

WHAT FAITH REALLY MEANS

A SIMPLE EXPLANATION

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Chapter 1

THE TRUE MEANING OF FAITH

Let us, then, begin at the beginning. In the first place, *Faith is necessary*; on this all are agreed, for, according to St. Paul, we are “justified by faith.” Luther termed this faith the “article of a standing or a falling Church;” and as for Catholics, their belief concerning it is determined by the Council of Trent, which called it “the beginning of human salvation, the foundation and root of all justification.”¹ But here, unfortunately, our agreement ends, for with the question that necessarily follows, “What is Faith?” we are at once plunged into controversy.

Ask the average Protestant, and you will find that by faith he means trusting in Jesus Christ for salvation, believing that He shed His Blood upon the Cross and washed all his sins away, personally accepting Christ and His offered Redemption. “The principal acts of saving faith,” says the “Confession of Faith,”² “are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.” Or, to quote the more familiar answer of the Shorter Catechism to the question:³ “What is faith in Jesus Christ? 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.”

According to this doctrine, when we have faith in Christ, Christ accepts us and looks upon us as “righteous” even though we are not really so. He “imputes His righteousness” to us; He covers

¹ Session 6, Chapter 8

² Chapter 14

³ No. 86

over our sins with His merits, much as a fall of snow covers a mud-heap. And so Luther taught: “God cannot see in us any sin, though we are full of sin; nay, are sin itself, inside and out, body and soul, from the top of the head to the soles of the feet, but He only sees the dear and precious Blood of His Beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, wherewith we are sprinkled.”⁴

Now it must be said at once that this is not the true and proper and Scriptural meaning of faith at all. That the word may sometimes bear this meaning—trust in a person, belief in his power, hope and confidence—is certainly not to be denied. You find this kind of faith in such cases, for example, as St. James 1:6, “Let him ask in faith, nothing wavering;” and St. Luke 8:48, “Daughter, thy faith hath made thee whole;” and St. Matthew 15:28, “O woman, great is thy faith;” and even St. Matthew 14:31, “O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?” and in other passages. But what we deny is that this is the kind of faith Almighty God demands of us as necessary for salvation, *saving faith*, justifying faith. In fact, St. Paul himself actually distinguishes them, the one from the other, and represents the former—trust, assurance, confidence—to be an effect of the latter: “In whom we have boldness and access with *confidence*, by the *faith* of him.”⁵

Faith we hold to be “a supernatural gift of God, which enables us to believe without doubting whatever God has revealed;”⁶ or, according to the fuller definition of the Vatican Council, “a supernatural virtue by which, through the grace of God inspiring and helping us, we believe as true all that God has revealed, not on account of their truth as perceived by natural reason, but on account of the authority of God revealing them, who can neither deceive nor be deceived.”

⁴ quoted in Verres, “Luther, an Historical Portrait,” p. 139

⁵ Eph. 3:12

⁶ Catechism, Q. 9

This is faith: an intellectual belief, the assent of the mind to certain truths, the acceptance of whatever doctrines God has taught, simply because He has taught them. It is not a mere “acceptance of Christ,” as Protestants assert, by an act of the will; though it is that, too, in the sense that we accept the doctrine that Christ died to atone for our sins. Certainly the will must move the intellect to make this act; and again, grace is required to move the will to operate, as Our Lord taught when He said: “No man can come to Me except the Father, Who hath sent Me, draw him.”⁷

In the long run, therefore, it is all a matter of God’s mercy bestowing grace. “For by grace you are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; for it is the gift of God.”⁸ But confining ourselves for the present to the *act of faith*, which is the effect of the *virtue of faith*, we say that, according to Catholic teaching, which is Scripture teaching, it is simply *an act of your intelligence*; it is believing and accepting with your mind, assenting and consenting to whatever truths Almighty God has made known, however difficult or impossible they may seem, simply because He has revealed them. This, and nothing else, is true faith.

I could adduce many texts to prove this, but I shall quote only one, for I am writing not to prove the Catholic doctrine, but only to explain and illustrate it, so that from a general view of the whole Catholic system you may be led to see how reasonable and unassailable, how beautiful, satisfying, and consoling it is. “Go ye into the whole world,” said Our Lord, “and preach the Gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be condemned.”⁹ Now,

⁷ John 6:44

⁸ Eph. 2:8

⁹ Mark 16:15,16

Our Lord is here speaking of *justifying faith*: “he that believeth shall be saved.” And the faith He speaks of is to be that faith by which the Gospel is to be believed. And what is the Gospel? It is the whole Christian religion, the whole scheme of salvation as announced by the Apostles in all its parts. “Go and teach all nations.” “Preach the Gospel to every creature.” Now, to believe that is an intellectual act, a work of the intelligence, accepting and assenting to the truths of the Gospel. It is not, as I said before, merely the fact of believing that Christ died for you upon the Cross, and trusting to that for salvation. That is only a part of God’s Revelation.

A man stands up in a meeting, and says he is “saved” because “God so loved the world as to give His only-begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him may not perish but may have everlasting life,” and “he that believeth in the Son hath everlasting life,”¹⁰ and “He loved me and gave Himself for me.” Or he buttonholes his neighbour at an Evangelistic meeting, and asks him, “Are you trusting in the Blood?” and “Have you decided for Christ?” and if he gets an answer in the affirmative, he will say: “Hallelujah! You are on the Lord’s side! You are saved!” I know all this, because I have seen it and heard it, and taken part in it. But that is not faith. It is a mere sentiment, a feeling, a persuasion—I am afraid more or less fanatical—concerning one single point of the Christian Revelation. It is narrowing faith down to one particular act in Our Lord’s Redemption, and ignoring all the rest. From this description you would never imagine that Jesus Christ taught anything about the Church, or the Sacraments, or good works. It is therefore essentially and fundamentally a false notion of faith—a delusion and a heresy.

St. Paul has given us an inspired description of faith: “Faith is the substance of things to be hoped for [i.e., the basis and foun-

¹⁰ John 3 16:36

dation on which rest the blessings of salvation we hope for], the evidence of things that appear not [i.e., the making certain for us things that are not visible to the senses, nor perceived by reason].”¹¹ This faith, by which “the just man lives,”¹² consists in a firm belief in the things revealed by God, as all the examples in this chapter¹³ of the Epistle to the Hebrews clearly shows. It is an act of the intellect by which we recognize such truths of revelation, for instance, as the forming of the world by the Word of God,¹⁴ and even the very existence of God as our future Judge.¹⁵ It was belief in God’s Word, howsoever made known to them—a belief formed in the mind and with the intelligence, and inspiring hope and confidence—which enabled Henoch and Noah and Abraham and the rest to do all those things for which they are praised by the sacred writer. They believed on the authority of God, Who made revelations and promises to them.

Such is the nature of that faith which is necessary for salvation in every part of Holy Scripture, and especially the New Testament. In the true sense, therefore, the Scriptural and the Catholic sense, we may define faith to be the willing and deliberate submission of the mind to revealed truth, the acceptance of and belief in all that God has revealed. And anything less than this is not faith.

¹¹ Heb. 11:1

¹² Heb. 10:38

¹³ Heb. 11

¹⁴ Heb 11:3

¹⁵ Heb 11:6

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