

CHAPTER VII

“ BY THE FAITH OF THE SON OF GOD ”

We pick up now our main thread where at the end of the fifth chapter we laid it down. We laid it down upon the fact that by His Cross and His Resurrection Christ became for all the world and for all time the Giver of His own life to men. We pick it up to ask, and if possible to answer, the question which follows in natural sequence, “ How is man to take hold upon the proffered gift? ” Of course the immediate answer is easy enough to find. The word “ faith ” leaps at once to one’s memory and one’s lips as being the great New Testament word descriptive of the means and method whereby man is brought into touch with the redemptive power of Christ. But what does the word mean? The theologian cannot complete his system without settling upon some adequate interpretation for it. The preacher cannot, unless his conception of its significance be so clear in his own thought as to become in his expression clear enough for all to understand, offer any gospel to disquieted hearts. However much the fact may be obscured during more or less prolonged periods by the necessity of concentrating upon apologetic or doctrinal revision along particular lines, it remains true that for both theologian and preacher the Christian message comes to its completion and its climax in their reply to the inquiry “ What must I do to be saved? ” And though the theologian in the retirement of his study may succeed in evading the inquiry, the preacher has no such way of escape. For his business is to win and nourish the souls of men. If he shies from a plain enunciation of faith’s essential character, or if he contents himself with vague replies, he may be a successful lecturer on many theological themes (though even so the broken column, type of unfinishedness, might well stand as the symbol of the gospel he proclaims), but an evangelist he cannot be. And it is perhaps not far from the truth to say that for many a preacher—specially for those who have moved away from the older theological positions and for whom in consequence the older formularies have lost their savour—the conception of faith is hung round as if with a veil he cannot draw aside. The statement that “ faith is acceptance of the finished work of Christ ” rings unconvincingly now. Conceded that it may still awaken in some an emotional response not quite valueless, nevertheless, for those who in their quest after the “ way of salvation ” would fain meet with clues which the mind can follow as well as with emotional currents to which the heart may yield,

it raises more questions than it resolves. To most, it seems a specimen left over from an ancient coinage which religious speech once issued from its mint, and a specimen so worn and battered that the inscription telling its value cannot be deciphered any more. No sincere preacher can be content simply to let the matter go at that. The conception of faith must have its clinging mists dispersed, else the preacher can be but a blind leader of the blind, merely linking hands with his hearers for a common groping through the enveloping dark.

What is faith?

I

Faith is a word of many meanings, meanings which as it were constitute a ladder having mere belief for its lowest rung and utter self-abandonment to faith's object for its highest. Yet, for all its multiplicity of meanings, it should not in any given case prove very difficult to determine the significance which the term must bear. The sufficient principle for guidance is always this. What faith is, in any special sphere or context, depends upon the object in which it is to be placed. The interpretation of faith in regard to any particular relationship must be governed by the *kind* of relationship into which faith is to introduce us; for faith is always a response; and the character of a response necessarily depends upon the character of the appeal. Faith may be purely an act of intellectual belief or assent, as with the faith we place in the multiplication table. In a case like this, faith—if we care to set so great a word to a comparatively slight application—is neither more nor less than saying “yes”. But pass a step or two up the ladder. On a higher rung we find ourselves speaking of *faith in* a man. And to have *faith in* a man is a quite different thing. We should hardly use the phrase “I have faith in that man” to indicate merely that we have accepted as true a statement which he has just made concerning the shortest railway route to a certain destination or the time of a train's departure. Or if we did employ the phrase in connection with such things, it would be only as an emphatic expression of our reliance upon our informant's proved knowledge, as against somebody's scepticism real or supposed; and we should really be using it as a sort of testimonial to our informant's character rather than as indicating our belief in the statements immediately in question. Our faith would be our response to the appeal which his character, in the relevant section of it, has made. And as we climb further up the ladder of faith's meanings, we find the same principle holding good. Faith is always a response to an appeal, and in framing a

satisfactory description of faith in any particular instance the character of the appeal must be the decisive thing.

Bearing this in mind now as we stand on the loftiest rung of the ladder and deal with man's faith in Christ, asking "What is the faith that saves?", we fall back upon our guiding principle, and answer, "It depends upon the character of the appeal to which faith has to make its response." We go back accordingly to the fact that Christ offers the new life-dynamic, offers life, to man by offering Himself; or, using terms with which the immediately preceding chapter has made us familiar, we remind ourselves that Christ brings a renewed immanence of Himself in man within man's reach. The appeal, therefore, is that of a life-giving Personality seeking to take man into itself. And, in consequence, the response—the only possible response if a vital and organic connection is to be established between the idea of Christ's part in the offering and that of man's part in the receiving—must be the surrender of man's personality to Christ's.¹ For that is the answering and corresponding Christward movement on man's part to the movement which Christ has made toward man. A life offered from one personality can only be appropriated into another personality through the surrender of the personality which is to receive: if one cares to make a sort of paradox of it (which may occasionally assist our thinking) the personality which is *giving* itself must *take* the other, and the personality which is *receiving* must *give* itself to the other. Faith *vis-à-vis* a life-giving Christ becomes an altogether different thing from what it would be if Christ brought only a new revelation, be that revelation never so resplendently glorious. It must be more than an intellectual assent to certain facts or doctrines concerning Christ and His work, more than a reliance upon the efficacy of any ministries which He may have performed or may be performing on our behalf, though these things must certainly be present, laid down as the first stepping-stones over which faith passes to its goal. It means, not merely an adjustment of the mind so that new truth may enter in, not merely an adjustment of the will so that new commands may be obeyed (even Tennyson's "Our wills are ours to make them Thine" does not adequately cover the ground), not merely an adjustment of the heart so that new encouragements and inspirations may be received, but an adjustment of the whole nature so that the new force may transform and re-create it. Faith is really a matter of giving up self-adjustments altogether, except that one self-adjustment whereby

¹ I have in this paragraph used here and there, in scattered fashion, a few sentences from the chapter on "Faith" in my previous book, *The Philosophy of Christian Experience*.

the entire content of one's nature is brought into the grip of the new force. Faith is a movement of the whole man, undivided and with everything that constitutes him unanimous and simultaneous in assent. To an actual life-force a man must submit, not his intellect alone, not his heart alone, not any single element alone, but *himself*. Faith is not taking something *from* Christ, but *taking Christ*—which means, when we go deep enough, Christ taking us. Faith must be the actual movement of man's entire personality to identify itself with, and to lose itself in (albeit the losing is the real finding too) the personality of Christ.¹ To some extent, at least, parallel experiences may be found on lower planes. In any case where there is the giving of any quality of character or mind, of anything inward and temperamental—and such giving is a quite possible thing within the limits of our ordinary human experience—the giving can be effective only through the surrender of him who is to receive to him who is to give: the inferior personality must identify itself, at any rate in that range and department of it that is to be enriched, with the superior; and no mere intellectual conviction that the superior personality *is* superior, no mere expectancy, nothing in short except the real moving up of the lower personality into the higher, will secure the boon. Of course the bestowal of external and tangible gifts need involve no such intimacy of relation. For that the mere stretching out of two hands is enough. Nor does exchange of thought call for it either. The movement of the lips in speech on the one side, and the hearing of the ear on the other, will suffice for that. But to give qualities of character or endowments of mind is a totally different matter. Those other relations are merely those of two circles which remain external to one another, though at a single point their circumferences may touch: this relation implies one sphere contained at any rate partially within another. And since between Christ and man it is a question of giving and receiving, not some qualities of character only, but *life*, the sum total of all qualities, it is the *whole* personality of man that must be enclosed within the personality of Christ. One sphere—the smaller and subordinate one—must lie *wholly* within the other's circumference. The one effort of the human soul is to be *in* Christ so that Christ may be *in* the human soul. He is to dwell in our hearts by faith. The loftiest ideal that our faith keeps in view is to possess its Christ, not as companion only, however close and faithful He might prove—not as dearest

¹ Compare Didon's striking phrases. "*L'essence de la foi est de nous livrer tout entiers à celui qui en est l'objet. Le croyant ne s'appartient plus, il renonce à ses pensées propres, à ses intérêts, à son initiative personnelle, à tout, et il appartient sans réserve à celui à qui il croit. Il meurt à lui pour vivre moralement dans un autre, il échange sa vie contre la vie d'un autre.*" (Jesus Christ, I, 452.)

friend only, however changeless His friendship might be—even, one may dare to say, as Saviour only in the limited sense of rescuer from doom—but to possess Him as soul of our soul, life of our life. A vital faith (it is hardly putting it too strongly) makes exchange of personalities with Christ. Christ's own words may be cited as strong support of the saying. He spoke of belief, but He spoke of belief *in* Him or *on* Him almost always. And these phrases must be taken as synonymous with other phrases which Christ employed to define the disciple's true relation with Himself. "Coming to Him", "receiving Him", and the like—they all mean this veritable union of personalities, or exchange of personalities (it matters not which way we put it) between the disciple and Christ. Indeed, all those utterances, cited in a previous chapter,¹ which show that Christ held His own right relationship with men to be one of self-communication, might be cited again as showing that He held man's right relationship with Himself to be one of self-identification; to use them thus would be but to make them repeat from the other end of the connecting line the same message as before. Faith is the actual passing of our nature into the nature of Christ Himself. It is man's contribution to the establishment of Christ's restored immanence within him. Faith, like the love for which it is really another name, smites the chord of self till it passes in music out of sight. To faith every moment is a Christmas moment, with Christ new-born within the heart whence faith proceeds. The soul which yearns after faith's sublimest experience voices its aspiration thus as it looks toward its Lord—

Thus would I live; yet now
Not I, but He
In all His power and love
Henceforth alive in me!

And the soul which in answer to its yearning after that sublime experience attains to any measure of it knows, in proportion to the degree of its attainment, first the death and then the resurrection of being "dead to herself and dead in Him to all beside".

If we are to *live* by faith, or are even to aspire after that experience—thus matching our spiritual programme to that of Paul, who declared that the life which he lived in the flesh he lived by the faith of the Son of God—it is only on these lines that a satisfactory conception of faith can be framed. Faith must do more than look back towards a historic event, with whatever splendour the historic event may gleam down upon us across the distance and however intense and expectant the backward look may be.

¹ Chapter IV, § 2.