

FAITH: TRYING, TRUSTING, OR SOMETHING BETTER?

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Faith and sin are incompatible. Faith is the Bible antidote to the problem of sin—not that faith is our Saviour, but that faith is what connects us to the Saviour. To understand what faith is, we must understand more clearly how deep are the roots of sin in human nature. True faith is something that goes down deep, to cleanse those motivational roots.

Sin is not only what we do or say outwardly; it is also that inward condition “from the sole of the foot even unto the head [where] there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores.” It involves our inner state of alienation from God and from one another, our state of rebellion, our obsession with anxiety, our carnal-mind enmity against God. This is not the Catholic or Calvinist doctrine of original sin. The sin for which human beings will be judged or condemned at last is volitional (John 3:16-21; 5T 177). New Testament faith gets down to the business of purifying those roots of sinful volition.

If Paul were living today, he would be amazed at how “sin abounds” in our modern culture. How can we make any sense out of what we see there unless we recognize that the Spirit of God is indeed being withdrawn from the world? Sin as a compulsive addiction is getting a tragic grip on the human race. In California, we have 5 year old

children getting hooked on drugs. One newspaper reported recently about 250 little children, many from middle and upper class families, who are drug addicts seeking help. Their average age: 12. Girls 11 or 12 are becoming prostitutes in order to get money for crystal meth. Sociologists openly say there is “no solution” to the problem; building bigger prisons for pushers will mean that “our society will become prisoners of our prisoners. . . . Civilized society isn’t in control of its destiny because the prisoners are gaining more control daily.”

This is a microcosm of a world steadily descending ever deeper into the morass of hatred, cruelty, terrorism, and hedonism. “Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.” (Eph. 4:19, NIV). Captives to lust, intemperance, hedonism, are also more and more to be found in the church, so that the question is being asked, “Is there any power in the Adventist message that can deliver from the addiction to sensuality, infatuation, materialism, and infidelity, that is so common today?”

And not only are thoughtful people distressed by the hedonism of even Adventist yuppies; the harsh, bitter criticism of holier-than-thou right-wing critics also indicates a state of sinful alienation. Strife and seditions are listed as “works of the flesh,” along with immoralities (Gal. 5:19-21). Helpless hand-wringing in the face of sin which abounds indicates an ignorance of the grace which more abounds; and that too is sin.

Sin is like AIDS; apart from the pure gospel of Christ, there is no known cure for it. Our concern in this study is to discover what is the truth of the Bible cure for even deep sin like the lukewarmness of Laodicea. Our focus will not only be on the general message of righteousness by faith, but on seeking to discover what its essential ingredient of faith is.

Speaking of freedom from “the yoke of bondage,” Paul says that “we through the Spirit wait for the hope of righteousness by faith.” (This is the only place in the entire Bible where that particular phrase occurs). Paul adds immediately that this “faith . . . worketh by love (agape)” (Gal. 5:1, 5, 6). What is New Testament faith?

It is impossible to overestimate its importance. While it is true that faith is not our Saviour, it is impossible for us to be saved without it. “By grace are ye saved through faith, . . . not of works.” Eph. 2:8, 9). Paul prays that “Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith” (3:17). We are “justified by the faith of Christ,” and the life we “now live in the flesh [we] live by the faith of the Son of God” (Gal. 2:16, 20). All will “perish” except those who believe, that is, have faith (John 3:16). Let no one denigrate faith. I can’t think of anything more urgent than understanding clearly what it is.

Let us not be proud and arrogant in assuming that we understand it. The Lord Jesus has been trying to get through to us for over a hundred years with the message that we don’t understand what faith is: “Thou . . . knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.” And in what, specifically, are we so “poor”? Faith, because

He adds in the same breath, “I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich.” That “gold” is pure faith (Rev. 3:17, 18; 1 Pet. 1:7). If we are satisfied with our understanding of faith and feel no need, we mark ourselves as resisters of Christ’s message to Laodicea. What a priceless blessing it must be to be able to feel one’s need: “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness,” Jesus says (Mt. 5:6). And there is only one kind of righteousness—that which is by faith. God save us from this terrible childish pride of glibly, thoughtlessly claiming, “Yes, I believe with all my heart.” Senior ministers have protested to me, “We as a people understand righteousness by faith—no problem there; we just don’t live it like we should.” And I have replied, “That statement illustrates our profound misunderstanding of righteousness by faith. It is impossible not to live righteously if we have true faith:” We would make some significant progress if we could learn to pray with the distraught father in Mark 9, “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief” (vs. 24). Our little study is dedicated to a search for a way out of that terrible “unbelief,” which is a lack of genuine New Testament faith.

Faith is not “trying.” We must not fall for the devil’s trick of making words mean the opposite of what they say, so that we twist faith to make it become “works.” As clearly as it can say it, the Bible declares that we are not saved by works (Rom. 3:20, 28; 4:2-5, etc.). Watch out for a very clever trick of Satan: he makes faith out to be something that you do, an initiative that you take, a decision

that you make, an election that you decide on, that settles your destiny. This is a subtle reverse of values, making faith to be a work so that when you enter the pearly gates at last you can say, “I am glad I took the initiative, that I made the right choice, that I took advantage of the opportunity to be saved! Praise God, yes, but praise me too, for helping Him to save me. I took the right path!” No, that is not New Testament faith. It is spiritual selfishness.

To be fair and accurate, it is not right to define New Testament faith as “trust.” That is, not the faith which figures in the inspired phrase, “righteousness by faith.” Let us permit the New Testament to speak:

Two Greek words are commonly used to express the idea of trust—*elpizo*, and *peitho*. “In him shall the Gentiles trust [*elpizo*]” (Rom. 15:12); “I trust [*elpizo*] to see you in my journey” (vs. 24); “I trust [*elpizo*] in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy” (Phil. 2:19); “we trust [*elpizo*] in the living God” (1 Tim. 4:10). “He trusted [*peitho*] in God; let him deliver him” (Mt. 27:43); “how hard . . . for them that trust [*peitho*] in riches” (Mk. 10:24); “I will put my trust [*peitho*] in him” (Heb. 2:13). But 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:

Faith, in New Testament usage, is a heart appreciation of the love of God revealed at the cross of Christ. In order to “buy . . . gold tried in the

fire” as the True Witness tells us to do, we must understand what such faith is. But before we can understand New Testament faith, we must understand New Testament love, for the former depends entirely on the latter. The content of faith is defined by the content of *agape*. For example: “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish” (Jn. 3:16). God loves and gives; we respond to that sacrificial loving; we appreciate it; thus we believe. And that faith immediately begins to transform the heart and the life, for such “faith worketh by love [*agape*]” (Gal. 5:6).

New Testament love, *agape*, is a love that the ancients had never dreamed of. It is a love that is completely free of self-centeredness, which knows not even a trace of fear. Such love, foreign to this world of sin, led Christ to take upon Himself the “curse,” dying on the cross, experiencing the equivalent of the second death in which there is no hope of reward or immortality. “He hath poured out his soul unto death.” (Isa. 53:12).

This amazing love took the world by surprise; the apostles could hardly talk of anything else, save “Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:1, 2). The phenomenal response of their hearers was not motivated by fear of hell or hope of reward in heaven. As Paul presented the cross to them, they “received . . . the Spirit . . . by the hearing of faith” (Gal. 3:1, 2). They said, “Did the Son of God come from heaven to endure my curse, and to die for me on a cross? Oh, then I must live for Him!” They described their “faith” in words like these: “The love

[*agape*] of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead [that is, all would have died]; and that he died for all, that they which live should not hence forth live unto themselves [that is, a lukewarm, self-centered, fear-or-hope-of-reward motivation now becomes impossible] but unto him which died for them and rose again” (2 Cor. 5:14, 15). This was “the hearing of faith.” Nothing short of this is worthy of the name, faith!

The common idea of trust usually rests on a condition of personal insecurity, associated with fear or hope of reward. For example, you trust the bank because you are afraid to keep your money under the mattress. You trust the police because you fear the anarchy that would result if they were not there. You trust your insurance company because you dread the loss that would come from your house burning or your car being wrecked.

This is not to say that it is wrong or sinful to hope for reward in heaven, or to fear punishment in hell. These are basic human emotions that we all know; but such self-centeredness is not New Testament faith. It is an example of childish immaturity. It has not prepared a people for the trials of the last days, nor for the coming of the Lord. True faith is set forth as follows: “It is not the fear of punishment, or the hope of everlasting reward, that leads the disciples of Christ to follow Him. They behold the Saviour’s matchless love . . . from the manger of Bethlehem to Calvary’s cross, and the sight of Him attracts, it softens and subdues the soul.” (DA 480). “A true sense of the sacrifice and intercession of the dear

Saviour will break the heart that has become hardened in sin; and love, thankfulness, and humility will come into the soul. . . This is the true religion of the Bible. Everything short of this is a deception.” (4T 625). If this is true (it is!), it follows that the root cause of Laodicea’s lukewarmness is “deception” involved in a false idea of righteousness by faith—a wrong understanding of faith itself.

Satan would not be the enemy that he is if he had not tried to infiltrate the remnant church with a false, or at least inadequate, idea of faith. He can find no more successful method of hindering the work of the Lord. Because of the widely held doctrine of natural immortality, the popular churches have no clear concept of *agape*; it is inevitable that they should likewise have no clear concept of faith. “The Lord in His great mercy sent a most precious message to His people” in 1888, a message that at least began to restore the New Testament idea of faith. But the message was not well received, and in consequence it was not well understood. Feeling guilty because of Ellen White’s inspired rebukes for rejecting the message, our brethren assuaged their sense of guilt by borrowing concepts from the popular preachers of the day. The Sunday School Times idea of righteousness by faith was adopted in place of the 1888 concepts. Long decades of wandering and confusion have followed.

We must never dare to claim that we have faith unless a genuine heart-appreciation of that divine love in the cross motivates us: “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." (*R&H*, July 24, 1888). In other words, this is the kind of "faith which worketh by *agape*." It "makes it possible to cease from sin," and to prepare for the coming of the Lord!

There is a highly refined form of spiritual selfishness that is popular. Someone may object to that constraining love revealed at the cross, saying, "The only reason why I joined the church was so I can go to heaven! That's why I keep the Sabbath, because I don't want to lose my reward. I pay my tithe because the preacher says I will be better off economically if I do. It's good business—there's something in it for me. And the only reason I practice health reform is so I can enjoy life better. I trust in Christ like I trust my insurance company—He's going to get me a ticket into the New Jerusalem." Well, this is indeed the spiritual experience of many in the church. They are astonished to realize that their motivation has been selfish. But this is the root cause of the church's lukewarmness. But whatever these dear souls have, it is not New Testament faith, and it is not the kind of faith that will prepare a people for the coming of the Lord.

Someone may object: "Doesn't Ellen White define faith as trust?" In the Index to her writings (Vol. 1, pp. 968-979) there are some 700 entries under the

word "faith," many of them various definitions. Trust is one of those many-sided definitions. True faith includes trust, or confidence in God; but Ellen White does not contradict her statements in *DA* 480, 4T 625, and the July 24, 1888 *Review* cited above. She never recommends that we adopt the self-centered faith of "Babylon." While trust is a part of faith consistent with a heart appreciation of God's love, it is only a part; one entry among the 700 contains a common denominator to them all—"faith always works by love." This is its bottom-line definition.

Abraham's faith made him the "father of the faithful" in all ages. But I recognize that the *agape* of Christ was never so clearly revealed in OT times as it was at the cross, nor was the truth of righteousness by faith so clearly spelled out as in the NT.

My expression, "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 predestinationists. 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," the kind of faith which works by *agape* and thus purifies the soul.

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. Practically all of our 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" only because I am contrasting 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. My point is that 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 as I see it, 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. But my point is that 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." Not just 9!

Let me add a few EGW statements that have influenced my attempt to define faith as an appreciation of *agape*:

"If men would contemplate the love of Christ, displayed at the cross, their faith would be strengthened to appropriate the merits of His shed blood, and they would be cleansed and saved from sin." *5BC* 1132, 33.

Note the order!

"Those who, failing to appreciate this wonderful sacrifice, withhold themselves from Christ's service, will perish in their selfishness." *MH* 502.

The entire passage is excellent.

"When you look to Calvary, it is not to quiet your soul in the nonperformance of duty, not to compose yourself to sleep, but to create faith in Jesus, faith that will work, purifying the soul from the slime of selfishness." *2SM* 20. Note again the order.

“The resolutions that are formed when the heart is deeply moved by the love [*agape*] of Christ will be high and holy, and will lead to the formation of wise plans of action. . . .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 . . .” *R&H* June 4, 1895.

“When we have a deeper appreciation of the mercy and loving-kindness of God, we shall praise Him . . .” *SDG* 198.

“Those who appreciate this great sacrifice receive from the Saviour that most precious of all gifts—a clean heart.” *R&H* May 30, 1907. Note again the order.

“Faith in Christ as the world’s Redeemer calls for an acknowledgement of the enlightened intellect controlled by a heart that can discern and appreciate the heavenly treasure. This faith is inseparable from repentance and transformation of character. To have faith means to find and accept the gospel treasure, with all the obligations which it imposes.” *COL* 112.

But those “obligations” are a pleasure to fulfill if one shows and appreciates what *agape* is!

“The light shining from the cross of Calvary will reveal to you God’s estimate of the soul, and appreciating that estimate, you will seek to reflect the light to the world.” *5T* 579.

“You may say that you believe in Jesus [may I dare say she means to say, only] 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.” *R&H* July 24, 1888.

That “bestowal” is freely given to all—but those who are lost are those who refuse it. Those who are saved are those who appreciate it and cherish it.

Let us humbly and honestly confess that we need that “gold tried in the fire.” And let us gladly give up our Babylonian ideas at the heavenly commissary in exchange for the genuine, and thus “buy” of Christ that precious “gold.”

WHAT DOES HEBREWS 11 SAY?

The author of Hebrews has just spoken about the contrast between “confidence” and “faith” in chapter 10: “Cast not away therefore your confidence [*parrhesia*] which hath great recompense of reward.” This “confidence” is not the word for faith. Next he discusses the need for “patience,” concluding that “the just shall live by faith [*pistis*],” assuring his readers that they are people who “believe [*pisteuo*] to the saving of the soul” (vss. 35-39). With this introduction (which should be a part of chapter 11) he proceeds to show how true New Testament faith is also taught and exemplified in the Old Testament.

Faith is not to be confused with confidence. As elsewhere in the New Testament, faith in Hebrews is a heart-appreciation of God’s glorious *agape*-love, revealed at the cross. Paul’s grand idea is that Abraham was justified by that same faith and thus

is “the father of all them that believe” (Romans 4:1-11). Abraham “saw [Christ’s day], and was glad” (John 8:56). He saw the uplifted cross as a future event whereas we see it as a past event; but the heart-appreciation was the same. Christ was “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:8). Righteousness by faith has always been God’s only way of saving anyone. Hebrews mentions many men and women since Abel who exercised exactly the same faith that we know today. Abraham’s true descendants have always been “them that believe,” not his fleshly unbelieving descendants. “In Isaac shall thy seed be called.” No intelligent descendant of Abraham ever imagined that “the blood of bulls and goats” could take away even one sin; all knew full well that Christ’s sacrifice alone could avail. All understood the sacrificial animal offerings to be merely types, including Daniel, whose experience is included in the Hebrews 11 saga. (Obviously, Daniel understood the reality of the heavenly sanctuary and the antitypical Day of Atonement in consequence of understanding righteousness by faith).

Thus Hebrews 11:1 is not intended to be an inclusive definition of faith. In fact, “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen,” is not itself a definition. The author is saying: This glorious phenomenon that we know, this gift of God’s grace, this heart-appreciation of His magnificent love that we know, this is “the substance of things hoped for,” the down-payment guaranteeing that all that Scripture promises will yet be realized.