

IN RESPONSE - WHAT IS FAITH? [PART THREE]

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Last month I attempted to show that Christianity defined as a leap of faith is based on the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Kant established a wall between God, who is in the noumenal world, and human beings, who are in the phenomenal world. And this wall cannot be breached. In other words, we cannot move from our world to God by the use of reason. There are in fact no reasons to believe in God. Nothing in our world would lead you in that direction. Buying into this line of thinking, modern fundamentalism sets forth the leap of faith as the only way to cross Kant's wall. And Kant himself maintained that we must presuppose the existence of God if ethics are to be meaningful.

In reaction to the leap of faith, orthodox Christianity maintains our faith is very reasonable. In fact, because we are made in the image of God, understanding the faith is very important. The content of the Christian faith is set down in documents like the Westminster Confession. This means a premium is placed on the intellect. The leap of faith is out. It is replaced by a very reasoned approach to faith.

But a profound danger lurks in the background. It is the danger of dead orthodoxy. To help us grasp this danger, let's review the three elements of true faith. First there is the intellectual element. "There is a positive recognition of the truth revealed in the Word of God."¹ The intellect must be brought into play so that the individual has "some idea of the fundamental truths of the gospel."² The reformers called this element of faith *notitia*. This intellectual element is absolutely necessary because the gospel has a certain content. It is a message. When this intellectual element stands alone, we are in bad company. In Mark 1:24 an unclean spirit testifies, "I know who you are—the Holy One of God."

There must also be assent to the truth of the gospel. We are convicted of the truth of the gospel. "The truth

grips the soul."³ This is the second or emotional element. We are convicted of our guilt before God because of sin. We are convicted of our need of Christ as the only answer for our sin. The reformers called this element *assensus*. But care must be taken because a person may know the gospel and even assent to the truth of it without having saving faith. The venerable R.B. Kuiper calls such a situation "orthodoxism." "In its absolute sense orthodoxism is an intellectual acceptance of the truth without a preceding change of heart and without a subsequent change of life. It is dead orthodoxy."⁴ We may elicit James 2:19 as a graphic example of intellectual assent, "The demons also believe, and shudder." There is no reason for them to shudder if they not actually assent to, believe, the truth.

This means that in addition to an intellectual grasp of the gospel and an assent to the truth of the gospel, there must be trust. This is the third element of faith and it involves the will. The reformers called this element of faith *fiducia*. What we are saying is this. You must know the facts about Christ. You must also assent to or accept the truth of those facts about Christ. This is not enough. You can know the facts and believe the facts are true, that is, assent to the facts, without being a Christian. You must also trust Jesus Christ with your life. When Jesus says, "Come to Me" (Matthew 11:28), you must take the step of responding and actually trusting Christ.

As mentioned above, under the second element of faith, it is possible to have an intellectual grasp of the truth and even assent to the truth without being born again, without being in a saving relationship with Christ. The interesting thing here is that many well-intentioned Reformed ministers vehemently deny this can be the case. I have heard it often in Bible lessons and sermons, "You cannot understand the gospel unless you are born again." This

statement is made in a sincere effort to preserve the doctrine of total depravity against any unbiblical notions of human ability. But this laudable effort denies the classic Reformed definition of saving faith.

Taken at face value, this position has disastrous practical implications. The person sitting in the pew may have heard the gospel many times. He may even be able to articulate it. He has the facts. He assents to the truth of those facts. But he has never taken the step of trusting in Christ. He does not rest upon Christ alone for his salvation. At the same time, the minister tells him that he cannot understand the gospel without being born again. And since this person does understand the facts of the gospel, what does he assume? He naturally assumes he is born again.

In other words, this person has a false assurance. He believes he is a Christian when in fact he is not. He holds to the doctrines of orthodoxy, but as R.B. Kuiper says, this individual has "an intellectual acceptance of the truth without a preceding change of heart and without a subsequent change of life." This is the danger to which we are exposed when we emphasize the intellectual element of faith in opposition to an irrational leap of faith. And at the same time we overthrow a true definition of faith. This is the danger of dead orthodoxy.

Does my position give undue credit to the fallen human mind? No. My position is based upon the classic Reformed understanding of saving faith. The fall did not diminish the intellectual capabilities to man. In fact, the Bible indicates that the mind of fallen man has huge capabilities. God Himself says, "Nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them" (Genesis 11:6). And unbelievers regularly outstrip believers in intellectual prowess. The problem is not with the intellectual ability to understand facts and manipulate facts, including the facts of the Bible. The problem is in the moral bias of the mind regarding those facts. Romans 8:6 says, "The mind of the flesh is death." The word

¹ Louis Berkhof, *Summary of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1969), p. 133.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

⁴ R. B. Kuiper, *To Be or Not to Be Reformed* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), p. 32.

“mind” means “aim” or “striving.” It could be translated “disposition.” “The disposition of the flesh is death.” In other words, the inclination of the mind is away from God. When the facts are understood and even seen to be the truth, there is a lack of submission to the truth. Similarly, the demons recognized Christ, knew who He was, and accepted Him for who He was. Their intellectual capacities were not diminished by their evil dispositions which caused them to despise Christ.

Here is the point. To maintain that unbelievers have minds and can read the Bible and get the facts of the gospel out of the Bible is not arminianism. Regeneration does not give men and women new minds. To say so is to affirm that unbelievers may read the poetry of Robert Frost and understand it but when it comes to the book called the Bible, to understand it, they must receive a new mind via the new birth. No. Unbelievers may understand the facts of the Bible, *notitia*. Unbelievers may assent to the truth of the Bible, *assensus*. Unbelievers may never trust in the Christ of the Bible without first being born again. The evil disposition of their hearts must be changed. Regeneration must logically precede *fiducia*, trust in Christ. The doctrine I am setting forth is not arminianism.

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