

Foreword

Long before the Neo-orthodox theologians thought of saying that faith is an encounter with a divine Person rather than assent to a proposition, preachers who ought to have known better taught that faith is trust in a person, not belief in a creed. This writer, when a teen-ager, was told that some people would miss Heaven by twelve inches - the distance between the head and the heart - because they believed the Gospel with their heads but not with their hearts. Today it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it is to find a minister - a conservative minister - who does not believe and teach that one must have a "personal relationship" with Christ in order to be saved. But what that "personal relationship" consists of is either not made explicit or, when made explicit, contradicts what the Bible teaches about saving faith. The result is that both Christians and non-Christians are either needlessly confused or totally misled. Perhaps the world is not responding to the churches' message because the message is garbled. Neither the churches nor the world knows exactly what to do to have eternal life.

Statements such as these about the head and the heart and trusting a person, not believing a creed, are not only false; they have also created the conditions for the emergence of all sorts of religious subjectivism, from Modernism to the Charismatic movement and beyond. No one will miss Heaven by twelve inches, for there is no distance between the head and the heart: "As a man thinks in his heart, so is he." The head/heart dichotomy is a figment of modern secular psychology, not a doctrine of divine revelation. St. Sigmund, not St. John, controls the pulpit in nearly all churches.

Further, "trust in a person" is a meaningless phrase unless it means assenting to certain propositions about a person, propositions such as "I believe in God the Father Almighty...and in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into Heaven, and sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead." Trust in Christ, unless it includes belief of these propositions - as well as the Gospel of justification by faith - is totally without value. "Christ" means these propositions - and a lot more, to be sure, but at least these. No one who trusts in the Christs of Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, C. S. Lewis, or N.T. Wright will be saved.

As for having a "personal relationship" with Christ, if the phrase means something more than assenting to true propositions about Jesus, what is that something more? Feeling warm inside? Coffee has the same effect. Surely "personal relationship" does not mean what we mean when we say that we know someone personally: Perhaps we have shaken his hand, visited his home or he ours, or eaten with him. John had a "personal relationship" with Christ in that sense, as did all the disciples, including Judas Iscariot. But millions of Christians have not, and Jesus

called them blessed: They have not seen and yet have believed. The difference between Judas Iscariot and the other disciples is not that they had a "personal relationship" with Jesus and he did not, but that they believed, that is, assented to, certain propositions about Jesus, while Judas did not believe those propositions. Belief of the Gospel, nothing more and nothing less, is what separates the saved from the damned. Those who maintain that there is something more than belief needed for justification, are, quite literally, beyond belief.¹

Since we first published *Faith and Saving Faith* twenty years ago in 1983 (the book was largely ignored by the clergy and the churches), there has been a widespread defection from the Gospel of Jesus Christ in Reformed churches - both Baptist and Presbyterian - a defection specifically from the doctrine of justification by faith alone. That defection is accelerating.

Several factors have contributed to the growing rejection of the Gospel in the churches, and one of those factors is confusion about the nature of faith. That confusion is common to those who oppose the doctrine of justification by faith alone, and to some of those who defend it. Faith, rather than being recognized as belief of a statement, that is, intelligent assent to an understood proposition - and saving faith being belief of the truth, that is, intelligent assent to Biblical propositions - rather than faith being understood in Scriptural terms, faith is seen as something more than belief - as "commitment to a person," "trust of a person," "encounter with a person," "surrender to a person," or a "personal relationship." This common viewpoint is not in accord with Scripture, for it makes a fatal dichotomy between persons and propositions, and regards faith as trust in or commitment to a person, rather than belief of a proposition.

Those who deny justification by faith alone may say that saving faith includes, or is identical to, obedience and good works. They define that vague "something more than belief" as something "objective": baptism, obedience, and good works. The deniers of justification by faith alone begin by agreeing with those who confusedly defend justification by faith alone: Faith is not "mere assent." Faith is more than belief, they say. Thus those who deny justification by faith alone, and many of those who wish to defend it, are united in this opinion - which Dr. Clark shows by painstaking exegesis of Scripture to have no support in Scripture - that faith is not intelligent assent to an understood proposition, not "mere" belief, but something more.

Deniers of justification by faith alone may say that faith is not mere assent, for it is obedience as well. They make the vague "something more than assent" definite by their assertion that saving faith includes works. This allows them - watch their sleight-of-hand carefully - to assert that justification by faith alone is true, as the Westminster Confession teaches, because they have redefined faith to include works. So when they assert that "justification is by faith alone," they mean, "justification is by works, too."

Many of those who wish to defend justification by faith alone are embarrassed because of their agreement with the deniers of justification that faith is not mere belief, not intelligent assent to an understood proposition. And they should be embarrassed, for their faulty understanding of faith has opened the door to the current widespread denial of justification by faith alone.

Faith and Saving Faith is not primarily about the doctrine of justification by faith alone, but its exegesis and analysis are fundamental to that doctrine. To understand the doctrine of justification by faith alone, one must understand the doctrine of faith, as well as the doctrine of justification. Err on either doctrine, and one errs on the doctrine of justification by faith alone. So one might misunderstand justification as a process, or progressive, or two-staged, or based on infused righteousness, or conditioned on one's obedience, rather than as an irrevocable legal act of God. And one might misunderstand faith as a complex psychological feat, which, if it is not performed satisfactorily by the sinner, and confirmed by meticulous introspection, cannot justify. One can make faith into a work such as "complete commitment," "unconditional surrender," "life-changing encounter," and "total trust." Many people, including many teachers in conservative churches and schools, are offended by the simplicity of the Gospel, and add to the statements of Scripture. They thus destroy the assurance of Christians by making them wonder if they have "surrendered" enough, "trusted" enough, or been "committed" enough to be saved.

This creates a spiritual climate of doubt in which those who deny justification by faith alone can flourish. To those who have been needlessly worried by this un-Scriptural doctrine of faith as a complex psychological feat, the deniers of justification by faith alone say: Look, we offer you assurance of salvation: Look to your baptism, look to your works, which are visible and objective and photographable. Who can tell if you have performed some complicated psychological feat or not? But everyone can tell whether you have been baptized, or if you are doing good works. So rest your assurance on those visible, photographable, "objective" things.

Both the defenders and deniers of justification by faith alone need to learn the lessons about faith that Scripture teaches. One of them is this:

The strength or kind of faith required is nowhere stated [in Scripture]. The Holy Spirit has said nothing as to quantity or quality on which so many dwell and over which they stumble, remaining all their days in darkness and uncertainty. It is simply in believing - feeble as our faith may be - that we are invested with this righteousness [of Christ]. For faith is not work, nor merit, nor effort, but the cessation from all these and the acceptance in place of them of what another has done - done completely and forever. The simplest, feeblest faith suffices: It is not the excellence of our act of faith that does anything for us, but the

excellence of him who suffered for sin - the just for the unjust - that he might bring us to God... Many a feeble hand - perhaps many a palsied one - was laid on the head of the burnt offering (Leviticus 1:4), but the feebleness of that palsied touch did not alter the character of the sacrifice or make it less available in all its fullness for him who brought it... The weakest touch sufficed to establish the connection between it and him. 2

Unintentionally and unwittingly, the defenders of justification by faith alone, by their un-Scriptural doctrine of faith (which makes faith a complex psychological act rather than simple assent to the truth), have created and sustained the theological climate in which those who deny justification by faith alone can flourish. The defenders of justification by faith alone have asserted that it is not enough to believe the Gospel, for even the demons believe the Gospel,³ and the demons are lost. Belief is not enough, they say. In order to be saved, one must do more than believe; one must commit, surrender, trust, encounter, relate, or emote.

The deniers of justification by faith alone agree: It is not enough to believe the Gospel in order to be saved. But rather than urging people to perform some further psychological task in addition to belief, they tell them to do good works in order to be saved. Their works (or their baptism) will complete what is lacking in belief alone. In this way, both the defenders and the deniers of justification by faith alone have lost sight of what in fact saves: The perfect, imputed righteousness of Christ, completely outside the sinner, and received by the simple instrument of belief alone.

The current controversy over justification has broken out in conservative churches because Christians recognize that the Bible denies justification by works, whether works are regarded as a ground, condition, or an instrument of justification. But what most Christians have not yet recognized is that the common Protestant view of saving faith as something more than belief of the Gospel has fueled and will continue to fuel denials of justification by faith alone so long as it prevails. Until faith is understood as mere belief - the Bible makes no distinction between the two words - the justification controversy will continue, and those defending justification by faith alone will continue to be embarrassed by their agreement with the deniers of justification, that belief of the Gospel is not enough for salvation.

In the pages that follow, Dr. Clark defends the view that faith is assent to a proposition, and that saving faith is assent to propositions found in the Bible. Saving faith is neither an indescribable encounter with a divine Person, nor heart knowledge as opposed to head knowledge. According to the author of Hebrews, those who come to God must believe at least two propositions: That he is God, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him. Mindless encounters and non-intellectual relationships are not saving faith. Truth is propositional, and one is saved and sanctified only through believing true statements. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing comes by the Word of God.

The anti-intellectual cast of virtually all modern thought, from the university chair to the barroom stool, controls the pulpits as well. It is this pious anti-intellectualism that emphasizes encounter rather than information, emotion instead of understanding, "personal relationship" rather than knowledge. But Christians, Paul wrote, have the mind of Christ. Our relationship to him is intellectual. And since Christ is his mind and we are ours, no relationship could be more intimate than that. That is precisely why the Scriptures use the analogy of marriage to illustrate the intellectual relationship between Christians and Christ - and marriage is an inadequate illustration, for the penetration of minds is far more profound and intimate than marriage.

This recognition of the primacy of the intellect, the primacy of truth, is totally missing from contemporary theology. One of the twentieth-century's greatest theologians and writers, J. Gresham Machen, wrote a book titled *What Is Faith?* fifty years ago. His words are as appropriate today as they were then:

This anti-intellectual tendency in the modern world is no trifling thing; it has its roots deep in the entire philosophical development of modern times. Modern philosophy...has had as its dominant note, certainly as its present day result, a depreciation of the reason and a skeptical answer to Pilate's question, "What is truth?" This attack upon the intellect has been conducted by men of marked intellectual powers; but an attack it has been all the same. And at last the logical results of it, even in the sphere of practice, are beginning to appear. A marked characteristic of the present day is a lamentable intellectual decline, which has appeared in all fields of human endeavor except those that deal with purely material things. The intellect has been browbeaten so long in theory that one cannot be surprised if it is now ceasing to function in practice...

As over against this anti-intellectual tendency in the modern world, it will be one chief purpose of the present little book to defend the primacy of the intellect, and in particular to try to break down the false and disastrous opposition which has been set up between knowledge and faith.

That, too, is a chief purpose of this little book. The following pages argue that it is rational to believe what God says; it is irrational to disbelieve God. No argument is more urgently needed than that.

John W. Robbins

1. There is one context in which the phrase "personal relationship" might have some Biblical meaning: if it is used to deny that an ecclesiastical, organizational, or sacramental relationship is saving.

2. Horatius Bonar, *The Everlasting Righteousness*, 40-41.
3. Of course, there is no Scriptural evidence for this at all.