

## FAITH AS AN ORGANISM

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Questions about the nature and function of faith have for many years been of peculiar interest to me, principally because of certain experiences as a missionary in Japan. There I was often faced with the problem of how to lead people with a false faith in a non-existent saviour to a true and vital faith in Christ, the historically and eternally real Saviour.

As you know, the Japanese are for the most part Buddhists. But I was born and spent my childhood in a prefecture of Japan remarkable for the fact that Buddhism had never dominated its population, and also for the fact that its people are more forthright and direct than most Japanese. The two circumstances are not unrelated. When, some years later, I returned to Japan as a missionary, I was located at first at my birthplace, but soon was moved to the city of Nagoya, a strong Buddhist center. There I began to realize the hold that the Shin sect of Buddhism has upon the people of that part of Japan.

This sect teaches that a certain mythical or hypothetical person, once known as Hoze the monk, now called Amida, had pity upon suffering men, and determined to save them, no matter what the cost in suffering. Laboring through a very long space of time, through many incarnations, he fulfilled his vow. All who call upon him in faith with the words, "Namu Amida Butsu" in dying immediately enter into paradise without further transmigration. This doctrine is not taught as having a historically true basis, but is admitted without any foundation of fact. No repentance is required, but only acceptance with gratitude of the gift of the hypothetical Amida.

It is not strange then that in my new field I found many people who were ready to hear with courtesy the Gospel of salvation by faith in Christ, but were utterly unwilling to see any reason why they should change from salvation by faith in Amida to salvation by faith in Christ. I found that these people took the Japanese proverb, "Iwashi no atama mo shinjin gara" (Even a sardine's head may be an object of worship), at its face value. A man once quoted it to me as a good reason for his sticking to his old beliefs instead of turning to Christ. I then asked him to tell me honestly whether he thought a sardine's head, for example, if worshipped and prayed to as a god, could really protect or help him. He replied, "Of course not, but if I believe it can it's all right isn't it?" When I pointed out to him that his trust was not then in the sardine's head but in his own faith, the product of his own mind, and therefore in himself, his reply was, "I never heard such fool talk in my life."

And so I found out that when I preached about faith in Christ my hearers would take it as another form of what they had been believing; or if they went on to make Christ the object of their faith, they were still bound by the idea that faith itself was the important thing, and what saved them. Japanese Christians talk a lot about faith: strong faith or weak faith, or how to build up their faith so as to obey some command or undertake some service to God; but apparently the object of faith is not as important as faith itself.

Once on a train in Japan as I was talking about Christ to the people sitting near me, a young man came across the aisle and joined the group saying that he was a Christian of the Holiness Church and had perfect faith in the Second Coming, also that his church was the one with the finest faith of all the churches. I told him that I did not feel competent to decide among the churches in Japan, but that I was sure that the church that came the closest to believing and obeying the Bible had the finest faith. Then he went on to tell me about a farmer in a nearby town who had such wonderful faith that he always grew far better vegetables than his neighbors, for he always prayed about them. Well, I am always more or less from Missouri about stories of that kind, especially from a speaker so well satisfied with his own spiritual attainments. So I told him that there were more important things than growing miraculous vegetables, and gave as an example one of the first Christians in that section of the country. This man, a farmer, began at once to live an obedient Christian life, very scrupulously resting on Sunday and devoting the day to God's worship. His neighbors naturally objected, for in Japanese farming communities it is the custom for neighbors to help each other in turn in planting, harvesting, and so on; but he would neither give nor receive help on Sunday. Finally he was boycotted, and the neighbors built up the little dikes around his rice fields so that water from the community streams would not flood his fields. Then there was a drought and his crop was about to wither away. His wife turned against him, and taking the children left him. But the man stood firm. Finally it rained and the dikes built up as they were, held the water, and he made a crop after all. I pointed out to my listener that God did give the man a crop, but that he was standing firm no matter what God in His wisdom might give or withhold. His reply was, "That was fine, but a man couldn't do anything like that unless he had built up very strong faith?" Of course I told him, as you would have done, "If you wait to build up strong faith first you can never do as that man did. In obeying God, there is faith."

Having this kind of thing to combat in the Japanese mind I more and more made it a practice in preaching and personal work to use forms of the verbs believe and trust instead of the noun faith, emphasizing the object of the verb, i.e., the true God, the historical Christ. It seemed to me that this would help lead my hearers to reliance upon God in Christ rather than upon an emotional state somehow involving God.

But as I have thought more and more about my long-continued practice it has seemed to me that I may have gone too far, for Christ spoke of faith, telling some that they had great faith and others that they had little faith. And the great quickening of the Church in the Reformation came through the words, "The just shall live by faith." So I have kept mulling the matter over, striving for a clear conception of all that is involved in faith, and looking for words and forms to express it clearly.

My contacts with Christian and non-Christian Americans during the last three years have made me realize more keenly the importance of the subject. Our increasing numbers of educated pantheists--whether they call themselves Christian or not--are approximating more and more the Buddhist position that faith is an end in itself, and that its beneficial results are dependent upon itself and not upon the qualities or even the reality of its object. The cult faddists with their sweetly pious talk about faith and surrender

to the Infinite, or Light, or Love or whatnot have entered the same road through the gate of sentimentality. I am much concerned about these trends, for they alike lead away from God to the evils inherent in the Japanese system, i.e., utilitarian ethics and practice, with violation of revealed moral precepts, because the unregenerated human mind refuses to recognize a higher norm than its own ideas, feelings, and supposed good.

There are those, too, who have the idea that faith is a matter of small moment, that if a man does what he should, lives right, and loves his neighbor, what he believes or how he believes is of little consequence. The person saying this forgets that as he speaks he is stating his belief that God asks only the easily possible of men, and forgets too that this belief motivates his actions. Then there is the man who insists upon correctness of belief but who has hidden away in his mind the proviso that it is not necessary after all to live up to his creed in all of its implications.

These are by no means all of the vagaries and misconceptions about faith that exist, but they are representative, I think. These and all others, too, have one thing in common, that they are all more or less the result of thinking of one ingredient or aspect or even element of faith as constituting the whole of faith, thereby not only minimizing, excluding or distorting the others, but even changing the nature of the ingredient selected. For example, the Buddhist makes the element of trust the essential thing in faith, making the validity of the object of faith of no importance and the working of faith non-essential; and in the process trust itself becomes a subjective emotional state.

As we turn to the Word of God for an answer to these errors and for exposition of the nature of faith, we must bear in mind that the word faith itself is used with different emphases, and that therefore we cannot take any one passage and from it alone build up a complete picture. So today, as I take as my basis for considering the nature of faith, a passage from the Epistle of James, I may seem to take liberties beyond the rules of exegesis, but this is only in order to tie up with it other teaching about faith so as to present as comprehensive a description as possible. In the 2nd chapter and 26th verse James says, "For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, even so faith apart from works is dead also." It seems to me that he here gives the key to a proper evaluation of faith and its elements or ingredients, and that key is the representation of it as an organism. It is not an organism, of course, but consideration of it by that analogy gives a true understanding of it.

This representation appeals to me because it involves a principle that I found of great help when I was trying to teach theology, i.e., that when in considering any great subject it is analysed into parts, the analytical divisions are not independent entities, but are considered separate only because of the limitations of the human mind which prevent immediate comprehension of the whole. For example, the attributes of God do not exist apart from Him or from each other. God's omnipotence is God's omnipotence, and so there is no danger of its running wild, for it does not exist apart from God's infinity or righteousness, justice, holiness, goodness and truth. And so there is never any conflict between the attributes of justice and goodness. When one acts, connections with the others are not cut off. It is God of all the glorious infinite attributes who acts. If one attribute

is considered as isolated from any or all the others or from the being of God, from that point on thought has left the realm of the actual.

Here James in his discussion of faith and works seems to be guilty of considering as separate and even antithetical things two ingredients of the complex of faith, but as the last sentence of his discussion shows, he is doing so in order to demonstrate that they are not separate, but are living and real only if they exist together as in an organism: "For as the body apart from the Spirit is dead, even so faith apart from works is dead also."

Now let us see what this presentation of faith as an organism involves. To begin with, there is an ellipsis in the analogy, for as it stands, works seem to be made analogous to the spirit, whereas the only way the figure can be understood is by recognizing that activity alone gives evidence of the presence of life in an organism; also that the life of an organism is the condition consisting of the union of body and spirit. Where body and spirit are together, there is life; and likewise where body and activity are together there is life. Therefore activity is a necessary accompaniment of the living man, and, by analogy, of faith.

As I have already indicated, my purpose today is not to enlarge upon the immediate purpose of the inspired writer, which was to show the necessity of faith's working, but rather to explore the implications of applying the analogy of faith and the human organism more fully. The analogy involved may be stated something like this:

- (1) Man has a body, a tangible, measurable form.
- (2) He has a spirit, or energizing principle.
- (3) Life consists of the union of body and spirit.
- (4) The evidence of this life is activity.
- (5) Absence of activity of any kind is evidence of death, i.e., the separation of body and spirit.

Also,

- (1) Faith has a perceptible, demonstrable form, i.e., the matter believed, the body of faith, a creed.
- (2) It also has an energizing principle, which is trust in God as apprehended in the creed.
- (3) The union of this body and the energizing principle--of belief about God and trust in God--constitutes living faith.
- (4) The evidence of this living faith is activity
- (5) Absence of any kind of activity attributable to the body of faith must indicate that faith is dead--that trust is not present in it.

We see here two elements and their products, which are present in living man and analogously in living faith: body, spirit and action. The perfection of the whole is in each case dependent upon the presence of all three, and in proportion to the perfection of each.

The body of a man is recognizable as a man, and all of its members and organs are necessary. Yet we know of men who are living, but lack one or more limbs, or even an internal organ in whole or in part. Occasionally

there occurs the case of a man without any limbs and without sight even, being kept alive. The spirit is there, and activity, though limited. Who will say that such a body is sufficient, that the spirit is enough? And who would be willing to give a list of parts of the human body necessary for a minimum of human existence? No matter what the possible minimum might be, only the complete number can really be considered sufficient for human life, nor would anyone be satisfied with less.

Yet countless Christians are perfectly willing to talk about and even recommend a minimum content of belief, as if trust in God were able to work through meager belief about Him any more than a man's spirit through a body barely able to maintain union with it. No, just as completeness of the human body is necessary for the entire field of man's work, so completeness of the body of faith is necessary for the works of faith. Abraham's reckoning that God could raise Isaac from the dead, and the centurion's reasoning about Christ's authority were possible because they believed certain things to be true about God and Christ.

We should never be satisfied with the content of our belief, but should strive to make it grow. As the body grows and is sustained by food, so our belief is increased and nourished by reception of God's Word of truth, and the whole organism of faith prospers.

On the other hand, let us never despise the small beginnings of faith, or even imperfection or meagreness of belief. We must remember that the body grows, also that the maimed or deformed man is still a man, though we are not satisfied with his condition. Our government recognizes this and is doing all it can to restore to full usefulness the wounded in this war. It is wonderful to see what is being done in the way of restoring paralyzed limbs and in fitting efficient artificial limbs in cases of amputation. Shall we be less zealous for the body of faith than men are for the human body? In the goodness of God, the maiming or deformity of the body of faith can always be repaired, though that of the physical body often cannot. Therefore, while we recognize essential elements of faith in those of incomplete or deformed belief, let us never approve their condition or even be guilty of considering their condition a permissible norm for Christians, but let us use every means to help them grow to maturity, and to heal their deformities.

We must also be careful how we nourish the body, eating food, not poison; and so we must be careful to build up our body of belief with the Word, and eschew worthless and poisonous teachings.

There is a further application of the analogy to the body which seems reasonable to me. That is, that as the physical body is to be transformed into a spiritual body, so the body of belief is to be transformed into knowledge in that day when we shall begin to walk by sight instead of by faith. But the spirit, i.e., trust in God, will continue, and in union with full knowledge the activity will be glorious.

Let us turn now to the second element, trust. This element I read into James' analogy, but necessarily, I think, for one element is omitted, and trust alone will fit the picture. Abraham was justified by works when he offered Isaac. In order to do this he needed not only to believe certain

things about God, but also to trust God to act according to His nature as Abraham believed it to be.

This element, trust, is vital, but like the spirit of man it is elusive. It can really be known only by its works in conjunction with the content of belief. But men are always trying to isolate it and make it a virtue in itself - to capture it without the rest of the organism of faith. This is the Buddhist fault I referred to: trying to have trust without belief about a reliable object of trust, and so failing as well to have the works that accompany living faith. There is with real trust peace of mind, as that of a child on its mother's breast. But this feeling is too often confused with the reality; and we find people everywhere trying by one device or another to produce it, and too often satisfied with the counterfeit they produce. The only safety lies in insisting upon faith in its entire organism--never just a part of it.

The element of trust, is, I think, what our Lord referred to especially when He told the Syro-Phoenician woman that her faith was great. Trust, keeping its eye upon God, reasons that He will act according to His nature. And so it cannot be complacent, take satisfaction in its own existence, or receive credit for it, for its very nature is to be entirely dependent upon God. This is what is like a grain of mustard seed, not self-centered at all, but utterly given to having God work in, upon, and through it. And so wonderful works come through it, and fullness of life.

Works attempted in order to show one's own perfection of faith or power of faith can never have such blessing from God simply because they do not spring from trust in God, but from a motive focussed upon self and therefore utterly different. The vital principle in such a case is not genuine, and therefore the whole organism is something other than faith in God.

I sometimes think that this vital element of trust is often strangely weak in those who have the most nearly complete content of faith, and that for this reason their works do not measure up to the promise of their profession. Their case is analogous--incongruous as it may sound--to that of the perfect physical specimen with a feeble mind. These Christians believe a lot about God, but somehow they do not commit themselves and their ways to Him. They do not take the final step of saying, "I know that God is Lord of all, that He has redeemed me in His Son, that He will never forsake me and that He will present me faultless before His presence; therefore I will undertake this work for Him, and trust Him rather than my own wisdom." Somehow they believe God can do great things for them, but they do not expect Him to, and so they do not undertake much in reliance upon Him. They do not reason as Abraham and the centurion did, and as every man who has done God's work must reason. I am speaking to my own failures here. The cure is not in working up a feeling of trust, but in going ahead in work, for in the doing will God's power be supplied. I like the translation of Jehovah-jireh in the A.R.V.: "In the mount of Jehovah shall it be provided." In the act of obedient service will the Covenant God provide for our need. In Abraham's offering of his son was his faith perfected, himself justified, and God's full providence manifested.

We come now to works, the activity of faith. They are important because they reveal the character and state of the organism. A faulty body cannot perform the best work, nor can a warped spirit, no matter how perfect the body. But if the body or mind is cured, this fact will be evidenced by the works. Some cures of the human organism are within the power of man, but such is not the case with the organism of faith. Its cure is of God. When our Saviour healed the paralytic in body and cleansed his soul from sin, He commanded him to take up his bed and walk. As he obeyed he found the power to obey present. Even so for us who through God's grace have belief and trust the obedience of faith is a duty. Will and decision to obey are closely linked with trust, and as they take form in action there is credible evidence that a man's faith is living. There is no other evidence that faith is alive, therefore let us always be obedient to the truth. We shall find this obedience the key to a sound body of faith. In exercise comes development, growth in conviction. "If any man willeth to do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it is of God, or whether I speak of myself." We shall find in obedience deliverance from the danger of looking for faith apart from works, because this work of obedience is but the expression of trust in God. It delivers also from looking for trust apart from creed because obedience is to God about whom something is believed.

As we have considered these factors in the whole complex of faith it has been obvious that none of them could be discussed without involving the others, or considered apart from them, and that the analogy between faith and the human organism is a true one. If the analogy is true, what is our duty as ministers of the Gospel? Our duty is not just to make Christ known to as many people as possible, but to lead as many people as we can just as near to Christ as possible. Our aim should never be the minimum to get a man over the line from death to life, but the maximum of transformation into the image of Christ.

Therefore we should always labor to have faith as an organism implanted and grow to perfection in men, because it is the great means to the end of presenting every man perfect in Christ Jesus. By it Christ dwells in the hearts of His own. In proportion to its perfection is the completeness of Christ's indwelling, and in the same proportion is the degree of transformation of the Christian into the image of our Saviour.

In implanting and nourishing faith we can work directly only with the externals, that is, the matter believed and faith's expression in works. Our responsibility is to be faithful here, for we are stewards of the Word of God, and must answer for the souls of men. And so first with ourselves and then with all men to whom God sends us, let us be faithful in building belief in the whole counsel of God, teaching it faithfully. Though it be hard to receive, and though it brings difficulties in obedience, let us hold back none of it.

On the mission field I have found it a great temptation to refrain from explaining to Christians the truth of God about certain things simply because that knowledge would bring obligation to break off from some doubtful heathen practice. This would make the Japanese Christian subject to persecution which would leave me untouched because of my position as a foreigner. Or I would be afraid the Christian might sin against new light. I believe Paul was thinking of such a temptation when he said, "I shrank not from declaring unto you the whole counsel of God." But let us not hesitate to hold or teach unpopular truth, remembering that we are responsible for building the whole organism of faith.

In the same way, let us look to our own works and admonish, reprove, and encourage as we look to the works of our flock. Let us remember that example is the finest teacher. Let us strive to be able to say, "Be ye imitators of me, even as I also am of Christ." And remember that one failure will be copied more than a dozen successes.

Most of all, because implanting and maintaining the organism of faith is God's work just as truly as the life of man is from God and maintained by God alone, let us labor in prayer of faith, reckoning that God will bless our work according to His nature and promise.

But who is sufficient for these things? May the God of all sufficiency, through Jesus Christ and His Holy Spirit enable you by faith to lay hold on His sufficiency as you strive to lead men into the obedience of faith.

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