

IN RESPONSE - WHAT IS FAITH? [PART FOUR]

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This month I am particularly interested in looking at the standard definition of faith with which I have been dealing in comparison to the views of popular modern day fundamentalism. Here is the question: Does modern fundamentalism properly represent saving faith? And if not, what is the real danger which is present in this false view of faith?

To get started, let's review the three elements of true faith. This is review, but bear with me! 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 certain content. It is a message! But 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."

And so 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 would be no reason for them to shudder did they not actually assent to, believe, the truth.

Finally, 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*. You must know the facts about Christ. You must also assent to or accept the truth of those facts about Christ. But you can know the facts and believe those facts to be 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 respond and actually trust 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. This is where there is a big bone of contention.

In his book *Absolutely Free*, Zane Hodges repudiates the historic definition of faith I have been using. "It is an unproductive waste of time to employ the popular categories - intellect, emotion, or will - as a way of analyzing the mechanics of faith."⁵ For what is Hodges then arguing? Look at what he says,

For example, if I ask, 'Do you believe that the President will do what he has promised?' I could expect any one of three possible answers. One might be, 'Yes I do.' another might be, 'No, I don't.' But my respondent might also reply, 'I'm not sure,' or, 'I don't know.'

There is nothing complicated about this exchange. Two of the three answers reveal a lack of trust in the President... Only the response, 'Yes, I do,' indicates faith or trust.⁶

In other words, the necessary depth to which saving faith in Jesus Christ must plunge is exemplified by the faith someone may have in the promises of the President. And Hodges laughs at the notion of asking about the nature of the faith placed in the President. "Such a question would be absurd."⁷ Such a question might be absurd when talking about the President but it is not absurd when

talking about Jesus Christ. But Hodges is adamant. He tells us this about Martha,

The facts presented to Martha by the Lord are more than great facts. They are saving facts. That is, they are divinely revealed facts which are to be believed for salvation.... Thus by believing the amazing facts about the person of Christ, Martha was trusting Him.⁸

Thus Hodges equates saving faith in Jesus Christ with *assensus*.

The inevitable conclusion from this argument is that saving faith is perfectly within the grasp of anyone at any time. It is within the capability of fallen human beings to exercise saving faith. This is the arminian principle. And it is often stated this way: You must believe in Christ in order to be born again. That is, faith logically precedes the new birth.

The problems are numerous. *Assensus* is only one element of saving faith. And to be sure, regeneration is not needed to assent to the truth of the claims of the gospel. But if you take this as saving faith, you are misrepresenting Christ! Not only so, if you equate *assensus* with *fiducia*, as Hodges does, and say that this act of trust stemming from the will is possible for the natural man, the picture is muddled further. As set forth in our previous discussion, the new birth is absolutely necessary for there to be trust in Christ.

Jesus Christ is clear, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" or, "enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:3 & 5). And those who believe in Christ are "born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man but of God" (John 1:13). The point is that the new birth logically must precede faith in Christ. So John can say, "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is [not, "will be," but, "is"] born of God" (1 John 5:1). But evangelists like Michael Guido of Metter, Georgia contradict the Bible. "Your will is yours. You can make it God's or not. Just as you choose."

And so if individuals are told that it is within their power to place faith in Christ, and if they are told that faith means simply believing the facts about

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

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 134.

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

⁵ Zane C. Hodges, *Absolutely Free* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1989), p. 31. See also footnotes 6. and 7, p. 207

⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 27-28.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 39. Italics his.

Jesus, and if these individuals act upon these assumptions self-consciously, they are deceived. They do not have saving faith in Christ! And this is true because assensus, assent to the truth alone, does not constitute saving faith! Second, the faith that they do have is a work of the flesh! “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6). And salvation certainly does not come about through the work of the flesh!

We had better stick with the standard biblical definition of faith. Why? Eternity hangs in the balance! May God therefore give us the grace to truly trust in Christ!

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