

The Higher Place of Faith

Every believer holds a deposit of heaven inside. But we must discipline our minds daily to reflect on the nature of Christ and what is most essential to faith in Him.

Roughly speaking, the word “faith” seems to be used by Christians in two senses or on two levels. In the first sense, it means simply belief—accepting or regarding as true the doctrines of Christianity. That is fairly simple.

But what does puzzle people—at least it used to puzzle me—is the fact that Christians regard faith in this sense as a virtue. I used to ask how on earth it can be a virtue—what is there moral or immoral about believing or not believing a set of statements? Obviously, I used to say, a sane man or woman accepts or rejects any statement, not because he or she wants to or doesn’t want to, but because the evidence seems good or bad.

Well, I think I still take that view. But what I did not see then—and a good many people do not see still—was this: I was assuming that if the human mind once accepts a thing as true it will automatically go on regarding it as true, until some real reason turns up for reconsidering it.

I was assuming that the human mind is completely ruled by reason. But that is not so. For example, my reason is perfectly convinced by good evidence that anesthesia does not smother me, and that properly trained surgeons don’t start operating until I am unconscious. But that doesn’t alter the fact that when they’ve gotten me down on the table and clapped their horrible mask over my face, a mere childish panic begins inside me.

I start thinking I am going to choke, and I am afraid they will start cutting me up before I am properly under. In other words, I lose my faith in anesthetics.

It is not reason that is taking away my faith. On the contrary, my faith is based on reason.

It is my imagination and emotions. The battle is between faith and reason on one side and emotion and imagination on the other. And the same thing happens in regard to our practice of Christianity.

Training Our Moods

I am not asking anyone to accept Christianity whose best reasoning goes against it. That is not the point at which faith comes in.

But suppose a person's reason once decides that the weight of the evidence is for Christianity. I can tell you what is going to happen in the next few weeks. There will come a moment when the news is bad, or the individual is in trouble or living among people who don't believe, and all at once that person's emotions will rise up and carry out a sort of blitz on his or her belief.

Or, there will come a moment when the person wants to tell a lie or sees a chance of making a little money in some way that's not perfectly fair. Some other moment will come in which it would be convenient if Christianity were not true. And once again the person's wishes and desires will carry out a blitz.

I am not talking of moments at which any new reasons against Christianity turn up. Those have to be faced, but this is a different matter. I am talking about moments when a mere mood rises up against belief.

Now faith, in the sense in which I am here using the word, is the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted, in spite of your changing moods. For moods will change, whatever view your reasons take. I know that by experience.

Now that I am a Christian I have moods in which the whole

thing looks very unlikely. But when I was an atheist, I had moods in which Christianity looked terribly probable.

This rebellion of your moods against your real self is going to come anyway. That is why faith is such a necessary virtue.

Unless you teach your moods "where they get off," you can never be a sound Christian or a sound atheist, only a creature dithering to and fro, with its beliefs really dependent on the weather and the state of its digestion. Consequently, our emotions must be trained in the habit of faith.

The first step is to recognize the fact that you have moods. The next is to make sure that, if you have once accepted Christianity, then some of its main doctrines must be deliberately held before your mind for some time every day.

Daily prayers, religious reading and churchgoing are necessary parts of the Christian life. We have to be continually reminded of what we believe. Neither Christianity nor any other belief will automatically remain alive in the mind. Belief must be fed.

Discipline Reveals Imperfections

Now I must turn to faith in the second or higher sense. I want to approach it by exploring the subject of humility.

The first step toward humility is to realize that one is proud. Then the next step is to make a serious attempt to practice the Christian virtues.

Once we do this, typically, things go swimmingly for the first week; but try six weeks. By that time, having fallen back completely or even lower than the point from which we began, we will have discovered some truths about ourselves.

None of us knows how bad we are until we've tried very hard to be good. There is a silly idea that good people don't know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie.

Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. You find out the strength of a wind by trying to walk against it, not by lying down.

We never find out the strength of the evil impulse inside us until we try to fight it. And Christ, because He was the only man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only man who knows to the full what temptation means.

The first and primary thing we learn from a serious attempt to practice the Christian virtues is that we will fail. Soon thereafter comes another discovery: that every faculty we have, our power of thinking or of moving our limbs from moment to moment, is given to us by God.

If you and I devoted every moment of our lives exclusively to His service, we couldn't give Him anything that wasn't in a sense His already. When we talk of doing anything for God or giving anything to God, I will tell you what it is really like: It is like a small child going to its father and saying, "Daddy, give me sixpence to buy you a birthday present."

Of course, the father does this, and he is pleased with the child's present. It's all very nice and proper, but only an idiot would think that the father gains monetarily in the transaction.

Faith, in the higher sense, arises after we have tried our level best and failed to practice consistently the Christian virtues, and realized that even if we succeeded, we would only be giving back to God what was already God's own. In other words, we discover our bankruptcy.

Once we have made these two discoveries, God can really get to work. Now real life begins.

Giving Back to God What God cares about, I think, is not our specific actions. Rather, what He cares about is that we should be creatures of a certain kind or quality—the kind of

creatures He intended us to be—creatures related to Himself in a certain way.

As long as we are thinking of God as a test examiner or as the opposite party in a sort of bargain, we are not in right relation to Him. We are misunderstanding who we are and who God is. We cannot get into right relation with Him until we have discovered the fact of our bankruptcy.

When I say “discovered,” I mean more than simply being able to talk about it. Anyone of us, if given a certain kind of religious education, will soon learn to say that we have nothing to offer to God that isn’t already His, and that we find ourselves failing to offer even that without keeping something back. But I am talking of really discovering this—finding out by experience that it is true.

We can only discover our failure to keep God’s law by trying our very hardest—and then failing. All this trying leads up to the vital moment at which we turn to God and say, “You must do this. I can’t.”

Don’t start asking yourself, “Have I reached that moment?” And don’t sit down and start watching your mind to see if it is coming along.

Quite often, when the most important things in our lives happen, we don’t know, at the moment, what is going on. You can see it even in simpler matters. Someone who anxiously starts watching to see whether or not he or she is going to sleep is very likely to remain wide-awake.

Also, the thing I am talking of now may not happen to every one in a sudden flash. It may be so gradual that no one could ever point to a particular hour or year when it occurred.

What matters is the nature of the change itself, not how we feel while it is happening. It is the change from being confident about our own efforts to the state in which we

despair of doing anything for ourselves and leave everything to God.

Trust Leads to Obedience

I know the words “leave it to God” can be misunderstood; but they must stay for the moment. In this sense, leaving it to God means an individual puts all his or her trust in Christ.

As Christians, we trust that Christ will somehow share with us the perfect human obedience, which He carried out from His birth to His crucifixion. We trust that Christ will make us more like Himself and, in a sense, make good our deficiencies.

Christ offers us something for nothing: Actually, He offers us everything for nothing.

The whole Christian life consists of accepting that very remarkable offer. But the difficulty is in reaching the point of recognizing that all we have done and all we can do is nothing.

Handing everything over to Christ doesn't, of course, mean that we stop trying. To trust Him means trying to do all that He says.

There would be no sense in saying you trusted a person if you didn't take his advice. Thus, if you have really handed yourself over to Christ, it must follow that you are trying to obey Him, but trying in a new, less worried way.

You are not doing these things in order to be saved, but because He has saved you already. You are not hoping to get to heaven as a reward for your actions, but inevitably you want to act in a certain way because a first faint gleam of heaven is already inside you.

I think all Christians would agree with me if I said that although Christianity seems at first to be all about morality—duties, rules, guilt and virtue—yet it leads you on

into something beyond. By faith, we have a glimpse of another country where they don't talk of those things, except perhaps as a joke.

In this other country, everyone is filled with what we should call goodness, as a mirror is filled with light. But they don't call it goodness. They don't call it anything.

They are not thinking of it. They are too busy looking at Christ, the source from which it comes.

Read a companion devotional.

C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) is probably best known for his seven children's fantasy novels that make up The Chronicles of Narnia. Nearly 50 years after his death, he continues to influence believers and nonbelievers around the world for Christ.