

Believe What?

By: T. Pierce Brown

In John 20:8 we find, “Then went in also that other disciple which came first to the sepulcher, and he saw, and believed.” What do you think he believed? Most of my life I have assumed he believed the truth about Jesus, and I have an idea most of my readers have done likewise. However, if verse 9 suggests what he did NOT believe, as confirmed by Mark 16:11, 13, 14, and Luke 24:11, does not verse 2 suggest what he DID believe? It seems evident that he did not believe the truth that Jesus was raised from the dead (v.9), but did believe the assumption made by Mary that “They have taken my Lord out of the tomb, and I know not where they have laid him” (John 20:2).

Although I am not terribly concerned with that, I am concerned very much with a principle suggested by it. It is my conviction that many religious persons, some of whom are connected, more or less loosely, with the Lord’s church have an improper concept of the term “faith” or “belief” as we find it in the New Testament. Most of us are aware of the rather widespread denominational concept that faith in Jesus means “accepting Jesus as your personal Savior,” whatever that means. In the church of the Lord, we have tended to deny that, although in our present state of affairs, it would not be too surprising to hear of large numbers affirming it!

However, I am suggesting an even more basic, and at least as dangerous an error. That is the concept that “faith” is a sort of independent entity without any object or content. This concept is advanced by such expressions as “just believe,” with no idea or expression as to what one is to believe, or in whom.

Some of the recent controversy about what constitutes valid baptism may result from a failure to come to a clear conclusion about what one must believe. Some of our “leading” brethren (it is not now clear where they would be leading us) seem to be asserting that a person’s baptism is valid if he does it with a motive to please God, without regard to what he understands or believes about its relation to salvation. It is not hard to prove that having a motive to please God does not, of itself, validate any activity. Acts 26:9 and many other references about Paul persecuting Christians with a motive to please God are only some of the indications of that fact. Surely, any honest, sincere member of ANY denomination has a motive to please God, not only with regard to his baptism, but with regard to most any religious act that he may perform, whether it involves water being sprinkled on him, or “telling beads”! Surely we do not have to accuse our religious friends of ALWAYS having impure motives and being hypocritical rascals in order to teach them that their religious actions and worship are vain!

Perhaps, we have so long emphasized the “baptism” part of Mark 16:16 that we have neglected the “believeth” part. In fact, is it not possible that when we quote “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved” we should spend more time on at least two aspects of the subject? First, “He that believeth WHAT?” Second, “He that is baptized into what, for what, and because of what?” Is it true that “He that believeth that the moon is made of green cheese and is baptized to indicate that he is already saved now, will be saved eternally?” If not, what IS the truth about it?

The purpose of this article is not so much to answer that question (though the answer is simple), but to point out that in order to make good sense of ANY statement about belief, we need to know the nature and object of that belief. A clear concept of this point might help us when we sing or preach that “Faith will be lost in heavenly sight.” Most of us have preached the idea that although love goes on forever, both faith and hope will cease when we reach the heavenly state. Surely, we have meant, “Faith in THE REALITY OF THE PROMISE is no longer necessary when the promise is received,” and “Hope for the attainment of the goal is impossible once the goal is reached.” Surely, none of us have meant to imply that when Jesus was raised from the dead and they saw him, they lost all faith in him, either from earthly or heavenly sight! Surely, none of us have meant that when we see Abraham, the father of the faithful, he will say, “I now have lost all faith in God, now that I am here, and am suggesting putting up a sign saying, ‘Abandon all hope, ye who enter here!’”

Yet, since communication is a continuing problem, it may be that we did not make clear what we DID mean, and assumed that our audience meant the same thing we did. Or, in some cases, it may be that we did not know what we meant!

Faith in a person and faith in a proposition stated by that person are two different things. However, we must not make the fatal mistake our denominational friends make who think you can properly believe in Jesus as a person and not believe what He says! Note carefully: If I believe in YOU, I will believe what you say, but the converse is not necessarily true. That is, I may believe in the truthfulness of a statement made by a liar, a robber, or an adulterer, without having faith in THEM!

So, let us make sure WE know, and try to make sure that our audience knows in any context whether it is “faith in WHOM” or “faith in WHAT.” In NO case in the Bible is “faith” a sort of abstract entity, hanging up in the air by itself, and having no object or content!

Faith in Jesus is a very comprehensive thing. It means (1) trust and confidence in HIM as a person—that He IS what He is reported to be. (2) Belief in the truthfulness of any statement spoken or authorized by Him. (3) Willingness to DO what He says. “Why call ye me Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?” (Luke 6:46).