



STATEMENT DF030

## THE MISUNDERSTANDING OF FAITH

In Ecclesiastes we read the "there is nothing new under the sun," and the truth of this proverb can be seen in a growing phenomenon in the body of Christ which could be called the "faith movement." It would seem that almost every believer (and lots of non-believers) has encountered this teaching at one time or another. It's easy to recognize; one hears such affirmations as:

"You can have what you say."

"The reason you haven't been healed is that you don't have enough faith."

"We can write our own ticket with God if we decide what we want, believe that it's ours, and confess it."

"Faith in God is simply faith in His Word. What that means is that faith says about one's self what the Word says."

"Faith is not something which we have so much as it is something that we do."

"Get your faith out there, start confessing God's Word. If we want God's Word to work for us, we must side with it."

The passage cited from Ecclesiastes is indeed pertinent; this "faith" teaching is not entirely new. It stems from an old problem--a problem that even the nation of Israel struggled with at times. A passage from Judges sums it up well:

In those days there was no king in Israel; *everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*

- Judges 21:25 (emphasis added)

"Now just a minute," some "faith" preaching brothers may say. "We're not doing what's right in our own eyes...we're doing what God says. We're walking by faith in His Word. We're living out God's perfect will."

Perhaps that's just the problem. It appears that the major problem with Christians who get caught up in the "faith" and "positive confession" movement is that they believe they know exactly what God wants at any given moment. They act as if the *whole* counsel of God could be (and is) fully revealed to them. They respond, at times, as if God had explained to them everything He thought, planned, or willed. Therefore, they indeed do what they think is right--what they *think* God's will is--in their own perspective.

With no intention of seeming caustic or unkind, this does seem to be one of the basic problems. What God *does* tell us about His will, His way, and His thoughts, however, may be insightful.

*"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,"* declares the Lord. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts."

- Isaiah 55:8, 9 (emphasis added)

Oh the depth and the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How *unsearchable are His judgements and unfathomable His ways!* For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it may be paid back to him again?

- Romans 11:33-35 (emphasis added)

These verses (and many others) would seem to indicate that the mind of our limitless God is not *fully* known (or even knowable) by such as us. That does not mean that there aren't things he reveals to us; however, we are not privy to His every thought. Being aware that His will is not fully known to us, there will be things that He will do that will seem strange and foreign to us. We will question what He's doing because we don't understand the end result. And yet, because He is sovereign and doesn't have to answer to us, He can do as He chooses.

CRI, P.O. Box 8500, Charlotte, NC 28271  
Phone (704) 887-8200 and Fax (704) 887-8299

But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever he pleases.  
- Psalm 115:3

Whatever the Lord pleases, he does; in heaven and in earth, in the seas and all the deeps.  
- Psalm 135:6

Nebuchadnezzar learned about this sovereign God the hard way. He had refused to acknowledge that "the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind" (Daniel 4:25). Because of his arrogance and self-seeking attitude, he was stricken by the Lord. He was driven out into the fields to live like an animal until he recognized that God could do whatever He chose. When Nebuchadnezzar came to his right mind, he said:

"But at the end of that period I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever; for His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation. And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does *according to His will* in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What hast thou done?'"  
- Daniel 4:34,35

Nebuchadnezzar's acknowledgement highlights the issue. God doesn't have to answer to us for what He does. That does not mean He refuses to reveal any of His will to us; all it means is that since He is sovereign, we can't demand that He bow to our wills or keep us fully posted on His plans.

Hand-in-hand with this misconception about the will of God, there is another misunderstanding embraced by this movement. This second area of concern is a misleading definition of "faith."

Different words are translated as "faith" or "believe" in the Old and New Testaments. And it is important to grasp the concepts implied by these words.

While the Old Testament clearly stresses the fear of the Lord, a large number of expressions, such as hoping, trusting, seeking refuge in God, looking to Him, relying on Him, fixing the heart on Him, and cleaving to Him --make it abundantly evident that this fear is not a craven but a child-like, reverent fear, and emphasize the *necessity of that loving self-commitment to God which is the essence of saving faith.*<sup>1</sup>  
- (emphasis added)

The most common word for "believe" in the Old Testament (*he'emin*) is closely akin to the word similarly translated in the New Testament (*pisteuo*). Both mean "to believe" or "have faith in." We can, therefore, define faith as follows:

The main elements of faith in its relation to the invisible God...are especially brought out in the use of this noun [pistis] and the corresponding verb [pisteous]; they are (1) a firm conviction, producing a full acknowledgement of God's revelation of truth, e.g. II Thess. 2:11,12; (2) *a personal surrender to Him*, John 1:12; (3) a conduct inspired by such a surrender, II Cor. 5:7.<sup>2</sup>  
- (emphasis added)

Note again the element of personal surrender to the Lord. As noted theologian Louis Berkhof wrote, "In both Testaments, faith is the same radical self-commitment to God..."<sup>3</sup>

"Where," one may ask, "is all this taking us?" It seems that the definition of faith portrayed here is somewhat at variance with the underlying message of the so-called "faith teachings." The "faith movement" appears to teach that the believer is to 1) get some sort of handle on the perfect will of God, and then 2) exercise "faith" to bring what is understood as the will of God to pass. "Faith," in that context, is simply a force of a power exerted through the confession of certain words to cause certain events to happen. It is a demand that God respond to us according to our understanding of His will.

For the "faith movement" people, faith is not a surrender to the person of God so much as it is an insistence that since they "understand" the mind of God. He is now *bound* to perform according to their expectations. Faith, in this case, becomes determination to have things go a certain way (according to one's own understanding of a situation). With these two definitions of faith in mind, let us turn Scripture to see where the truth lies.

They therefore said to Him, "What shall we do that we may work the works of God?" Jesus answered and said to them, "*This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.*"  
- John 6:28, 29 (emphasis added)

Notice that to do what God requires of us demands faith, and that the object of the faith is to be the person of Jesus. Our trust, confidence, hope, and reliance are to be in the Lord Himself. As it says in Proverbs:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight.  
- Proverbs 3:5, 6

In John chapter 11 we have an illustration that may be of help. The chapter deals with the resurrection of Lazarus.

In verse 4, Jesus clearly states that what is going to happen to Lazarus is for the glory of God (note that this is the *Lord's* viewpoint). Mary and Martha, however, have slightly different opinions.

When both Mary and Martha meet the Lord, they each say, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died." (verses 21,32). They both believe something *about* Jesus. They assume they know what the will of the Lord is -- that if Jesus had been there, Lazarus couldn't have died, and therefore express doubt about Jesus' timing.

If they truly believed that Jesus was "the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world" (v.27), as Martha said, why did they not trust that He knew what time was best to come and what was the right thing to do? What kind of faith did they demonstrate?

Martha's responses to Jesus throughout their encounter are revealing. She expresses strong conviction about certain attributes and abilities of Jesus (much like those in the "faith movement"). She insists that He can heal (v. 21), that He will raise the dead one day (v. 24), and that He is the Christ, the Son of God (v. 27). But all of this is simply a firm conviction of things she thinks are true about Jesus. (This is not to imply that these things are not true, only an observance that she is acknowledging her belief in certain things *about* Jesus.)

But note that when Jesus tells them to roll away the stone, Martha questions His judgement (v. 39). Seeing that Jesus wasn't responding in accordance with her understanding, she was confused.

When Jesus reminds her of her need to believe (v. 40), He obviously isn't calling her to a firmer conviction of her desire to see Lazarus raised. He's also not calling her to exert some force or power herself. He is exhorting her to place her confidence in what He feels is best, even though she doesn't understand it. She needs to surrender her understanding of what she thinks God's will is and simply trusts Jesus Himself.

This passage illustrated the issues at hand. The teaching about faith in the "faith movement" leads to an attitude typified by Mary and Martha. They had some understanding about God and they insisted that he ought to act in accordance with their understanding. There is a lack of personal surrender to a God who has infinite insight and understanding.

The Word of God does not exhort us to place our trust in our understanding of the Word or in what we think God wants to do. The Word calls us to consider the Lord worthy of our trust as to His character and motives regardless of our understanding. We are encouraged to place our confidence in His ability to do what He deems best, in spite of our opinions of what "ought to be" or "should be." The Bible challenges us to take our lives out of our own keeping and entrust ourselves wholly to the Lord's care (See Matt. 9:27-30).

There *are* promises in God's Word, but they are not there to give us a handle so we can "work" God according to our understanding of what God wants to do. The promises point us to a God who is worthy of our trust; they give us grounds to surrender our lives to his will, *whatever that may be*.

For example, I would not truly be trusting you to take care of my car if, after leaving you the keys, I began listing exactly how it is that you should go about caring for the car. I would simply be using you to get things done my way. Such action on my behalf would indicate very little trust or faith in you.

Faith, true biblical faith, entails surrender; surrender moment-by-moment to God and His will...even if we don't understand it. Faith is entrusting our whole lives to Him and then trusting Him to do what He deems best. Since His will and ways are often

different than ours, at times that surrender may well seem somewhat unpleasant. Faith says, "That's OK; He knows what He's doing."

Faith is also receiving the good things of life with an understanding that those things aren't the result of our efforts, but simply the work of Him who works all things according to the good pleasure of His will. Therefore, the highest prayer of faith is simply, "Thy will be done." In those words we affirm our trust in Him to do whatever He chooses. This is the sort of faith we can see echoed in Job's words:

Through He slay me, I will hope in Him  
- Job 13:15

Just as in the days of Jeremiah, faith is leaving our lives in God's care. However things may appear to us, faith continues to hold fast to the truth that whatever God wants is ultimately best.

Whether it is pleasant or unpleasant, we will listen to the voice of the Lord our God to whom we are sending you, in order that it may go well with us when we listen to the voice of the Lord our God.  
- Jeremiah 42:6

*Brian A. Onken*

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> Louis Berkhof. *Systematic Theology* (1941, Eerdmans; Grand Rapids, Michigan) p. 499.

<sup>2</sup> W.E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (1966, Revell; Old Tappan, New Jersey) p. 71.

<sup>3</sup> Berkhof, *op. cit.*, p. 498.