

IN RESPONSE - WHAT IS FAITH? [PART TWO]

by Dennis Prutow
Volume I, Number 2

Last month I commented on the definition of faith taken from an article in our local newspaper.

Somebody once likened faith to platform diving. Faith, he said, is like standing on the platform and looking down into an empty pool. God says, "Go ahead and jump, I'll fill it."

So most of us run to the end of the platform and stop, looking down quickly to see if the pool is beginning to fill. Unfortunately, it isn't. Only after we jump do we discover that the pool is filled, every time, without fail. Leaping off such a platform would indeed lack logic, and to someone who has never tried it, it makes no sense whatsoever.¹

I said that this was the philosophy of Immanuel Kant set forth as biblical truth! I related this view of faith to the errors of easy believism and dead orthodoxy. And in closing I again said that I am convinced that both errors spring from the modern secular view of reality which is based on the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. These are errors which have penetrated deeply into the church of Jesus Christ among both evangelicals and those who are Reformed. My purpose here is to continue the same line of thinking. First I want to show how the above definition of faith is related to Kant. Second I want you to see the devastating effect this is having within the evangelical community.

It is well known the Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) held to the existence of two realms, the phenomenal and the noumenal. "According to Kant, human knowledge never brings us into contact with the real world, what he called the noumenal world. All we ever know is the phenomenal world, the world as it appears to us after it has been modified by the categories of our understanding."² The noumenal world is where

we find things-in-themselves and where we find God. But our thought processes cannot take us into the noumenal world. "All we ever know is the phenomenal world." This is the world of sense perception as organized by the categories of the mind. And: "Knowledge is valid because it applies to phenomena."³

"Kant's system had the effect of erecting a wall between the world as it appears to us and the world as it really is. Human knowledge is restricted to the phenomenal world, the world of appearance, the world shaped by the structure of the knowing mind."⁴ Again, the result of this theory of knowledge is that human thought processes cannot move from the phenomenal world into the noumenal world. "This result is for Kant, very significant; for having shown that knowledge is limited to phenomena, he expresses his firm conviction that the way is open for faith to fill in the gaps."⁵ "He wrote that he had 'found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith.'"⁶

Here is the crux of the matter. God is in the noumenal world. There is a wall separating us from God. Neither knowledge nor understanding nor reason can take us over that wall to God. The only way to get over that wall is a leap of faith. As our original definition of faith says, such a leap "makes no sense whatsoever." But this is said to be the very essence of faith. The connection of the foregoing definition of faith with Kant should therefore be clear. This understanding of faith has no doubt fueled the anti-intellectual climate within the church. Since faith is not supposed to be grounded in knowledge, there is a tendency to move toward emotionalism. This is evident in evangelical circles where the irra-

tional leap is set forth as the preeminent characteristic of faith. It is also evident in Reformed circles where a search for more successful means of evangelism has turned heads toward evangelicalism. But there are devastating consequences.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism defines faith in this fashion: "Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel."⁷ One of the key points here relates to how Christ is presented. If the gospel message is presented as an irrational leap of faith, grounded upon an emotional appeal, then the faith expressed in this leap is not really faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself tells us, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6). Therefore, a "faith" which is an emotional response of the flesh, which does not come out of a renewed heart, is not saving faith at all! It may be a leap off a diving platform into an empty pool. But it is not saving faith in Christ. And when evangelists encourage individuals to take steps of faith like this, they are leading men and women astray!

From an arminian perspective, what we are talking about is particularly devastating. The arminian evangelist encourages his hearers by telling them that it is within their own power to place faith in Christ: "You have the power of choice. And it is your choice." Now it must be confessed that the power of the flesh is very great. After the building of the Tower of Babel, God said, "Behold they are one people, and they have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them" (Genesis 11:6). The point is that the mind of the flesh is a powerful tool. And when the evangelist says that the mind of the flesh is able to embrace Christ, and this is coupled with an emotional appeal, the mind of the flesh may

¹ The Sterling Bulletin, December 26, 1991, p. 4.

² Ronald H. Nash, *The Word of God and the Mind of Man* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), p. 27.

³ Horatio W. Dresser, *A History of Modern Philosophy* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1928), p. 171.

⁴ Nash, p. 27.

⁵ Dresser, p. 182.

⁶ Nash, p. 27-28.

⁷ Answer 86.

very well make a commitment to Christ. It will however be a commitment made for the wrong reasons. For example, the flesh will embrace Christ for purely selfish motives. A commitment will be made out of fear and a desire for self preservation. The flesh will not embrace Christ out of a love for Him having seen the utter beauty of His person and work.

Scripture does tell us that such commitments are possible. "And the one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this was the man who hears the word, and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away" (Matthew 13:20-21). An emotional leap of faith is very possible. But it is a work of the flesh. It is not faith in Jesus Christ!

Let me hasten to say that it is possible in these circumstances for a person to be genuinely born again (God is sovereign) and as a result of that new birth actually place saving faith in Christ. But such faith will not be a leap in the dark. It will be based upon a certain knowledge of the content of the gospel, a certain sense of guilt, and a deep sense of need for Christ. And there will then be an act of the renewed will trusting Christ as the only adequate payment for sin.⁸ This is a reasoned commitment quite different from the leap of faith. Next time we'll look at dead orthodoxy in this same context.

'In Response' is published by the Sterling Pulpit, Post Office Box 303, Sterling, KS 67579-0303. Copyright © 1992 by Dennis Prutow. You may reproduce articles for use in church school classes.

⁸ See "In Response," January, 1992. I define the three elements of saving faith.