

Faith and Reason

Part I

According to many Protestant writers, Roman Catholicism is seriously mistaken in making faith a mere intellectual assent to certain dogmas. Faith, true faith in Christ, these writers say, is a personal trust rather than a cold intellectual belief. On the other side, the *Catholic Encyclopedia* (in loc. cit., p. 752, 1913 ed.) states "Non-Catholic writers have repudiated all idea of faith as intellectual assent." The truth of the matter, however, seems to be more complicated than these brief characterizations suggest.

These complications include the uncritical assumption that personality should be divided into intellect, will and emotion rather than into id, ego and superego. Granted the Freudian division may have an evil odor, but its very recognition of an evil nature in man could be closer to the biblical view than the other division allows. For the older division is not self-evidently scriptural. At any rate, those who use it often assume that intellect, will and emotion may be equated with specific biblical terms, when a study of the Bible shows that this is not so.

THE HEAD AND THE HEART

The key term of biblical psychology, particularly in the Old Testament where the fundamental principles are laid down, is the term *heart*. When contemporary Christians, often in evangelistic preaching, contrast the head and the heart, they are in effect equating the heart with the emotions. Such an antithesis between head and heart is nowhere found in Scripture. In the Psalms and the Prophets the heart designates the focus of personal life. It is the organ of conscience, of self-knowledge, indeed of all knowledge. One may very well say that the Hebrew *heart* is the equivalent of the English word self.

To understand Old Testament usage, consider the following few examples.

Every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually . . . (Gen. 6:5).

Then Abraham . . . said in his heart, Shall a child be born . . . (Gen. 17:17).

In the integrity of they heart thou hast done this . . . (Gen. 20:6).

My heart exulteth in Jehovah . . . (I Sam. 2:1)

Commune with your own heart (Psalm 4:4).

God, who saveth the upright in heart (Psalm 7:10).

They speak falsehood . . . and with a double heart do they speak (Psalm 12:2).

The fool hath said in his heart . . . (Psa. 14:1).

He . . . speaketh truth in his heart (Psalm 15:2).

Lest they . . . understand with their heart (Isa. 6:10).

Neither doth his heart think so (Isa. 10:7).

He hath shut . . . their hearts that they cannot understand. And none calleth to mind [heart], neither is there knowledge nor understanding (Isa. 44:18, 19).

As there are somewhat over 750 occurrences of the word *heart* in the Old Testament, these form a meager sample. But they are enough to show that many verse would make complete nonsense if the term were translated *emotion*. For example, if this identification were made, it would be necessary to say, "He speaketh truth in his emotions"; and, "Lest they understand with their emotions." Obviously this substitution results in nonsense. It is not to be denied that the biblical term *heart* can and does occasionally refer to the emotions, as in Samuel 2:1, though even here there must be some intellectual understanding. But although sometimes referring to the emotions, the term *heart* more often signifies the intellect. It is the heart that speaks, meditates, thinks and understands. At the same time, since the self acts emotionally, volitionally and intellectually the three activities are each represented in the several occurrences of the term.

But the preponderance of the intellectual references shows the preponderance of the intellect in the personality. It is extremely difficult to appreciate the motives, at least in the case of those who are attached to the Bible, which lead to a disparagement of the intellect. Why is it that thinking, meditating, understanding are to be condemned? Why is knowing and thinking of God a poor way, and impossible way or an impious way of coming to him? What is wrong with intellectual activity?

The common modern contrast between head and heart is thus evidently unscriptural. There is a scriptural contrast. It is the contrast between the heart and the lips, for Matthew is quoting Isaiah when he says, "This people honoreth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me." When the scriptural contrast is refused, the possibility cannot be ruled out that the other scriptural theses are discarded at the same time.

Two results of this unscriptural belittling of intellectual activity will be discussed.

THE ELEMENT OF TRUST

In describing the nature of faith, fundamentalists, evangelicals and even modernists in a certain way stress the element of trust. A preacher may draw a parallel between trusting in Christ and trusting in a chair. Belief that the chair is solid and comfortable, mere intellectual assent to such a proposition, will not rest your weary bones. You must, the preacher insists, actually sit in the chair. Similarly, so goes the argument, you can believe all that the Bible says about Christ and it will do you no good. Such illustrations as these are constantly used, in spite of the fact that the Bible says, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved."

CONFUSING THE ISSUE

There is here at least a confusion of mind, a confusion between something unscriptural and something else that is entirely scriptural. The weak point of the illustration is that it contrasts an intellectual act of believing with a physical act of sitting in a chair. This distinction is a matter of common experience; but how is it supposed to apply? In the spiritual realm there is no physical action but mention action only; hence the act of sitting down, if it means anything at all, must refer to

something completely internal and yet different from belief. Belief in the chair has been made to stand for belief in Christ, and according to the illustration belief in Christ is of no value. Something else is needed. But what is this something else that corresponds to the act of sitting down in the chair? This is the question that is so seldom answered. Now, there is such an internal factor, though it is extremely doubtful that those who use the illustration have this factor in mind. But since there is another facet of mental activity, the truth that has been confused with the error needs to be given its due. However, when the true element is identified, the illustration collapses.

In addition to “mere belief” or “intellectual assent” faith in Christ surely involves an “act of will.” Whether faith requires emotion or not and if so, which emotion it requires are at best secondary considerations. Emotions notoriously depend on bodily conditions; a good meal or a bad meal can alter them; atmospheric pressure and anemia likewise. Emotions by definition are fluctuating, whereas throughout our constantly changing emotional states, our beliefs and the volitions founded on them remain comparatively fixed. And, to return, faith surely involves the will.

Here, however, the original difficulty returns in full force. Is there such a thing as “mere belief,” or “mere intellectual assent?” Indeed, is there such a distinguishable phenomenon as a “mere” act of will? Intellectual assent is itself an act of will; and conversely, no volitional action could possibly take place without belief. If you will to eat ice cream, you must believe at least that there is some ice cream to be eaten. Intellect and will are not two separate “faculties”; rather they so interpenetrate in a single mental state that it is difficult and perhaps impossible not only to separate them in time but even in definition.

FAITH AND BELIEF

There is perhaps another flaw in the illustration, a flaw which also combines an element of truth with a confusion of thought. It would seem that those who say belief in Christ is of no value have an incorrect notion of belief and intellectual assent. They probably mean—though it is rash to guess what they might mean—that salvation is not obtained by knowing the propositions in the Bible and understanding their meaning. Obviously this is true. Many intelligent men know very well what the Bible says; they understand it far better than many Christians; but they are not saved and they are not Christians. The reason is that though they understand, they do not believe.

Clear thinking, however, will reveal that faith, Christian faith, is not to be distinguished from belief. Consider Hebrews 11:1. “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” The A.R.V. says that “faith is *assurance* of things hoped for, a *conviction* of things not seen.” Assurance and conviction are belief, strong belief, voluntary belief and as intellectual as you please. The heroes of faith, whom the chapter goes on to describe, all believed some definite intellectual content. Hebrews 11:3 says, “Through faith we understand” something about the creation of the world. Surely this is an intellectual content. And in explaining why “without faith it is impossible to please God,” verse 6 says, “for he that cometh to God must believe that he is.” As a reply to those who disparage the intellect within the limits of this first example, let this suffice.

Part II

There is a second result of the sharp distinction between the intellect, the will and emotions, coupled with a view of religion that makes it essentially emotional. It disparages the intellect, and is

basically anti-intellectual. It discredits creeds and theology. Its propounders often contrast faith in a person with faith in a creed, and in more or less explicit language they teach that it makes little difference what a man believes, if only he has faith in Christ.

However, in Hebrews 11:6 we have seen that faith in God is impossible without a creed. The first article of this necessary creed is that God exists. And how obvious! Can a man come to God if he believes that God does not exist? To turn an illustration back upon its originators, can you sit in a chair which you believe does not exist?

There is also a second article to this creed which must be believed before one comes to God. If a man believes that God exists merely as some impersonal force, he will not come. Therefore, he must further believe that God is a reward of those who diligently seek him. This of course implies that God is personal. What an extensive theology we are getting! And how intellectual we have already become, for we are now using the logical form of implication!

FAITH REQUIRES A CREED

Someone may here object that faith in God is not precisely saving faith in Christ: the devils believe in God, in one God, but they do not diligently seek him. Let it be so. The first point was that faith requires a creed. It was not said that the creed as so far elaborated was sufficient for salvation. It is necessary, but not sufficient. And its necessity is emphasized because of the fundamentalist-modern strictures on creeds and intellect.

Now, faith in Christ as well as faith in God requires intellectual assent to theological propositions. Suppose I ask you to lend me a sum of money and to trust me to repay it. On the pleasant assumption that you have the money and do not immediately need it (this is an intellectual belief too), will you make the loan without believing certain propositions about me? Suppose you have heard that I am dishonest? Suppose you believe I will “skip out” on you? Could you, with these beliefs, say that intellectual assent is trivial and that you will trust me all the same? Not many people are so stupid in business affairs. This stupidity is reserved for nonintellectual, emotional religion. It is said of religion that the heart is important but not the head. But if this were true, we could trust Christ for salvation without believing that he is trustworthy, without believing that he can save, without believing that his blood cleanses from all sin. We would need no creed, no statement of the Atonement, no historical information about Jesus; we would need only a comfortable feeling around the heart.

Although there have been mystics and assorted anti-intellectuals in every age, the main current of Christianity has always been intellectualistic. Creeds or statements of belief have not been abandoned. There has always been some recognition of the primacy of the intellect.

At any rate the Protestant, especially the Reformed, position is clear. Calvin (*Institutes*, Book I, ch. XV, Sec. 6-8), after he summarizes some philosophical analyses of the soul's faculties and indicates that they are plausible but far from certain, particularly because the philosophers ignored the depravity of human nature due to sin, proposes a twofold, not a threefold, division of soul: understanding and will. Understanding, he says, discriminates between objects; the will chooses what the understanding pronounces good. The understanding is the guide and governor of the soul; the will always respects its authority and waits for its judgment. And there is no power in

the soul other than these two. Charles Hodge, also speaking of man before the fall (*Systematic Theology*, Vol. II, p. 99), says, "His reason was subject to God; his will was subject to his reason."

And finally, J. Gresham Machen (*What is Faith?* p. 26; cf. pp. 49, 51) states that "it will be one chief purpose of the present little book to defend the primacy of the intellect." Later he adds: "That does not mean that we finite creatures can find out God by our own searching; but it does mean that God has made us capable of receiving the information which he chooses to give. . . . So our reason is certainly insufficient to tell us about God unless he reveals himself; but it is capable (or would be capable if it were not clouded by sin) of receiving revelation when once it is given" (*ibid.*, p. 51)

A PROTESTANT POSITION

The proper Protestant position might be summarized somewhat as follows. An act of will, that is, the activity of a person in choosing something, and an act of intellect, that is, the activity of a person in believing something, if they are regarded solely as the clanking of so much mental machinery, are neither one superior to the other. Their differences in value, merit or superiority depend entirely on their objects. In making a purchase it is the object bought that makes the activity worthwhile or foolish. So it is the object chosen and the proposition believe that give value to the will and the intellect. Now, in the case of will, we may choose to eat ice cream or we may choose to believe in the Republican party; but in the case of intellect, by definition, the object is always a truth or an alleged truth.

It may be granted that the single act of will by which we choose to worship God is of superior value to the single intellectual action of believing in the Republican party. But inasmuch as the proper object of intellectual action is always the truth (though often we sinfully believe lies), whereas food, recreation and sleep are perfectly proper objects of choice, it may be concluded that in its nature the intellectual act is superior to the volitional act.

THE PRIORITY OF TRUTH

The primacy of the intellect therefore could well be called the primacy of truth. This does not mean, as Machen has already said, that we can discover the truth about God apart from revelation; nor does it mean that man in his mind is immune to the effects of sin; but it does mean that man's mind is not totally destroyed by sin and that even yet it is constitutionally capable of receiving, understanding and believing information that God reveals.

Neither is the claim here made that intellect invariably dominates the will. Calvin indeed said that it is the office of the will to choose what the understanding shall have pronounced to be good and that the will always respects its authority (*Institutes*, Book I, ch. Sv, Sec. 7). But Calvin did not discuss voluntary assent to the truth. In such cases the will leads and the intellect follows. And a study of the history of philosophy may well indicate that this is far more frequent than ordinarily supposed.

The primacy of the intellect, then, is not a power automatically exercised over our volition. Such a representation tends to violate the unity of the person. Rather, the primacy of the intellect, or, better, the primacy of truth, means that our voluntary actions ought to be conformed to truth. If it is true that worshipping God is good, we ought to worship him. This way of putting the matter extends as well to the voluntary choice of belief. We may choose to believe a truth, or we may

choose to believe a lie. Both types of choice actually occur. But the primacy of truth means that we ought to believe the truth and we ought not to believe the lie.

In conclusion, now, the implications of this primacy for Christianity will be drawn by means of one example and one generalization.

A minister of fundamentalist persuasion and evangelistic zeal asserted that there is little hope of understanding the Bible. Theology is abstruse and doubtful. However, God has given his people the power of discerning the hearts of men, and with this power a minister can decide who should and who should not be admitted to church membership. In the confused and confusing discussion that followed, Romans 10:9-10 made its appearance. At first, in the rapid exchange of ideas, the minister was inclined to agree that anyone satisfying the conditions of that passage was a saved person. But when it was pointed out to him that belief in Christ's resurrection was a belief about history, an intellectual acceptance of an historical proposition, he quickly corrected himself and denied that belief in Christ's resurrection entails salvation. Salvation, he asserted, is not a matter of belief at all.

The generalization that was to follow this example must be introduced with a reference to modernism and neo-orthodoxy. For although these forms of religion have scant sympathy for fundamentalism, yet all three forms of religion are in a strange but substantial agreement. The agreement consists in their anti-intellectualism. If the two modern forms allow any intellectual expression at all, if they make any room for doctrine, they regard it sometimes as a tentative formulation which in a later age may be replaced by its contradiction. Thus the exponents of modernism have condescendingly granted that the Nicene Creed was well and good, and even true enough, for the fourth century, and that the Westminster Confession satisfied the needs of the seventeenth; but the twentieth century cannot accept these outmoded formulas. And the neo-orthodox claim that the Nicene Creed, the Westminster Confession and the formally contradictory writings of Fosdick or Brunner as well are all merely symbolic, metaphorical, mythological expressions of a single ineffable experience. Being ineffable, it cannot be expressed in words. Since therefore all words are equally futile, it makes little difference what words we use symbolically in our attempt to express the inexpressible.

But this is not Christianity. Christianity includes the primacy of the intellect and the sovereign claims of truth. There is no distinction between the head and the heart, no depreciation of intellectual belief. Christianity cannot exist without the truth of certain definite historical propositions.

To deny the truth of such propositions or to call them symbols of some mystic experience is not Christianity. On the contrary, by faith we *understand* that God created the universe; by faith we *assent* to the proposition that God is a reward of those that diligently seek him; by faith we *know* that Jesus rose from the dead. If these propositions are not true, and if truth has no claim upon our acceptance, let us not hypocritically say that Christianity is worth propagating.

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