

1-1-1977

## Authentic Christian Faith

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### Recommended Citation

Moellering, Ralph L. (1977) "Authentic Christian Faith," *Consensus*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol3/iss1/1>

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# AUTHENTIC

# CHRISTIAN

# FAITH

*Ralph Moellering*

The word "faith" is such a comprehensive, widely applied term in the English language that its meaning has become vague and ambiguous. "Have faith in something" is a popular North American platitude which seeks to avert insecurity or despair. Presumably belief is always preferable to unbelief and it is almost socially unacceptable not to acknowledge some set of values which corresponds at least to some degree with those characteristic of our surrounding culture.

The Latin word from which the English word "faith" is derived really signifies "trust" or "confidence." The more varied dictionary definitions usually include: 1) unquestioning belief; 2) a system of religious beliefs; 3) anything believed; 4) complete reliance; and 5) loyalty or allegiance to some person or thing.

In view of these varied interpretations of the word "faith" in general, one realizes how there can be a great deal of confusion and misapprehension regarding the meaning and implications of *Christian* faith. What is distinctive and what is essential in our understanding of Biblical faith as distinguished from

the innumerable “pseudo-faiths” which are so prevalent today and which are so likely to distract us from a clear vision of the life which God has intended for us in Jesus Christ?

## *DISTORTIONS OF FAITH*

Both deliberate and unwitting distortions of Christianity must be eliminated to prepare the way for an authentic Christian commitment. At its worst, faith has been perverted into repulsive forms of irrational fanaticism. The “true believer” has become the person who can become oblivious to reality and embrace the most fantastic illusions. To possess faith becomes the capacity to act counter to one’s “common sense” -- to ignore objective data or normal sensual impressions. By faith some people entertain religious delusions or suffer from hallucinations which make friendly communication with their neighbours almost impossible. Their nocturnal visits with Jesus or the voices of their departed relatives, which they hear from the “Great Beyond,” place them outside the sphere of ordinary experience. Their detractors are arrogantly denounced as men and women of “little faith.”

Sometimes Christian faith has been equated with a zealotry for orthodoxy that has led to the condemnation of all dissenters. The Inquisition of the Middle Ages comes to mind as a deplorable example. To preserve the true faith, uncontaminated by heresy, churchmen justified the use of torture and cruel forms of execution.

Another is found among militant Fundamentalists whose faith is deeply imbedded in an excessive literalism in their reading of the Biblical materials. The element of the miraculous, in the sense that so-called “laws of nature” are suspended or violated, is integral to their understanding of faith. The acceptance of the whole dimension of the supernatural as that which defies scientific explanation is crucial to their outlook.<sup>1</sup> Every chronological detail and every incidental reference must be factual and would be verifiable if we had adequate information and scholarship at our disposal. Understandably enough, the proponents of these views are likely to be accused of obscurantism.

In orthodox Presbyterianism and confessional Lutheranism in the New World there has been a disposition to magnify sound doctrine as saving faith. Catechization with the questions and answers all provided in advance, and with the memorization of all the appropriate proof texts has been the means of preparing many generations of children for confirmation.<sup>2</sup> Presumably if one

1. Both the findings of modern science and Biblical scholarship make it difficult to uphold a sharp distinction between “natural” and “supernatural.” To recognize this reality may change some of our interpretation of scriptural records. In the most profound sense it in no way eliminates the truly miraculous character of Revelation, nor does it reduce the feeling of awe which we experience in confrontation with divine mystery.
2. Luther’s Small Catechism remains a priceless gem in its classic synopsis of Christian doctrine. The contemporary Catechisms, however, conveyed the faulty impression to countless children

knows the right answers and mouths a verbal profession of allegiance to the Church's creedal standards, he possesses the desired faith and is acceptable for membership.

Another distortion of the real significance and imperatives of Christian faith comes through some of the ideas and practices which are associated with popular religiosity. In his essay on *Pious and Secular America*, Reinhold Niebuhr described how people simultaneously profess a devotion to religious ideals and exhibit a dedication to materialistic goals. In what sounds like a contradiction, they can be said to be both godly and godless. They are "religious" in the sense that the churches have enjoyed the financial support and active involvement of more laymen than in any nation of the Western world. They are "secular" in the sense that they pursue immediate rewards in life, without asking too many ultimate questions about the meaning of life and without being too disturbed by the tragedies of life.

North Americans as a whole have had a passion for technical efficiency. Combining this urge for industrial enterprise with the natural resources of a richly endowed continent, they have received an abundance of material delights. A favourably disposed Providence has blessed the virtues of diligence and thrift. God is credited with our financial success stories. Faith tends to become dedication to an economic ideology. It is perverted into a form of modern idolatry.

Another misuse of Christian faith which is widespread in our contemporary culture is its reduction to sheer sentimentality on the popular level. One of the false gods with which we must contend today is one which has been spawned and nurtured by recent trends in North American piety. This god, who bears little resemblance to the God of the prophets, the apostles, or the reformers, is characterized by his nearness and easy accessibility. Somehow this god becomes identified with our way of life. He can be depended upon to support Western civilization in its struggle against the encroachments of alien forces. Through prayer and worship, he can be manipulated to fit our needs. In some popular literature, he is presented as a power which can be turned on as easily as you can turn on an electric fan to cool your fevered brow. And thus our citizenry is guided to believe in a sort of divine-human chumminess.

Quite a different form of popular religiosity which still attracts some sectarians and pietists is at the opposite pole. Instead of trivializing sin or condoning the sexual revolution or baptizing everything that our society approves, it pronounces a stern damnation on materialism and sensuality. Its evangelists believe that the world is rapidly heading toward its doom. Their faith calls for a renunciation of mundane values and willingness to patiently or

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that the essence of Christianity could be communicated through a long series of questions and answers buttressed by Biblical quotations. Some of the questions were of dubious merit, some of the answers were unconvincing, and some of the attempted "proof texts" were misapplied out of context.

3. Cf. A. Roy Eckardt, *The Surge of Piety in America: An Appraisal*; (New York: Association Press, 1958). See also Martin Marty, *The New Shape of American Religion* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959). On the Canadian scene consider the best-selling book by Pierre Burton, *The Comfortable Pew* (New York: Lippincott, 1965).

eagerly await divine deliverance through the direct intervention of God. In any appraisal of what Christian faith means to the masses we dare not forget that many are awaiting an apocalyptic climax to world history. Often this expectation is coupled with the anticipation of some visible millennial reign of Christ on earth in which all the wickedness of people will be banished and perfect peace and prosperity will prevail. Sometimes this is a sturdy and admirable faith that renounces all the treasures of the world to await the bliss of heaven. But it is all too likely to become a form of escapism from present responsibilities and an excuse for acquiescence in the face of social injustice. Usually it implies a sharp dichotomy between the body and the soul, between things spiritual and things earthly. This type of faith pleads for the salvation of souls -- for a spiritual rescue mission -- as distinguished from a concern for the whole man in his total experience, including the physical and the social. It focuses on the vertical relationship with God to the neglect of one's horizontal relationship with people. It tends to limit faith to a private transaction with God, quite unrelated to one's job or daily routine or political decisions. This kind of faith disparages the usefulness of God's creation and the possibilities for God's remedial action in history.<sup>4</sup>

## BY FAITH ALONE

If, now, we have succeeded in eliminating some of the false interpretations of what Christian faith is all about, what can we say in a more positive way about its focus and purpose? "Faith," one Lutheran leader recently wrote, "means trusting in God against impossible odds in every circumstance of life." Therefore, as we recognize our sinful nature and despair of our own attempted righteousness it is the core of the Gospel message to hear: "Nevertheless, you are forgiven because Christ died for your sins and rose from the dead to demonstrate His victory over evil."

To depend exclusively upon God's reconciling activity in Jesus Christ is to be saved by faith alone. In reality this is only another way of expressing what was set forth already in 1530 in Article IV of the Augsburg Confession:

"... men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits or works, but are freely justified for Christ's sake through faith, when they believe that they are received into favour and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who, by His death has made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in His sight."

Faith, then, is the human response (made possible by the Holy Spirit) which reaches out to receive the gift of God's grace. Faith involves the conquest of

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4. To some extent this type of religion is included in Dean M. Kelley's explanation of *Why Conservative Churches are Growing* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

unbelief, the renunciation of self-centredness, and the full confidence that God in Christ has accomplished everything necessary for salvation.

A major problem arises, however, when we compare the letter of James with the letters of St. Paul addressed to the Romans and the Galatians. How can we insist that we are justified by grace through faith totally apart from our own deeds and still concur with James that "a man is justified by works and not by faith alone?"<sup>5</sup>

Both Paul and James quote the same verse concerning Abraham (Genesis 15:6) which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," and they seem to draw dissimilar conclusions. James comments: "Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completely by works." Contrarywise Paul uses the story to prove that Abraham acted exclusively out of faith in response to God's command.

Superficially considered it might seem that James was attacking the teaching of Paul, who advocated a "faith-without-works" doctrine. Some who have been partisans of Paul in this supposed disagreement have gone on to claim that his *sole fidei* teaching represents authentic Christianity, while the benighted James reflects only a slightly modified Judaism.

Of course, there has always been the danger of perverting Paul's teachings into a kind of antinomianism -- an abuse of Christian liberty under the aegis of the Gospel. All too often the Reformation emphasis on justification by faith alone has been subjected to misinterpretation and abuse. Among Luther's own followers, after his death, a bizarre controversy arose when George Major (a colleague of Melancthon at the University of Wittenberg) propounded with dogged intensity the proposition that good works are absolutely indispensable for salvation. In the vehement polemics that ensued, Major was denounced as a pelagianist and a "double papist," and Nicholas Amsdorf (who had once accompanied Luther to the Diet of Worms) countered with the absurd declaration that good works are detrimental and injurious to salvation. What happened thereafter was that both sides in the dispute were driven to make extravagant statements that refused to submit to the paradoxical character of Scriptural Truth in which apparently contradictory affirmations must be allowed to stand side by side to provide a more profound and more valid synthesis.<sup>6</sup>

Paul and James seem to be in opposition to each other until one realizes that they are approaching the question of the interrelationship of faith and works from different perspectives. In James, attention is directed to the issue of whether a verbal or nominal profession of faith is genuine if there are no deeds to substantiate it. In his epistle to the Romans, Paul is concerned about a different problem, namely: how does one come into a proper relationship with God? Does one have to earn God's good will, or buy His favour by offering up a spotless record? Does the applicant for God's favour have to complete a list of earned credits? To such inquiries the apostle Paul retorts with an unequivocal

5. Cf. *A Study Document on Justification* (Prepared by the Commission on Theology for the Lutheran World Federation Assembly in Helsinki, July 30-August 11, 1963).

6. Cf. F. Bente, "Historical Introduction to the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church," *Concordia Triglotta*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1921), pp. 115 ff.

“no.” When a sinner responds to God’s grace, if he has faith, he is immediately and fully received into the circle of God’s family. Never, however, in Paul’s usage of the term is “faith” a mere belief in God, nor is it synonymous with the recital of any creed. Faith is a personal reaction in sincere gratitude to the love of God which Jesus proclaimed and manifested in His life, death, and resurrection. It incorporates the saved person into a new life of trust, loyalty, and affection.

A harmonization of the viewpoints expressed by Paul and James is not unthinkable. Paul speaks of faith active in love. James writes: “For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead.” Paul writes: “If I have faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.” The expressions may vary, but the basic meaning is the same. Thus Article VI of the Augsburg Confession can also assert that “faith is bound to bring forth good fruits, and that it is necessary to do good works commanded by God, because of God’s will, but not that we should rely on those works to merit justification before God.” Contrary to some popular misconceptions Luther did not repudiate good works. His terse but pointed statement was: “Good works do not make a good man, but a good man does good works.”

Nevertheless, it must be admitted that many Lutherans have misconstrued their own teaching and have tended to turn the precious gift of God’s undeserved love into forms of “cheap grace.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran martyred under the Nazis, repudiated cheap grace as the “deadly enemy” of the Church and challenged Christians to recognize what he called “costly grace.”<sup>7</sup>

The futility of cheap grace and the necessity of properly motivated good works are accented in the parable of the Last Judgement in Matthew, Chapter 25, in which the division between the sheep and the goats is made on the basis of whether or not people resist the physical and social needs of humanity. Similarly in the first letter of John we are told “that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love remains in death.” Both agree with James that “faith without works is dead.”

## A MORE MATURE FAITH

As we learn to applaud James for insisting that faith detached from demonstrable acts of concern for the welfare of others is phony, we have laid the groundwork for advancing toward a more mature faith.

Real Christian faith, we should understand, is trusting in God no matter what reverses we experience or how much the contrary forces of evil may seem to predominate. As Erdmann Neumeister put it in the hymn he penned in 1718:

“I know my faith is founded  
On Jesus Christ, my God and Lord;

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7. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: MacMillan, 1949), pp. 45 ff.

And this my faith confessing,  
Unmoved I stand upon His Word.

Man's reason cannot fathom  
The truth of God profound;  
Who trusts her subtle wisdom  
Relies on shifting ground.

God's Word is all-sufficient,  
It makes divinely sure,  
And trusting in its wisdom,  
My faith shall rest secure."

God's Word, however, does not promise us external proofs, to bolster our faith. Certitude does not come through an accumulation of man-contrived evidence. Constantly we have to resist the temptation to depend on something other than divine promises to prop up our beliefs. Only consider how in recent months numerous clergymen have been rejoicing over their discovery of an apparent ally in Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, the noted authority on death and dying. Dr. Kubler-Ross has told her audiences: "I do not simply believe in life after death; I *know* that there is life after death." In her book, *Questions and Answers on Death and Dying* (1974) she wrote: "Before I started working with dying patients, I did not believe in a life after death. I now believe in a life after death, beyond a shadow of a doubt." In her lectures Dr. Kubler-Ross relates incidents in which accident victims pronounced dead by doctors have awakened to describe the sensation they had in being separate from and floating blissfully above their bodies.

This sort of evidence, Kubler-Ross' certainty, comes as a welcome boost to the feeble faith of many Christians. One might be inclined to join the enthusiasts over her alleged findings until one scrutinizes them from a theological standpoint. As Lutheran pastor, Robert Herhold, has perceived, we do not need Easter if we can prove that the soul is immortal:

"Life after death is by definition, beyond the range of scientific research; it is in the realm of the extrasensory, not the sensory. If life after death could be empirically verified . . . then there would seem to be little need for faith. It would be the thanatologist rather than the believer who would inherit the kingdom of heaven."<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore the scientific methodology of someone like Kubler-Ross does not deal with eternal life as participation in life with God -- as qualitative transformation from a lower to a higher form of being, but merely as an extension of our present consciousness. In Christ (because of His Resurrection) we Christians believe that we become part of the New Creation which is the future God has intended for us. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" as the letter to the Hebrews phrases it.

Authentic Christian faith trusts in God despite what may seem like overwhelming obstacles. Such a faith does not depend on visible evidence; it

8. Robert M. Herhold, "Kubler-Ross and Life After Death," *Christian Century*, April 14, 1976.

matures through a constant process of exposure to misgivings and questionings.

When the father with a child tormented by an "unclean spirit" pleaded with Jesus for help, he was told "all things are possible to him who believes." Immediately he cried out, "I believe, help my unbelief." This co-mingling of faith with honest doubt is not to be reprimanded. There is a sense in which we can speak appropriately of Christian agnosticism and not be guilty of a contradiction in terms in spite of what James writes (1:6), "Ask in faith without doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind." A Christian is not a person who is free from doubt but one who struggles with his doubts and refuses to surrender to them. On sunny days we sing, "My heart is fixed, O God . . . I am sure that nothing can separate us from your sacrificial love revealed in Jesus Christ." Under cloudy skies that song may die on our lips and doubt chills our heart. But we need not be alarmed over this incessant civil war within ourselves if we keep our attention pivoted on the cross and the open tomb, Christ crucified and risen again.

Our lives -- all that we experience and all that we can know -- remain shrouded in mystery. The most profound meanings, in reality, are hidden in mystery beyond the bare facts. Mathematics only begins with one; it ends with infinity. Biology begins with the single cell but it ends with the Infinite Creator. Astronomy begins with the speck of dust and goes on into the limitless heavenly spaces. The Christian religion begins with a mustard seed of faith and ends with the awareness of the boundless mercy of God and the miracle of a new birth.

In the final analysis, Christianity does not consist of flawless creeds, impressively marshalled arguments or well-defined statements, but of symbolic truths disclosed through angels and visions, hopes and dreams, mangers and crosses, of Mt. Sinai and the Mt. of Olives, of burning bushes and barren wildernesses, and all the places where the mysterious Presence of God has brooded upon life and drawn it out beyond the confines of sight and sense; beyond the moment into the momentous, beyond and through the commonplace into the Holy of Holies.

Faith is the key to piercing the mysteries of God. But let us not be impatient. We shall never more than penetrate its fringes. The important thing is that we learn to trust Him who lies behind it; to know beyond all doubt that the mystery is His, that He made it and knows its secrets, and is using it to lead us into His Presence.

So the Christian proclamation insists that the only power that can finally overcome our skepticism and unbelief is found in Christ. It takes His Cross to make our modern Golgothas intelligible; and it takes the Resurrection experience to transmit our failures into victories; and it takes the living Spirit of God to lead us through the perplexities of life to the absolute assurance that the inscrutable wisdom and unsurpassed love of God have been fully validated.