

Herald

ANTIPAS

"Antipas, My faithful witness" (Rev 2:13)

No 5

SAVING FAITH

The real and the counterfeit

Nico van der Walt

NOT JUST ANY FAITH

❑ The Bible is very clear on the fact that God's forgiveness and justification can only become a reality in a person's life *through faith*. But this is not true of just any faith. There are many types of faith, and they come to expression in a thousand ways. Every person in the world practises faith - in fact, one cannot imagine life without it. Even the small deposit I make in the bank, is an act of faith, because I believe that I will be able to get it back again!

Saving faith is something very specific! And to have absolute clarity about what it really entails, is literally a matter of life and death. It is ever so frighteningly easy to live your entire life under the illusion that you are saved, while in fact you have nothing but the false and futile faith against which we are warned throughout Scripture.

It is even possible to have a faith which is very orthodox - but in vain! (James 2:14-26)

❑ In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 7:21-23) the Lord says that there are people who *confess His name*, who will nevertheless be lost. It is even possible for them to *prophesy, drive out demons and perform miracles - in His name (!)* - and yet be rejected by Him on the

day of judgement. No wonder that they will be dumbfounded when this happens. And, take careful note, not just a few, but *many* will fall into this category.

Jesus calls them evildoers, in other words, sinners. Their sins were never forgiven, they were never justified by faith. *They never had saving faith!*

❑ In His parables too, the Lord repeatedly warns against self-deception in this regard, against the natural inclination of man to delude himself into thinking that he does not have a problem. How important it is for us not to be superficial in our self-examination (2 Cor 13:5)!

* Prior to the storm of God's judgement, true and false spiritual houses may look equally sturdy (Matt 7:24-27).

* Wheat and weeds often look so much alike that the difference can only be discerned when it is too late (Matt 13:24-30).

* Ten girls receive an invitation to a wedding banquet; all of them accept the invitation, all of them wait for the Bridegroom - only five go in with Him (Matt 25:1-13).

* Two persons appear to have

exactly the same faith. Only after some time (it may be years) it becomes apparent that the faith of one is fake - when it withers under persecution or chokes under the desires of this world (Mark 4:3-9; 14-20).

❑ True faith and false faith look deceptively alike. There are, in fact, astonishing examples in the Bible of the extent to which the Spirit works in and through people - short of His regenerative work in their lives:

* True faith delights in Christ alone; false faith can be feverishly excited about Him (John 2:23-25).

* It is the Spirit who brings about true faith; but false faith may be accompanied by much of His work (Heb 6:4-6)¹.

* True faith breaks free from the grip of this world; false faith may also do so, but only temporarily (2Pet 2:20-22).

TRUE FAITH IS GOD'S GIFT

❑ What then is true, saving faith?

¹ These people are not born again. Their hearts have never been changed, and remain, in spite of the rain of God's blessing (v.7), as hard and wild as the soil of v.8. The author to the Hebrews is however convinced that this is not true of his readers, but that they are truly saved. This is why he tells them in v.9 that he is confident of *better things* in their case - things that *accompany salvation*.

In this regard, the Bible teaches two apparently irreconcilable truths. On the one hand, a sinner must believe in Jesus Christ before he can be saved. It is his responsibility, and failure to do so, is his ultimate sin before God. On the other hand, no sinner is capable of believing in Christ in his own power, because natural man does not understand his terrible condition before God and is therefore blind to the miracle of Christ's redemptive work.

❑ God himself provides the solution - through the gift of regeneration. Born-again man sees his need, he understands the gospel, and he cannot but embrace Christ in saving faith. Regeneration is therefore not faith, but it makes faith possible, in fact, inevitable. Thus faith is a gift from God (Eph 2:8; Phil 1:29; 2Pet 1:1).

❑ The fundamental difference between true and false faith has to do, therefore, with the matter of *origin*. When it comes to manifestation in itself, as we have seen, the authentic and the counterfeit may be almost indistinguishable. Any attempt to define the difference between the two merely in terms of outward expressions, can therefore only result in deception and endless hairsplitting.

No, false faith has its origin in

man; true faith comes from God - and the difference between the two is one of essence, not of degree.

❑ If faith then is a gift from God, what exactly is it that He gives?

THE ELEMENTS OF TRUE FAITH

❑ An illustration may be helpful: You find yourself at a large international airport for the first time in your life. Minute after minute jumbo jets depart to all corners of the earth. Your destination is New York, halfway around the world. First of all you must establish your time of departure, and through which gate (of the many dozens) you must go on board. Step number one is therefore to decipher the details on the giant electronic notice board. You jot down the information, but suddenly a thousand doubts beset you. Do I have it right? What if I go through the wrong gate and land up in Tokyo? Wise man that you are, you approach a weathered traveller for confirmation. He puts his thumb up, and you make a bee-line for gate 38. Only one thing remains: to get on board. And as you relax into your seat, you breathe a sigh of relief and resignation: now it's over to the pilot - surely he knows exactly what he is doing.

❑ A minute's thinking will tell you

that your fictitious experience consisted of 3 components. Firstly you needed information or knowledge; secondly you had to have assurance or conviction; thirdly you entrusted yourself to the plane and its pilot.

This is what saving faith is like. Essentially it is surrender and trust. But obviously it needs an inner conviction that the trust is resting on reliable facts.

True faith therefore has three essential elements: *knowledge, conviction* and *trust*. So long has this been understood, that there are specific Latin terms for these elements: *Notitia, Assensus, Fiducia*.

FAITH IS KNOWLEDGE

❑ Faith is more than knowledge, but no faith is possible without at least some knowledge. *Faith has content!* And how can faith be true if the content is false? The content of true faith must be 'true truth'.

How can you 'board the right plane' if you do not have the required information, nor understand it? For this reason Paul wrote: *'And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? ... Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ'* (Rom 10:14,17).

❑ The Bible does not reveal in

specific terms how much knowledge is required for faith to be real. What knowledge did the criminal on the cross possess? Perhaps it can be put like this: there must be sufficient knowledge, no matter how embryonic, to cause a person to flee from God's coming wrath - into Christ.

□ Such knowledge must have at least three elements:

* Firstly it is necessary for me to have some understanding of *who God is*. In particular I must have some perception of His holy righteousness which holds me responsible and will judge me according to His perfect standards (Acts 17:30-31).

* Secondly I must know that I have a terrible problem: I am totally incapable of passing His test. *I must know that I am a guilty sinner*.

Why? Without an understanding of my sin, I cannot possibly be interested in God's solution to my dilemma. It is this knowledge which really makes the gospel such 'good news' to me.

* Thirdly, and this is really the vital element, I must have a basic knowledge of God's answer to my predicament: *Jesus Christ!*

It concerns *His Person* [God's Son who became man to be mediator

between God and sinners (John 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1Tim 2:5; 1John 4:2)]; *His crucifixion* [where He paid my debt before God (Rom 3:25-26; 2Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13)]; *His life of perfect righteousness* [which is imputed (credited) to me in order that I may meet God's standards of perfection (Rom 1:16-17; 4:1-5:21)]; *His resurrection* [by which the Father proclaimed that He had lived a life of perfect obedience and 'successfully accomplished His mission' (Acts 13:32-35; 17:31; Rom 1:4; 4:25; 1Cor 15:12-23)]; *His second coming* [when He will bring my salvation to completion by resurrecting my body, and by destroying my final enemy, death (Rom 8:23-25; 1Cor 15:24-26; 35-58; 1Thess 4:13-18; 2Tim 1:10; Rev 20:14)].

This is why the apostles' preaching was so totally Christ-centred (1Cor 1:17-2:5 - in particular 1:17-18, 23-24, 2:2).

FAITH IS CONVICTION

□ It is possible to know a lot about a subject - without being convinced that what you know is true. An example would be the knowledge that a Christian missionary in the Middle East has of Islam.

True faith therefore encompasses more than factual knowledge. *Conviction* is necessary. And this involves at least two things: I must

be convinced that what I know is factual indeed - and that it also applies to me personally.

□ It is the *Holy Spirit* who converts knowledge into conviction. In this regard the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ in John 16:8-11 is very significant

* The verb, translated as 'convict', carries a strong meaning: the person involved has no doubts in his heart afterwards; he knows it is true.

* He convicts *in regard to sin*, because the person *does not believe in Christ* (v. 9). This brings the inner knowledge of personal spiritual bankruptcy, and of God's perfect solution for it in Christ, and of being guilty for the rejection of God's love in him.

* He convicts *in regard to righteousness*, because *the Lord Jesus returned to the Father* (v. 10). This refers to the resurrection and ascension (14:12,28; 16:28), and the Father's accompanying proclamation concerning the Son's compliance with all the requirements of justice.

This conviction precipitates in me the deep understanding that my own righteousness could never meet God's perfect standards, and that my only hope lies in being clothed with the righteousness which God

provides - that of Christ, imputed to me.

* He convicts *in regard to judgment* - because *the prince of this world now stands condemned* (v. 11 and 12:31-33). Satan has been judged and is waiting, as it were, in the death cell for the lake of burning sulphur (Rev 20:10). The point here is that if the father of sinners cannot escape God's judgement, no sinner can - least of all a terrible sinner like me.

* Note that the Spirit convicts of those very truths which are described above as essential knowledge.

□ It is this work of the Holy Spirit which changes mere intellectual knowledge into experiential knowledge - something more precious than gold, having burnt itself into a heart searching for meaning, certainty and salvation.

FAITH IS TRUST

□ *Trust is at the heart of saving faith; in fact, there is no salvation without it.*

* Trust and assurance of salvation should not be confused. Although the latter ought to accompany true faith, some Christians do to a greater or lesser

extent experience periods of doubt. This is a 'pastoral malady', but it is also true that the strength of faith essentially lies in weakness and dependence. In fact, a faith which never doubts, is to be regarded with suspicion. What is more, seasons of doubt often prepare the believer for an even deeper appreciation of, and gratitude for, God's sovereign grace in Christ - when ultimately the sunshine of the Spirit's assurance breaks through again.

❑ It is possible for counterfeit faith to have knowledge. Even demons have it (James 2:19). It may even have some conviction - as in the case of Saul (1 Sam 15:24), Judas Iscariot (Matt 27:3-4), and Felix (Acts 24:25). But Spirit-wrought conviction always goes over into trust. It cannot 'remain at the gates - it must go on board!'

❑ In Matt 5:3 the Lord Jesus says that poverty of spirit (Greek: being a spiritual beggar) is the threshold-condition for entering His Kingdom. This is the case when someone comes before the living God in a state of total spiritual bankruptcy, knowing that his pathetic efforts at scraping together sufficient merit in order to meet God's perfect standards are not only useless, but presumptuous.

The trust, which is at the heart of true faith, accepts Jesus Christ from

such a position of spiritual bankruptcy (John 1:12-13), embraces the offer of the Gospel, and rests completely in the Mediator's work on the sinner's behalf.

❑ In his Gospel, John consistently makes use of a unique construction to emphasize how profound this trusting faith is. Literally he speaks of believing 'into' Christ. It is, as it were, an action which takes the sinner out of himself and out of Adam - and implants him into Christ.

❑ Trusting Christ is to hang onto Him - like a drowning man clings to a buoy, like a mountaineer swings from a single steel pin. It is nailing your eyes on the 'bronze snake' (Num 21:4-9; John 3:1-15). True faith is *dependent trust!*

* Nobody has ever expressed it better than Toplady: *'Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to Thy cross I cling; naked, come to Thee for dress; helpless, look to Thee for grace; foul, I to the fountain fly; wash me, Saviour, or I die!'*

❑ Surely then, a faith such as this, which truly understands and appropriates the Saviour and His work, cannot but be the fountainhead of lifelong devotion and obedience. To teach that someone can accept Jesus Christ as Saviour, yet not serve

Him as Lord, is nothing short of heresy.

❑ Do you have true faith? Are your eyes fixed on Jesus Christ, the author and Perfecter of your faith (Heb 12:2)? Do you look at Him again and again, day after day, without getting tired? Is He your only comfort, in life and in death? Will His Name be on your lips when you die?

'But my faith is so pathetically weak and wavering', you say.

There is a world of difference between weak faith and false faith. The Lord has promised that He will never break a 'bruised reed', or snuff out the 'smouldering wick' (Matt 12:20). His promises do not apply to strong faith, but to *real* faith. *Wweak faith need do nothing more than look.* Not the faith, but the Redeemer must be strong - and that He is, without a doubt!

Oh, wonder of wonders, the strength of true faith lies in its very weakness, its dependence, its bankruptcy (2 Cor 12:9-10)!

This then is the Gospel: *'Look, look, keep on looking - and be saved!'*

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PUBLISHERS

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P.O. Box 263435, Three Rivers, 1935, South Africa

Tel: +27 (0)16 423 3639 or +27 (0)16 423 3391; Fax: +27 (0)16 454 0387

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Antipas Reformed Baptist Church (in the Vaal Triangle, South Africa)

P.O. Box 263435, Three Rivers, 1935, South Africa

Tel: +27 (0)16 423 3639; Fax: +27 (0)16 454 0387

and

Antipas Reformed Baptist Church (in Pretoria, South Africa)

P.O. Box 12371, Queenswood, 0121, South Africa

Tel & Fax: +27 (0)12 329 3012

Nico van der Walt is a congregational pastor and teacher in Pretoria. He subscribes to the historically respected and internationally recognised 1689 Baptist Confession - like most Reformed Baptists worldwide.

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