

Power From On High - The Psychology Of Faith

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I have heretofore endeavored to show that sanctification is wrought in the soul by the Spirit of Christ, through faith, with and not without the concurrence of our own activity. I now wish to call attention to the nature or psychology of faith as a mental act or state. My theological teacher held that faith was an intellectual act or state, a conviction or firm persuasion that the doctrines of the Bible are true. So far as I can recollect, this was the view of faith which I heard everywhere advanced.

When it was objected to this that the intellectual convictions and states are involuntary, and could not be produced by any effort of the will, and, consequently, we cannot be under obligations to exercise faith; and, furthermore, that faith, being an intellectual act or state, could not be virtue, it was replied that we control the attention of the mind by an effort of the will, and that our responsibility lay in searching for that degree of evidence that would convince the intellect; that unbelief was a sin, because it was the inevitable result of a failure to search for and accept the evidence of the truths of revelation; that faith was virtue, because it involved the consent and effort of the will to search out the truth.

I have met with this erroneous notion of the nature of Christian faith almost everywhere since I was first licensed to preach. Especially in my early ministry I found that great stress was laid on believing "the articles of faith," and it was held that faith consisted in believing with an unwavering conviction the doctrines about Christ. Hence, an acceptance of the doctrines, the doctrines, the DOCTRINES of the Gospel was very much insisted upon as constituting faith. These doctrines I had been brought to accept intellectually and firmly before I was converted. And, when told to believe, I replied that I did believe, and no argument or assertion could convince me that I did not believe the Gospel. And up to the very moment of my conversion I was not and could not be convinced of my error.

At the moment of my conversion, or when I first exercised faith, I saw my ruinous error. I found that faith consisted not in an intellectual conviction that the things affirmed in the Bible about Christ are true, but in the heart's trust in the person of Christ. I learned that God's testimony concerning Christ was designed to lead me to trust Christ, to confide in His person as my Savior; that to stop short in merely believing about Christ was a fatal mistake and inevitably left me in my sins. It was as if I were sick almost unto death, and someone should recommend to me a physician who was surely able and willing to save my life, and I should listen to the testimony concerning him until fully convinced that he was both able and willing to save my life, and then should be told to believe in him, and my life was secure. Now, if I understood this to mean nothing more than to credit the testimony with the firmest conviction, I should reply: "I do believe in him with an undoubting faith. I believe every word you have told me regarding him." If I stopped here I should, of course, lose my life. In addition to this firm intellectual conviction of his willingness and ability, it were essential to apply to him, to come to him, to trust his person, to accept his treatment.

When I had intellectually accepted the testimony concerning him with an unwavering belief, the next and the indispensable thing would be a voluntary act of trust or confidence in his person, a committal of my life to him, and his sovereign treatment in the cure of my disease.

Now this illustrates the true nature or psychology of faith as it actually exists in consciousness. It does not consist in any degree of intellectual knowledge, or acceptance of the doctrines of the Bible. The firmest possible persuasion that every word said in the Bible respecting God and Christ is true, is not faith. These truths and doctrines reveal God in Christ only so far as they point to God in Christ, and teach the soul how to find Him by an act of trust in His person.

When we firmly trust in His person, and commit our souls to Him by an unwavering act of confidence in Him for all that He is affirmed to be to us in the Bible, this is faith. We trust Him upon the testimony of God. We trust Him for what the doctrines and facts of the Bible declare Him to be to us. This act of trust unites our spirit to Him in a union so close that we directly receive from Him a current of eternal life. Faith, in consciousness, seems to complete the divine galvanic circle, and the life of God is instantly imparted to our souls. God's life, and light, and love, and peace, and joy seem to flow to us as naturally and spontaneously as the galvanic current from the battery. We then for the first time understand what Christ meant by our being united to Him by faith, as the branch is united to the vine. Christ is then and thus revealed to us as God. We are conscious of direct communion with Him, and know Him as we know ourselves, by His direct activity within us. We then know directly, in consciousness, that He is our life, and that we receive from Him, moment by moment, as it were, an impartation of eternal life.

With some the mind is comparatively dark, and the faith, therefore, comparatively weak in its first exercise. They may hold a great breadth of opinion, and yet intellectually believe but little with a realizing conviction. Hence, their trust in Him will be as narrow as their realizing convictions. When faith is weak, the current of the divine life will flow so mildly that we are scarcely conscious of it. But when faith is strong and all-embracing, it lets a current of the divine life of love into our souls so strong that it seems to permeate both soul and body. We then know in consciousness what it is to have Christ's Spirit within us as a power to save us from sin and stay up our feet in the path of loving obedience.

From personal conversation with hundreds and I may say thousands of Christian people, I have been struck with the application of Christ's words, as recorded in the fifth Chapter of John, to their experience. Christ said to the Jews: "Ye do search the Scriptures [for so it should be rendered]; for in them ye think ye have eternal life, and they are they which testify of Me; and ye will not come unto Me that ye might have life." They stopped short in the Scriptures. They satisfied themselves with ascertaining what the Scriptures said about Christ, but did not avail themselves of the light thus received to come to Him by an act of loving trust in His person. I fear it is true in these days, as it has been in the days that are past, that multitudes stop short in the facts and doctrines of the Gospel, and do not by any act of trust in His person come to Him, concerning whom all this testimony is given. Thus the Bible is misunderstood and abused.

Many, understanding the "Confession of Faith" as summarizing the doctrines of the Bible, very much neglect the Bible and rest in a belief of the articles of faith. Others, more cautious and more in earnest, search the Scriptures to see what they say about Christ, but stop short and rest in the formation of correct theological opinions; while others, and they are the only saved class, love the Scriptures intensely because they testify of Jesus. They search and devour the Scriptures because they tell them who Jesus is and what they may trust Him for. They do not stop short and rest in this testimony; but by an act of loving trust go directly to Him, to His person, thus joining their souls to Him in a union that receives from Him, by a direct divine communication, the things for which they are led to trust Him.

This is certainly Christian experience. This is receiving from Christ the eternal life which God has given us in Him. This is saving faith.

There are many degrees in the strength of faith, from that of which we are hardly conscious to that which lets such a flood of eternal life into the soul as to quite overcome the strength of the body. In the strongest exercise of faith the nerves of the body seem to give way for the time being under the overwhelming exercise of the mind. This great strength of mental exercise is perhaps not very common. We can endure but little of God's light and love in our souls and yet remain in the body. I have sometimes felt that a little clearer vision would draw my soul entirely away from the body, and I have met with many Christian people to whom these strong gales of spiritual influence were familiar. But my object in writing thus is to illustrate the nature or psychology and results of saving faith.

The contemplation of the attitude and experience of numbers of professed Christians in regard to Christ is truly lamentable and wonderful, considering that the Bible is in their hands. Many of them appear to have stopped short in theological opinions more or less firmly held. This they understand to be faith. Others are more in earnest, and stop not short of a more or less realizing conviction of the truths of the Bible concerning Christ. Others have strong impressions of the obligations of the law, which move them to set about an earnest life of works which leads them into bondage. They pray from a sense of duty; they are dutiful, but not loving, not confiding. They have no peace and no rest, except in cases where they persuade themselves that they have done their duty. They are in a restless agonizing state. Reason they hear, her counsels weigh, And all her words approve And yet they find it hard to obey, And harder still to love.

They read and perhaps search the Scriptures to learn their duty and to learn about Christ. They intellectually believe all that they understand the Scriptures to say about Him; but when Christ is thus commended to their confidence, they do not by an act of personal loving trust in and committal to Him so join their souls to Him as to receive from Him the influx of His life, and light and love. They do not by a simple act of personal loving trust in His person receive the current of His divine life and power into their own souls. They do not thus take hold of His strength and interlock their being with His. In other words, they do not truly believe. Hence, they are not saved. Oh! what a mistake is this. I fear it is very common. Nay, it seems to be certain that it is appallingly common, else how can the state of the Church be accounted for? Is that which we see in the great mass of professors of religion all that Christ does for and in His people, when they truly believe? No, no! There is a great error here. The psychology of faith is mistaken, and an intellectual conviction of the truth of the Gospel is supposed to be faith. And some whose opinions seem to be right in regard to the nature of faith rest in their philosophy and fall short of exercising faith.

Let no one suppose that I under-estimate the value of the facts and doctrines of the Gospel. I regard a knowledge and belief of them as of fundamental importance. I have no sympathy with those who undervalue them and treat doctrinal discussion and preaching as of minor importance, nor can I assent to the teaching of those who would have us preach Christ and not the doctrines respecting Him. It is the facts and doctrines of the Bible that teach us who Christ is, why He is to be trusted, and for what. How can we preach Christ without preaching about Him? And how can we trust Him without being informed why and for what we are to trust Him?

The error to which I call attention does not consist in laying too much stress in teaching and believing the facts and doctrines of the Gospel; but it consists in stopping short of trusting the personal Christ for what those facts and doctrines teach us to trust Him, and satisfying ourselves with believing the testimony concerning Him, thus resting in the belief of what God has said about Him, instead of committing our souls to Him by an act of loving trust.

The testimony of God respecting Him is designed to secure our confidence in Him. If it fails to secure the uniting of our souls to Him by an act and state of implicit trust in Him--such an act of trust as unites us to Him as the branch is united to the vine--we have heard the Gospel in vain. We are not saved. We have failed to receive from Him that impartation of eternal life which can be conveyed to us through no other channel than that of implicit trust.