. Yet it is an essential ingredient of the three-word formula, “righteousness by faith,” which has been discussed so much, that some think they are weary of hearing about it.

But since New Testament faith itself is a world largely undiscovered, New Testament righteousness by faith is also a realm of truth largely awaiting exploration. While it is destined to enlighten the earth with glory, Christ assures us that at the present time we are actually “poor, blind, and naked” in understanding it, while we have imagined ourselves “rich and increased with goods.” Discovering the fabulous secrets of the gospel is a more fascinating search than hunting for Spanish gold and sunken treasure.

We have some curious notions about faith which we have taken over from the preachers we hear in the media. Sometime ago Marshall McLuhan warned that the electronic screen is so powerful that whoever appears on it no matter what they say, is credited as being truth. “The medium is the message.” If somebody can get on television or radio or in print they must be believable.

One of the ideas adopted from Babylon is that faith comes first and then it turns into love. You have to

trust someone before you can ever fall in love with them. Sometimes this trust turns out to be one giant act of faith on your part. It’s described as coming up to the edge of an escarpment with nowhere to go. It’s just crazy to jump off without a parachute. You’ve doubted in the past whether there even is a God. But now you overcome momentarily your skepticism and count up all the reasons you can muster to fortify your mind. Finally, you take the leap of faith believing that you are going to fall into the arms of God.

This is more presumption than it is faith. I have to admit this is just my initial, immature way of thinking about faith in God as a teenager. I try to use my own reason upon which to build my trust that there is a God who had regard for me. It is presumptuous on my part to posit my act of faith on a self-made platform.

Modern Protestant “faith” is a spiritual bank into which, through a process of presumptuous infatuation, has lost all original value. It has now become a note drawn upon the bank of *self*.

Salvation by faith is much spoken of and advocated at the present day, but without calling forth either hatred or persecution or worthy of imitation from others. Has then the offence of the Cross ceased? No. But it will be found that very much of what is called faith is nothing but self-dependence, a dependence of human acts and human righteousness, of the trust of one’s own person in *his own act of belief*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Garnier, *The True Christ and the False Christ*, Vol. II, p. 358.

The view that faith is an *act* of belief which effects some mystical change in God's attitude toward the sinner is wholly accepted today.

The Christian life of sanctification is a matter of growth dependent on a growing knowledge of Christ, or of the truth, which can be learnt by means of trial, temptation, and affliction, and constant prayer and striving. However, the effect of the idea of faith being an act and then do nothing, is a sudden mystical change. Such individuals say to themselves, "I will trust Jesus for a pure heart and *now*, and with the *act of faith* there distilled into my heart like the gentle dew, the sweet *consciousness* of the cleansing blood and presence of Jesus Christ formed in me." . . .

By this is represented cleansing from sin, instead of being a moral and spiritual process wrought in the soul by belief of the truth, being crucified with Christ, as an occult effect produced in some mystical way.

It makes holiness something to be *taken* by an act of belief, and while it calls it trust in Christ, it is really trust in the person's own act. For if being dead to sin depends on a person's believing that he is dead unto sin, every failure to be so must cause him, instead of going to Christ for strength; to question the strength, and seek to increase the firmness, of his belief in his own holiness. His sole dependence in this on his act of belief, or act of self-abandonment, by which he is supposed to "fall in to the arms of Jesus," and become suddenly holy.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, II, pp. 207, 210.

Another misconception we have about faith is that we must trust God in order to have a relationship with Him. We talk a lot about having a "saving relationship" with God—that is all that counts. We think this must be genuine faith. But the New Testament never defines faith or believing as trust. Neither *elpizo* nor *peitho* is the word for to believe or to have faith. The word for faith is *pistis*, and to have faith is *pisteuo*. The New Testament never defines faith as being trust. Why? The reason is that it presents a better definition.

I have a "saving relationship" with CAAA. I have been paying my car insurance premiums "faithfully" for the past twenty years. I believe that they have promised that if there's an accident they will restore everything whole again like it was before. As long as I do my part they will do their part.

I trust in my "First Bank" with which I have been doing business for the past twenty years. I like going there. There are no long lines. I know the cashiers and they are friendly. If I want to cash a check, they don't card me because they know me. One time I asked for thirteen thousand dollars in cash and my friendly cashier counted out 130 hundred dollar bills. I trust they will have my money available when I need it. I have done my part and they will do theirs when I need them.

But God's promises are not bargains or contracts that He makes with us. Salvation is not a contract whereby God says if we do our part then He will do His part. Such relationships are all the ways of the world. Rather, God's covenant of salvation is His

promise in Christ that He will forgive and cleanse us.

Another misconception we have regarding faith is that if we don't believe in God we will be destroyed. Such self-preservation is what it means to be "under the law." Our greatest fear which holds us in bondage is the fear of death all our lives. On the other hand, if we do believe in God, then we can trade in our earthly real estate for heavenly tract homes and have an address on the streets of gold. The cornerstone of this motivation for faith rests on our selfish desires.

All three of these misconceptions of faith are driven by what the ancient Greeks called *eros* which is self-love reaching out for God.

As we talk with various ones, we learn that most consider that we do understand righteousness by faith. We have no lack there. The problem is we just don't practice it. Where is the humility of heart which will listen to Jesus, the True Witness, who says, "thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked" (Revelation 3:17). The reason for our Laodicean luke-warmness is the robust conscious that we have a true understanding of what "faith" is. However, the True Witness says, "I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire" (Revelation 3:18). His understanding of "gold,"<sup>3</sup> which is faith and love, is just what we lack.

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<sup>3</sup> "Faith and love are the gold tried in the fire." Ellen G. White *The Desire of Ages*, p. 280.

The Bible has a better definition of faith. See if you don't think so. Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, thought he had "faith" and God all figured out, when Jesus spoke these words to him: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). Here is the order of salvation. God's love is first. When we see that love in His giving His only Son, that generates belief in Him.

So we have this very idea affirmed by the servant of the Lord: "Our hearts are melted by contemplating His great love in giving us Jesus, His priceless gift. We receive Jesus, as we appreciate the love of God. . . . When we contemplate the love of Christ . . ." <sup>4</sup>

So we understand that faith is God's gift of love. "God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith" (Romans 12:3). Faith is not a magic formula that self creates out of nothing in order to impress God with our sincerity. "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17). Faith comes by hearing about Jesus. The Holy Spirit ministers to everyone the word of Jesus. "Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?" (Galatians 3:2, cf. 5). "The works of the law" are self-motivated. Genuine faith does not come from self. It's source is the love of God.

What is "the hearing of faith"? Paul presented the message of the cross so clearly to the Galatians

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<sup>4</sup> Ellen G. White, "Qualifications for the Worker," *Review and Herald* (June 4, 1895), par. 5.

that they felt themselves “before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified” (Gal. 3:1). [See also Acts 2:36-38.]

The servant of the Lord says, “You may say that you *believe* in Jesus when you have an *appreciation of the cost of salvation*. You may make this claim, when you feel that Jesus died for you on the cruel cross of Calvary. . . .”<sup>5</sup> “The cost of salvation” involved Jesus, the sin-bearer, 1) voluntarily laying down His life on your behalf, 2) sensing the agonies which the wicked will suffering at the second death. 3) He chose to be separated from His eternal relationship with the Father forever. 4) He surrendered the independent use of His divine powers over to the Father. 5) He did not have the hope of the resurrection.<sup>6</sup>

When you can appreciate what it cost Jesus to die for you, then you can say that you have faith. When you can say that you put Him through that, then you can say you have faith. This is no superficial connection with Jesus. This is no mere creedal assent to some objective truth. This is a genuine

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<sup>5</sup> Ellen G. White “How Do We Stand,” *Review and Herald* (July 24, 1888), par. 5.

<sup>6</sup> “The Saviour could not see through the portals of the tomb. Hope did not present to Him His coming forth from the grave a conqueror, or tell Him of the Father's acceptance of the sacrifice. He feared that sin was so offensive to God that Their separation was to be eternal. Christ felt the anguish which the sinner will feel when mercy shall no longer plead for the guilty race. It was the sense of sin, bringing the Father's wrath upon Him as man's substitute, that made the cup He drank so bitter, and broke the heart of the Son of God.” Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 753.

reconciliation of your heart to Jesus' heart. It involves the crucifixion of self with Christ for it was “self” that put Him on His cross. It is an appreciation of Jesus' love for you that is genuine faith.

“A human heart appreciation of . . . the *agape* of Christ” does not mean a merely human exercise. Faith is the gift of God, a measure of which, Paul says, is given “to every man.” But it is ours to exercise. We have the power to resist or to accept the light. If we accept it, of course we do so by the enabling grace of God; but nonetheless, there is a human element of choice involved. We are not Calvinist who believe in predestination. Somewhere in the plan of salvation there is a place where a Continental Divide takes place—one sinner chooses to believe, and another chooses to disbelieve. My point I wish to make is this: when the sinner chooses to believe to the saving of his soul, the true motivation involved is not a self-centered grasping for reward or a fear-motivated attempt to escape from hell. He appreciates the dimensions of love revealed in the *agape* at the cross. God so loved that He gave; the sinner's part is to respond, to “believe.”

My point is to present Biblical faith in more authentic terms than is the case in “Babylon.” Thy always define faith as “trust,” which implies a self-centered, basically selfish, grasping for security and reward. This kind of “faith” can produce nothing but lukewarmness, or even apostasy. I believe genuine Biblical faith is not egocentric in nature; it is, as I try to say, a heart appreciation of *agape*. The sinner responds not because he is afraid of hell, or wants

a reward in the New Jerusalem, but “the *agape* of Christ constraineth us . . .” 2 Cor 5:14; DA 480. So many preachers and evangelists define faith precisely as do the Babylonians—trust, and fear or hope of reward is the almost universal motivation appealed to. I use the words “human heart appreciation” are used because they contrast the divine revelation of *agape* evoking a complementary human response—faith; but that response is never *eros* or even *philos*. In Paul’s concept, faith is the proper human response to divine *agape*. Therefore, one’s concept of *agape* must condition his dimensions of faith. If you believe in the natural immortality of the soul, you cannot truly appreciate the dimensions of *agape* revealed at the cross, and consequently your faith is adulterated and watered down correspondingly. Hence it is that Babylon cannot comprehend true righteousness by faith.

This human heart appreciation of God’s *agape* love is not “intellectual,” nor merely human. But, the death to self is the fruit of that faith, not the cause of it. Self cannot be crucified, except “with Christ.” And the point of union with Christ must be faith. No other way is possible. Hence, the faith must precede all works. Genuine faith results from a true “beholding” of *agape* at the cross, and always “works by *agape*” to produce the fruits of repentance, turning away from sin, and results in complete obedience to “all the commandments of God.”

Paul spoke of “the hearing of faith” as an experience illustrated in the life of Abraham, when his heart-broken experience of *true faith* was

counted for righteousness. But the righteous God could never count as righteousness any grasping *act* of “faith” such as is often enjoined upon sinners by popular Protestant evangelists. With them, faith becomes a mere trust, devoid of the heart-broken love and contrition which can be aroused in human nature only by the proclamation of the truth of the Cross. This trust is emphasized to be in the sinner’s own act of appropriation of this “salvation.” One thing is certain, such “salvation” is not from *self*. Aside from a certain sense of psychological “adjustment,” the sinner will find, if he is honest with himself, that the exhibitions of selfishness which constitute the root of sin are simply “sublimated” or disguised in a new form. Sometimes even the “elect” can be temporarily deceived.

Did Paul preach the word of “magic,” occult “faith” that transforms black into white? Did he teach that this “magic word” causes God to “count” an unjust man as just, or, in other words, to justify the wicked? “He that justifieth the wicked” is an “abomination to the Lord.” Proverbs 17:15. Such confusion is the direct result of omitting the truth of the atonement. “But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justified, his faith is accounted for righteousness” (Romans 4:3, 5). Abraham was not accounted righteous when he was not righteous. His *faith* was accounted to him *for* righteousness—his faith being, of course, a “broken spirit, a broken and a contrite *heart*,” which believed unto righteousness through an understanding of the atonement. “Abraham rejoiced to see my day” (John 8:56.) The idea that Abraham merely

“trusting” God and for some real estate is very misleading, but it contributes to a modern misunderstanding of faith. Abraham’s faith, being genuine, was righteousness, and God merely acknowledged in justifying him, that all He has ever wanted from us was a similar *heart* experience of contrition. *That* is righteousness, and produces naturally all the works of righteousness. To circumvent the experience in the human heart, to be aroused by the preaching of Christ crucified by considering faith as “magic” is a travesty in preaching Christ.

In the statement of Sr. White read earlier she completes her thought this way: “You may say that you *believe* in Jesus when you have an *appreciation of the cost of salvation*. You may make this claim, when you feel that Jesus died for you on the cruel cross of Calvary; when you have an intelligent, understanding *faith* that His death makes it possible for you to cease from sin, and to perfect a righteous character through the grace of God, bestowed upon you as the purchase of Christ’s blood.”<sup>7</sup> It is a “faith which worketh by love” (Galatians 5:6). God’s new creation is constrained by love (2 Cor. 5:14). The new creature whose heart is reconciled to God will be obedient to all the commandments of God which is the opposite of sin.

All conventional wisdom of Babylon’s definitions of faith as some mystical act of the soul, trust, a saving relationship, faith precedes love, are inadequate when compared with the Biblical

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<sup>7</sup> Ellen G. White “How Do We Stand,” *Review and Herald* (July 24, 1888), par. 5.

presentation of genuine “gold tried in the fire” which is *agape* and *faith*.

In his book *Hidden in Plain Sight*, author and pastor Mark Buchanan writes about a woman named Regine. Originally from Rwanda, Regine came to Christ while reading her sister’s Bible during the genocide that ravaged her country. When she fled to Canada for refuge, she met her husband, Gordon. They decided to return to Rwanda to show the love of Christ to the people who had once been her enemies. Regine told Mark Buchanan this story of *agape* love: A woman’s only son was killed. She was consumed with grief and hate and bitterness. “God,” she prayed, “reveal my son’s killer.” One night she dreamed she was going to heaven. But there was a complication: in order to get to heaven she had to pass through a certain house. She had to walk down the street, enter the house through the front door, go through its rooms, up the stairs, and exit through the back door. She asked God whose house this was. “It’s the house,” he told her, “of your son’s killer.” The road to heaven passed through the house of her enemy. Two nights later, there was a knock at her door. She opened it, and there stood a young man. He was about her son’s age. “Yes?” He hesitated. Then he said, “I am the one who killed your son. Since that day, I have had no life. No peace. So here I am. I am placing my life in your hands. Kill me. I am dead already. Throw me in jail. I am in prison already. Torture me. I am in torment already. Do with me as you wish.” The woman had prayed for this day. Now it had arrived. All she could see

was Jesus' love in being crucified for her. Her spirit was crushed by her responsibility. Faith had come to her. She found, to her own surprise, that she did not want to kill him, or throw him in jail, or torture him. In that moment of reckoning, she found she only wanted one thing: a son. "I ask this of you. Come into my home and live with me. Eat the food I would have prepared for my son. Wear the clothes I would have made for my son. Become the son I lost." And so he did.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Mark Buchanan, *Hidden in Plain Sight*.