

'Faith' Unworthy of the Name

By

James W. Andrews

Believing in Christ. . . following Christ. . . it's the same difference. Faith says, "I will follow Jesus." Following says, "I believe in Jesus." Two sides of the same coin. Faith in Christ follows after Christ. Like milk with 2 percent fat, 'two percent disciple' or 'believer' is a contradiction in terms. Ninety eight percent short of reality and 100 percent certain to hear those fateful words: "Depart from Me. I never knew you."

Living faith. . . real faith. . . the faith that saves is a blue collar faith. It is a faith that shows up in work clothes. Dead faith, the kind James talks about, just talks. Living faith walks the talk. Jesus Himself said it: "My sheep hear My voice and they *follow* Me." (John 10). Sheep that don't follow aren't His flock. They don't follow Him because at bottom they don't really trust in Him. Believers follow and followers believe.

Are we suggesting salvation based on faith *plus* performance? No way. We *are* saying the reality of faith is tested or verified by performance (following Christ). Real faith is a faith that works. . . a faith that responds to Christ the Lord. . . a faith that is alive to the Spirit and operates through love.

Now neither Christian faith nor following is a sin-free zone. Believers are not immune from failure. Just like babies, disciples must grow in understanding and develop strength of faith. Spiritual adulthood comes in a process. Maturity in Christ takes time, belief in Christ never takes a rain check from obedience.

Nevertheless in all believers reflexes of the old life remain. In Jesus' original disciples, don't we see stubborn, residual prejudices and blind spots that were slow to give way to the light of Christ? So in all of us, the desires of the Spirit are opposed by a constant undertow and static interference from the flesh. Yes, in combat our courage can blink. Our flesh may get the best of us. Our faith can falter in the trenches. Yet a truly believing heart remains steadfast and unconditional in its purpose to please Christ. A honest-to-God believer wants to follow Jesus even unto death. And we are ashamed to death whenever our follow-through proves weaker than our good intentions.

Let there be no misunderstanding about implications here. Salvation is by grace through faith---and faith alone. We cannot earn salvation. We cannot even contribute to it. Not by meritorious performance. Not by rite nor ceremony nor sacrament. Not by affiliation with some religious institution. Salvation is "by grace through faith. . . not by works." (Ephesians 2:8-10)

The only question is, what qualifies as *saving* faith. It is one thing to profess faith; it is another to possess it. The thought of false or counterfeit faith should surprise no one familiar with the NT. There we are told, for example, of false brethren, false prophets and false apostles. In John 6 some of Jesus' 'disciples' got fed up and embarrassed with his hard sayings. So they split. They walked no more with Him. Remember the parable of the sower where Jesus describes rootless and fruitless faith. Both pretenders. James (chapter 2) speaks of dead faith. On one occasion John (2) tells us Jesus refused to acknowledge the belief of some in Jerusalem. Why? He saw right through it. It was bogus. In a similar way the Lord challenged (and unmasked) the unbelief of some Jews who, impressed with his many miracles, had ostensibly believed in

Him---until He crossed swords with their prejudices. (John 8:31) In fact, Jesus warns that at the judgment the faith of some so-called ‘Christian workers’ will be exposed as a fraud. Despite their boast of performing miracles and casting out demons in His name, their godless works will show them up for the unbelievers they really were all along.

What I am trying to get across is the truth that (real) believers and (true) disciples are one and the same thing, not two different stages of Christian maturity. I am contradicting the (I think) heretical notion all too engrained in some Christian circles (including the one in which I myself was reared) that (real) believers are what one might call ‘entry level’ (or generic or so-called carnal Christians) whereas (true) disciples of Christ are those who have gone to the next level, have pulled out the stops, decided to follow Jesus and walk after the Spirit.

Such a distinction, I contend, flies wildly in the face of NT theology. One passage upon which it is based (1 Corinthians 3) is taken out of context and misapplied to believers *in general* whereas Paul is discussing the testing of teachers in particular for the quality of their workmanship upon the foundation (Christ) of the Church.

I am also saying that the widely held idea that Jesus Christ can be received in two installments, first as Savior and subsequently as Lord, is something that would have blown the minds the Apostles. One cannot separate the Savior from the Lord! Those offices are bound up together like hands and fingers.

Yes, it is quite true that whenever one receives Christ the Lord, the new believer rarely, if ever, grasps all the ramifications of that relationship. On the other hand, how often do new believers fully comprehend the whole orbit of Christ as Redeemer? We are not saying that whenever one comes to Christ, one must instantly understand and consent

to the full scope of the demands implicit in His Lordship. Certainly not. But I am insisting that if one does understand what the Lord expects of a believer yet *rejects* or *refuses* the authority of the *Lord* Jesus Christ---that person is not a believer, but a pretender. That person is not a newborn, but is stillborn. That ‘faith’ is half-baked. As ‘faith’ it is as fatally defective as that of those who recognized Jesus as a prophet of God, but in the last analysis failed to receive Him as the promised Messiah. It is equally irrational to imagine one can receive the Lord as one’s personal Savior and dump Him as one’s personal Sovereign. That is rather like attempting to own my father as my guardian and provider while rejecting him as my parent.

The point I am making is in principle not unlike the issue of the Virgin Birth. Does one have to positively believe in the Virgin Birth to become a Christian? Of course not. But if one knows what the Bible teaches and understands its theological implications, then to deny it would indicate by implication a critical core of unbelief. So it is with sovereignty of Christ over our Christian lives. In his seedling faith a new Christian may not get the whole picture immediately, for the Spirit of God has a patient way of breaking things to us pabulum-like, as we are better able to digest them.

What I am disputing here is the notion that one can look Christ as Lord right in the eye, understand His claims and expectations of us as disciples, but deliberately reject them and still imagine he can credibly call himself a believer just because he took the “free gift” offer. Well, it doesn’t work that way. It’s a package deal. Lord and Savior are bound up inextricably together.

I am saying that narrow gauge ‘faith’, that confined-to-one-thing ‘faith’ that says (to put it in its crassest form), “Look, I took Him only as Savior. That was the bargain.

All I want is a fire insurance policy, you know, ticket to Heaven and a pass out of Hell. That is as far as it goes. Down here I want to live my own life and do my own thing; maybe later I will consider the next step, taking Him as Lord of my life,” is as hollow as a chocolate Easter bunny.

Many Christians actually believe one can do just that. In fact many claim to have done just that and later came around (so they profess) to receiving Christ as Lord ten, twenty or thirty years after their ostensible conversion experience. That notion is a gross caricature of the faith Christ called men to place in Him.

Let’s not misunderstand what I am saying. Yes, grasping the scope and cost of discipleship takes a maturing process. Believers have to crawl before they can walk and walk before they can run. We grow into our adult Christian clothes. The Christian life or discipleship admits of development. It also admits of the potential for disease, just as the physical life. Growing up we all fell and stumbled around some.

Disciples, because we are still in the flesh, beset by all its weakness and appetites, infected with cultural influences, and constantly leveraged by the Tempter, we do not always see things as we ought. We do not always make the right choices. We do not always think in a godly fashion. We do not always walk in a straight line behind the Lord. Sometimes like a child who needs more discipline we balk at where he is leading. His rod and His staff may comfort me, but my flesh will always oppose me.

Yet this remains true, if I am truly His, if I truly trust in Him: I love Him, I want to serve Him, I want to follow Him more perfectly, I want to grow in the grace and knowledge of my Lord and I am honestly trying to be what I ought to be and do what He wants me to do. When I sin, it grieves and distresses me. When I fail Him, like Peter, I

am ashamed and hate myself. I am never happier than when I do what pleases Him and never more miserable than when I give into the flesh rather than the Spirit. I love good and hate evil and, though I am as big a coward as the next guy, I would count it a privilege to die for Christ and a still greater honor to live for Him in such a way as to hear Him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Spiritual development, we know, is not a straight line upward. Like a graph, it is a lot of jagged lines, some spikes sharply upward, some downward, some level spots, but the pattern from the starting point toward the goal is upward. If we truly trust in Christ for all that He is (again, we do not trust Him selectively or piecemeal), then we naturally and logically follow Him where He leads.

If we don't, we're hypocrites. Hypocrites claim they trust in Him. But whenever push comes to shove and the issues are put to them, they pull their punches and say, "Oh, I don't think so. Too risky (or too much pain or too costly or too humiliating or some such thing)." That mentality marks so much of contemporary American 'Christianity' it is scary. Call it Christianity Lite. Call it Wal-Mart Christianity. McChristianity. Costless, bloodless Christianity. So disgustingly American. Have-A-Free-Pass-to-Heaven-and-A-Painless-Trip-in-the-World version of Christianity. Just call it bogus Christianity, or 'another Gospel'. Because that is what the Lord is going to call it on the last day.

If however we really are Christians, truly regenerated and authentic children of God, the Spirit of God grows and matures us so that in time we take on real Christian character, walk in the light and pay the price for being different.

If what we call ‘faith’ does not materialize into following Christ (or discipleship), then it’s a religious game of ‘let’s pretend’. Jesus and the apostles made it so abundantly clear that real believers are real followers that it baffles me that there could be any question about this.

To say to Christ, “I will take you as my Savior, but I refuse to follow you there or to serve you here” or to say to Him, “I will gratefully accept the life you laid down for me, but don’t expect me to give mine back in return or be ruled by you,” well, that’s appalling on the face of it. Such people are like Simon Magnus, “still in the bonds of iniquity.” Yet, to all intents and purposes, that is the perverted version of the ‘Gospel’ that has passed and still is passing for evangelical in many churches to this hour. It is a scandal. It is that impostor of Christian faith we call ‘easy believism’. It cheapens grace beyond words.

As the late Charlie Finley, erstwhile owner of the Oakland Athletic baseball team, once responded dismissively when asked by reporters whether or not a rumored buyer of his club would come through,

“Big hat, no cattle.”

A lot of Christian profession is that way, big hat, no cattle. Christian faith comes with walking shoes, not just talking heads. As Bishop J.C. Ryle has said, everyone God justifies, He also sanctifies [in the sense of bringing about practical holiness in them]. See Hebrews 12:14. A ‘faith’ that fails to follow is as hollow as a con artist’s promises.