

THE PROBLEM OF FAITH

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on September 16, 1962 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

It was just over a year ago that I paused one day on a street in a residential district of London to talk with an elderly man, a retired teacher, who was picking withered leaves and petals from his rose bushes. I invited him to attend the campaign which we were conducting and to hear the gospel of Christ preached. His reply was very brief and very direct. I think I shall never forget it. He said simply, "I wouldn't be interested." As we talked it was obvious that he did not even believe in a personal God, nor that Jesus Christ is the divine Son of God, nor in the inspiration of the Bible. In short, he does not believe.

Almost five years ago, in one of the most soul-searching experiences of my life, I visited Japan and Korea where I saw thousands and thousands of people who know almost nothing of Jesus of Nazareth. Everywhere one looked, everywhere one went, there were people and these people did not know Christ. They, too, do not believe.

In recent months I received a letter from a retired Jewish businessman who is spending the last years of his life in Santa Monica, California. His letter was rather bitter, charging that the Christians of the world had been unfair in their discrimination against and persecution of the Jewish race. He closed his letter by offering a thousand dollar reward if I could prove to his satisfaction that Jesus is the divine Son of God, the Messiah. I would add that when a mind is as closed as his mind the evidence that clearly establishes the fact that Jesus of Nazareth is divine can hardly receive a hearing. Here, too, is another example of one who does not believe.

The Most Important Thing

The most important thing about any man is not how he looks, where he lives, of what race he is a member, nor any of the other things that are often considered as of primary importance. Rather, the most important thing about any man is what he believes. What he believes depends upon what he has been taught. The fact is that we are largely what we have been taught to be. That is the obvious and only explanation of why the vast majority of India's 400 millions are Hindus, why China's 600 millions are Buddhists, and why Japan's 90 millions are Shintoists, and why the millions of Egypt and the other Arab nations are Moslems. This is also the reason that millions behind the Iron Curtain are atheists. Everywhere people are what they are because of what they have been taught.

The Bible also has examples which show the importance of what one believes. One of my favorites is the example of Joseph. He was sold at the tender age of seventeen by his brethren into Egyptian bondage, and subsequently he became a prisoner in Egypt, yet all of this failed to drive him from his moorings. Why? He was tempted by Potiphar's wife yet he remained virtuous. Why? Later he was exalted to the highest rank and position that Egypt could offer, knowing both great wealth and power, yet he remained good. Why? The answer is that he had faith in God and that he solidly believed in the principles of God which he had been taught during his early years. He had convictions. He believed something, and he was faithful to what he believed.

In the New Testament the example of Saul of Tarsus shows tremendous effect that faith has upon one's life. In his early adult years he was a vigorous persecutor of Christians. He himself says, "I verily thought with myself that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth and this I also did ..." (Acts 26:9-10. A little later, almost unbelievably, we read of him preaching Christ to the whole Gentile world. What happened to change his life so? The answer is found in his own statement, "I know him whom I have believed ..." (II Tim. 1:12). His beliefs changed; his life changed. When a man's beliefs are changed you change his entire life. Nothing is so fundamental to life as what a man believes.

Faith in Christ

Of all the millions of things that man may believe, the most important is that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. A man may be wealthy, powerful, highly educated, and successful in every other way, but if he lacks a knowledge of Christ, his life is a tragic failure. One of the most familiar sentences in all the scriptures is found in John 3:16, a verse that we learn early in life and retain in our memories as long as we live, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life." This plainly says that those who believe on Christ are the ones who can avoid eternal punishment and can know eternal life. The obvious "other side" of this verse is that those who do not believe on the Son shall not see life. Later in this same chapter, John writes, "He that believeth on the Son hath eternal life; but he that obeyeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him." (John 3:36).

In the Roman letter Paul wrote, "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?" (Romans 10:13-14). Calling on the Lord for salvation can only come after one has believed in Christ, which can only come after one has heard the gospel of Christ.

Finally, in this connection, we would mention Hebrews 11:6, which says, "Without faith it is impossible to be well-pleasing unto him; for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that seek after him."

How Does Faith Come?

If faith in Jesus Christ is so extremely vital to one's salvation, we need to give real consideration to the question, "How does this faith come?" The answer is obvious, both in our own reason, and also in explicit statements in the Bible. For example, Romans 10:17 says, "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." Only the hearing of the gospel of Christ can produce faith that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God. Near the end of the gospel according to John, there is this statement, "Many other signs therefore did Jesus in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name." (John 2:30-31). The primary purpose for the writing of the four gospel narratives is that man may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God.

Some years ago, J. W. McGarvey told a story of a lawyer in the state of Missouri who, though not religious, attended worship services on a certain Sunday morning. He had never had much concern for religion, but he was curious enough to want to see what was going on and attended the church services. The sermon concerning Christ both interested and challenged him. As a lawyer, he became concerned to determine whether Jesus really "had a case" or not. He went home and read Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, to determine whether the evidence really supported Christ's claim that he was the Son of God. After his reading, he concluded that Christ "had a case"--a strong case indeed. The result was that this lawyer became a Christian.

In addition to the reading of God's word, there also needs to be Christian association. By associating with those of like precious faith, one is strengthened in his faith. On the other hand, associations day after day with those who do not believe in God, or Christ, or the Bible, weaken one's faith. We tend to become like those with whom we associate. We tend to accept their beliefs and their behavior as our own. Hence, association with Christians is of supreme importance.

In the raising of flowers two things are necessary: proper plant food, and a proper climate. In the building of Christian faith, two things are necessary: proper spiritual food (the gospel of Christ as revealed in the Bible) and a proper environment or climate (association with other Christians).

Other Reading

There are many brilliant young intellectuals of our day who have a sophistication that makes it difficult for them to appreciate the simple reading of the Bible. In their youthful pride they consider anything as old as the New Testament church and the ancient gospel to be beneath them. For just such sophisticated intellectuals C. S. Lewis, fellow of Magdalene College of Oxford University in England, one of the most brilliant minds of our day, has written *Mere Christianity*. This book is challenging reading and presents a defensible, convincing argument for Christianity.

There are those who feel that scientific discoveries have outdated the Bible and the Christian religion in general. For these, the following books are suggested: Bernard Ramm, [The Christian View of Science and Scripture](#); Russell Mixter, [Evolution and Christian Thought Today](#), and C. S. Lewis, [Miracles](#). For those who question the inspiration of the Bible, we would recommend Benjamin Warfield's, [Inspiration of the Bible](#), and Wilbur Smith's, [Therefore Stand](#).

There are many others who are so preoccupied with other matters that they have little interest in Christ or the Bible. If these could be induced to spend a few minutes each day, a few hours each week, in the reading of the Bible, they would find it exciting reading and would discover that it is interesting and vital to their lives. The Bible itself is its own best evidence. While other books are valuable in defending the claims of Christianity, nothing is more powerful in creating a faith in God and in Christ than the simple reading of the Bible. It carries with it a convincingness that is difficult to describe but keenly felt by those who will open their hearts to read it.

In every case, Christianity welcomes an investigation of the facts. Christianity has nothing to fear from the dissemination of truth of every kind. It only calls for a hearing, confident that when the facts are heard faith will result.

Conclusion

As we close this study, I would describe a simple event that happened a few years ago. The setting is a large state penitentiary somewhere in Pennsylvania. In condemned row there is a prisoner by the name of Roger Cole. His life is to be brief and he knows the date of his execution. He is reading a magazine and discovers an advertisement concerning the church of Christ. With the stark realization that he is soon to die, he has discovered an interest in religion and in his soul. He sends for a preacher. William Bryson comes immediately and learns of Roger Cole's new-found interest in religion. He wants to know what he must do to be saved. The preacher does not tell him, but gives him a Bible and suggests that he read the first ten chapters of the book of Acts. On the following day when the preacher returned the prisoner immediately said, "I want to confess my faith in Christ and be baptized." He believed; he obeyed; he died a Christian.

May the faith of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ dwell in your heart and bring forth the fruit of obedience to the Lord's commands, so that some day you may share eternity with your Lord in heaven.