The Demons Also Believe (Poor Devils!)

by
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*T*he Church today is rife with conflicting views about the nature of faith. Ask any two people what it means for a Christian to "have faith," and you will get two entirely different answers. Occasionally one even hears reference to a "leap of faith." More often than not, however, the response is simply an assertion that faith does not depend on feelings. The discussion of faith is sometimes couched in philosophical terms. That is where the phrase "leap of faith" originated: with philosophers.

The publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859 and the resultant furor over the theory of evolution raised all sorts of questions about the veracity of the Scriptures' account of creation. That controversy by itself forced theologians to wrestle with the relationship between reason and faith. The problem, as viewed by liberal theologians last century, was simple. Reason dictates that truth must agree with fact; that is, one cannot derive truth from error. If there were errors in the Bible (which they said there were), then faith could not be based on reason. Based strictly on the liberals' assumption of error in Scripture, their concerns were justified. Their conclusion was also logical: Reason could not be the basis for one's belief in the God of the Bible. The errors which most concerned these scholars were the miracles reported in the Scriptures. Their argument in this regard was straightforward as well. Reason does not allow for the occurrence of miracles; so the miracles of Scripture had to be in error. (Did you catch just a glimpse of their circular reasoning in this?)

After half a century of scholarly debate over these issues, liberal scholars decided reason and faith could not be reconciled. Consequently, philosophers joined in, trying to establish a philosophical basis for faith. They explained philosophically why one had to suspend reason and "leap" into faith, believing things that were irrational. Once philosophers joined in, faith became whatever one deemed it should be. Under those conditions, the content of one's faith became irrelevant. *What* one believed about God or Jesus Christ was relatively unimportant. The important thing was *that* one believed in God. The difficulty with which these men wrestled boils down to proof of the existence of God. Does the God of miracles exist, or does He not? Obviously, if God exists, reason tells us that the miracles reported in Scripture could have been the logical work of the metaphysical being described there. The skepticism these theologians voiced, however, was against the view that reason could prove the existence of the God of the Bible. They rejected the postulate of God's existence as a basis on which to construct rational arguments.

In response to the onslaught of liberals, conservatives offered rational arguments, based on what they viewed as convincing evidence, to prove the existence of God. To counter liberal arguments, most conservative seminaries now offer courses in Apologetics. (The English term Apologetics comes from the Greek word *apologia*, which merely means "defense.") Through Apologetics the conservatives seek to defend the rational basis for faith. Popular speakers in conservative circles speak in terms of "defense of the faith." Under this rubric, they offer various arguments for the existence of God, trying to provide a logical basis for faith.

Cosmological and ontological arguments are just some of the specific grounds given as proof for the existence of God. In the ontological argument they draw on an analysis of the nature of being for proof. In the cosmological argument they do much the same thing, except they use specific characteristics of the universe as proof that God exists.

Conservatives and liberals do not actually argue with one another. Neither side would be convinced by any of the arguments or evidence offered by the other side anyway. Consequently, each side tailors its message for its own audience. The liberal view remains dominant in most public institutions of higher education and in many theological seminaries. There, professors still teach theories about the Scriptures developed

by proponents of the theory of evolution in the latter half of last century. For example, liberals do not believe Moses wrote the Pentateuch. They claim that an unknown editor put it together hundreds of years later by extracting and merging stories from four (or five) different sources. Students in liberal seminaries still master this theory as the basis for further theological discussion. It doesn't seem to bother them that their own scholars have methodically discarded much of the evidence and disproven many of the arguments that were originally used to prove the theory. The theory has long since become fact, superseding the need for such "proof."

How Does One Believe?

Two basic difficulties face the participants in this controversy. The first of these is that proof is not objective. Evidence is objective because it exists. Proof, however, is completely subjective. That is, proof exists only in the mind of the individual. The old adage, "One person's junk is another person's treasure," illustrates the point. That is exactly how it is with proof. One person's proof is another person's foolishness.

Absolute proof is also largely the consensus of the majority. Therefore, it is elusive and difficult to achieve even with the best of tools, as any good lawyer can tell you. In a court of law, lawyers present evidence followed by arguments based on that evidence. Arguments that convince a panel of jurors serve to "prove" guilt or innocence. But good lawyers know they don't win cases solely by proving their case with objective evidence and rational arguments. They win by convincing subjective jurors. Jurors selected to hear legal arguments are presumed to be unbiased. But that is largely a fiction. Two juries hearing the same evidence may or may not reach the same verdict. That is why lawyers don't seek just to prove their case. They do whatever is necessary to convince the jurors.

The best lawyers know that people who are unswayed by convincing arguments will often be influenced emotionally. That is where the subjective nature of proof enters the picture. It is also the reason you hear successful lawyers accused of playing to the jury instead of sticking to the objective facts of the case. Consequently, a valid definition of proof is "convincing arguments based on evidence." So when we use the terms *prove* and *proof* we are referring to such convinc-

ing arguments. We realize that what is proof to one will not be proof at all to someone else.

You can see then, that conservative religious leaders have been presenting arguments that some individuals will readily accept as proof. Those arguments will not convince everyone, however, since proof is a personal matter. If you are convinced something is true, you believe it. If you aren't convinced, you don't believe it. That is the way it should be. Everyone is responsible for *what* they believe. Therefore, God can—and will—judge everyone individually according to their beliefs.

The second difficulty faced in the controversy over "faith" is similar to the first, in that it involves an evasion of certainty. It is that one cannot prove non-existence. Existence is usually easy to prove. Simply let somebody see, hear, taste, touch, or smell something, and a rational person will be convinced it exists. It may not even have a name but, as they say, "I'll know it when I see it." So proof of existence begins with arguments based on evidence.

Non-existence, on the other hand, cannot be apprehended by the senses. Something that does not exist in one place may well exist in another. Therefore, you cannot show that something does not exist simply by proving absence. Absence of presence is not the same as non-existence. For example, we all know that carrots exist. We know that, however, only because we have seen, touched, and/or tasted them. But we cannot prove that twenty-five-foot-long carrots do not exist because we have no hard evidence to present. The best we can do is offer rational arguments why they should not exist. At best, proof of non-existence begins with convincing arguments based on probabilities and circumstantial evidence. It does not begin with arguments based on concrete evidence.

You can see from this that the liberals faced a Herculean task. They could not produce the required "convincing arguments based on evidence" that would prove the God of the Bible does not exist because one cannot prove non-existence. Subconsciously, they must have known that. Consequently, they chose to *assume* that God did not exist because they were not willing to believe that the miracles recorded in the Scriptures had actually occurred. However, these theologians also made a further error. They confused the terms *normal* and *rational*, making them synonyms. For them, the *normal* expectation of natural phenomena became the

only *rational* expectation. Therefore, supernatural phenomena (miracles) could never, from their perspective, be a rational expectation. Instead of breaking with the Christian tradition, however, liberal theologians simply changed the meaning of the term *faith*. For them, faith became an irrational step. To become a Christian, one had to believe with no rational basis for doing so.

Do You Believe?

By the end of last century, the liberals' devaluation of the meaning of the term *faith* was total. If faith were irrational to begin with, it didn't matter *what* you believed. The only important thing was *that* you believed. The logical result of their position should have been obvious to them. It has proved itself even within their own constituency. If it doesn't matter what you believe, you might just as well be a Muslim, a Buddhist, or a Jew. That is why mainline denominations have been declining in membership for decades; they stand for nothing that sets them apart from any other religion.

Conservatives, however, recognized the fallacy in the liberal's position. They understood that *what* you believe is every bit as important as *that* you believe. Therefore, some conservatives responded with a forthright definition of what they thought were the essentials of the Christian faith. Between 1910 and 1915 a group within the conservative wing of Christian Protestantism published *The Fundamentals: A Testimony of the Truth*. In these volumes they set forth the core content of saving faith. These conservative believers claimed that if one did not believe these essentials, they could not possibly be saved.

The conservative response to the liberal position was the only real option available to them. Any other response would have meant total loss of everything gained during the Protestant Reformation. Had they not challenged the liberals, salvation by faith as a basic truth of the Gospel would have been diluted to the point of being nothing more than empty words.

Therein lies the difficulty we face when we talk about faith today. Conservative attempts notwithstanding, the liberal definition of faith has permeated the conservative Church. The conservative layperson's attitude toward faith is not much different from that of liberal scholars. They no longer consider *what* you believe to be a matter of any great significance. The important

thing is *that* you believe. But the average layperson does not understand the high stakes involved in this matter of faith. Most would not be too concerned even if they did. Unfortunately for them, however, God is the ultimate rational Being. He considers faith to be of the utmost importance. So important, in fact, that He made faith the basis of salvation.

Why Do You Believe?

The conservatives who sought to circumscribe the boundaries of faith by defining its essential content were correct in their conclusions. If what one believes matters, the next logical step should be the delineation of the content of saving faith. Here we intend to carry the logic of this position to its ultimate conclusion.

If one wants to understand the nature of Christian faith as God intended it, the first place to look is in the New Testament. The English word *faith* comes from the Latin *fides*, which means "trust." But the Greek word translated "faith" in the English New Testament is *pistis*. That Greek term not only means "trust," it also means "confidence" and "belief." *Pistis* is a noun. Its meaning is derived from the action of the verbal root to which it is related. That Greek verb is *peitho*. *Peitho* means "to persuade" or "to offer proof." You can see from this how the meanings of the two words are linked. One who has been persuaded by evidence offered as proof has confidence, trust and belief.

The Biblical view of faith is straightforward. If you haven't been convinced by the evidence you have seen, heard, or otherwise apprehended, you do not really believe. That flies right in the face of the liberal's concoction. It is also a position which leaves many believers today with little or nothing to anchor the faith they claim to have.

By now you should be able to see the relevance of the issue over which the conservatives and liberals took sides. The liberals' effort to reconcile reason and faith resulted in their conclusion that faith was irrational. Therefore, it didn't matter *what* one believed. The sole essential was *that* one believed. Taking that position, the only individual they would exclude from salvation would be the atheist.

The conservatives, however, realized that the liberals' definition of faith robbed it of all significance. So they held to the Biblical definition. Faith was faith only if one had been persuaded by convincing arguments

based on evidence. They understood that the evidence and convincing arguments that persuade are *what* one believes. And they knew that *what* one believes is crucial to salvation.

Are You Convinced?

The Scriptures say that "without faith it is impossible to please" God (Heb. 11:6). They also represent the Gospel message of the Old Testament as the source of the evidence on which that faith should be based. (See "Do You Believe The Gospel of Jesus Christ?" *The Voice of Elijah*, October, 1991.) Paul said that "… faith {comes} from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ." (Rom. 10:17) We know, therefore, that faith should be the result of a logical sequence of progressive activities. It begins with the evidence of the Gospel (the word of Christ), continues with persuasion (the hearing), and results in belief (faith), as discussed above.

It only makes sense then that the more convincing the arguments, the stronger the resultant faith will be. That is precisely the case. Paul tells us that Christians can be "weak in faith." They show that weakness by their actions, limiting their own freedom in Christ and wanting to limit others also:

Now accept the one who is weak in faith, {but} not for {the purpose of} passing judgment on his opinions. One man has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables {only}. Let not him who eats regard with contempt him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One man regards one day above another, another regards every day {alike}. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God. For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.
(Romans 14:1–8)

Those who are "weak in faith" can escape that condition, however, because "faith grows":

For we are not overextending ourselves, as if we did not reach to you, for we were the first to come even as far as you in the gospel of Christ; not boasting beyond {our} measure, {that is}, in other men's labors, but with the hope that as your faith grows, we shall be, within our sphere, enlarged even more by you, so as to preach the gospel even to the regions beyond you, {and} not to boast in what has been accomplished in the sphere of another.
(2 Corinthians 10:14–16)

Just as faith comes by hearing and believing the Gospel, so also the growth of faith comes by hearing and believing more of the Gospel. The one who does not fully understand the Gospel message remains weak in faith and lives with undue restriction. That agrees with what Jesus said:

Jesus therefore was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, "If you abide in My word, {then} you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."
(John 8:31–32)

One gains salvation by believing the Gospel message concerning Jesus Christ. The New Testament Scriptures clearly say that we are "sanctified by faith" (Acts 26:18); we are "justified by faith" (Rom. 3:28; 5:1; Gal. 2:16; 3:8, 24); and faith is our "righteousness" (Rom. 4:5; 9:30; 10:6; Phil. 3:9). Paul emphasizes that fact:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, {it is} the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast.
(Ephesians 2:8–9)

In spite of all this, even conservative theologians approach the issue of faith as though the central concern is *that* you "believe in Christ." (Whatever that means!) Calvinist theology tends toward that position. Some would even have us believe that the establishment of faith is a once-for-all-time event instead of a growth process. One should have no major disagreement with the basic Christian truth that Calvinist theology has perceived and sought to defend regarding the security that faith provides. But neither should one ignore the variable introduced by the *what* aspect of faith. *That* you believe has no value in God's sight if *what* you believe is a half-truth or lie. In that regard,

Paul encouraged the early Christians to "stand firm in the faith" (1 Cor. 16:13; 2 Cor. 1:24). Peter did also:

Be of sober {spirit}, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in {your} faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world.
(1 Peter 5:8–9)

It would make little sense for these two Apostles to encourage someone to stand firm in faith if it were not possible for a Believer to change his mind concerning what he believed. That is exactly what the Scriptures tell us is possible. James mentions it as though it were a common occurrence:

My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth, and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins.
(James 5:19–20)

Paul also points out that some in his day had "gone astray from the truth":

Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, {men} who have gone astray from the truth saying that the resurrection has already taken place, and thus they upset the faith of some.
(2 Timothy 2:17b–18)

Since *what* one believes is so important, those individuals who have strayed from the faith have given up that by which they would have been saved. More importantly, however, Paul understands that many will also "turn away their ears from the truth" in these, the Last Days:

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but {wanting} to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths.
(2 Timothy 4:3–4)

Would you know the Truth if you heard it? Or would you be content to believe only what you have

heard taught as tradition? If the Spirit of God resides within you, you will know the Truth. *The* (one true) *Teaching* of the Gospel has characteristics that will identify it to those who seek God's will. It is as Jesus said:

"My teaching is not Mine, but His who sent Me. If any man is willing to do His will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it is of God, or whether I speak from Myself."
(John 7:16b–17)

Jesus also said:

"And the Father who sent Me, He has borne witness of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form. And you do not have His word abiding in you, for you do not believe Him whom He sent. You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me, that you may have life."
(John 5:37–40)

James made the following point in another connection, but it applies here as well:

You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder.
(James 2:19)

These are the Last Days. Therefore, one should not be reluctant to examine thoroughly everything one believes. For centuries a basic knowledge of what God accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has been sufficient to produce a faith strong enough to save. The day is soon coming when that will no longer be. A faith based on guesswork and tradition will not survive the delusion that is already underway. Only faith based on knowledge of the complete plan and purpose of God as described in the Gospel of Jesus Christ will deliver one from that delusion. If you believe the Truth of the Gospel, you will endure to the end. If you believe a half-truth or a lie …? Having said all this, we now come to a point we treat elsewhere in this issue (See "Do You Believe The Gospel of Jesus Christ?" **The Voice of Elijah**, October, 1991.) The logical question one should ask regarding pistis (faith) is, "persuaded by what evidence?" The answer we find in the New Testament is other than one might expect. ■