

XXXV.

Faith and Knowledge.

“He that believeth in the Son hath everlasting life; and he that believeth not the Son shall not see Life.”—*John iii. 36.*

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In the discussion of saving faith, faith in general can not afford us the least assistance. To understand what “faith” is, we must turn in an entirely different direction, and answer the question: “What is, among the nations, the universal root-idea and original significance of faith?”

And then we meet this singular phenomenon, that among all nations and at all times faith is an expression denoting at one time something *uncertain*, and at another something *very certain*.

It may be said: “I believe that the clock struck three, but I am not certain”; or, “I believe that his initials are H. T., but I am not certain”; or, “I believe that you can take a ticket directly for St. Petersburg, but it would be well first to inquire.” In every one of these sentences, which can be translated literally in every cultivated language, “to believe” signifies a mere guess, something less than actual knowledge, a confession of *uncertainty*.

But when I say, “I believe in the forgiveness of sin”; or, “I believe in the immortality of the soul”; or lastly, “I believe in the unquestionable integrity of that statesman”; “to believe” does not imply doubt or uncertainty about these things, but signifies *strongest conviction* concerning them.

From which it follows, that every definition of the being of faith must be wrong which does not explain how, from one and the same root-idea, there can be derived a twofold, diametrically opposed use of the same word.

Of this difficulty there can be but one solution, viz., the difference in the *nature of the things* in regard to which certainty is desired; so that, with reference to one class of things, highest certainty is obtained by faith, and, with reference to another, it is not.

This difference arises from the fact that there are things *visible* and *invisible*, and that certainty regarding things visible is obtained by *knowledge* and not by faith; while certainty in regard to things *invisible* is obtained exclusively by *faith*. When a man says regarding visible things, “I believe,” and not, “I know,” he impresses us as being *uncertain*; but in saying regarding invisible things, “I believe,” he gives us the idea of *certainty*.

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It should be observed here that the expressions “visible” and “invisible” must not be taken in too narrow a sense; by things visible must be understood all things that can be perceived by the senses, as in Scripture; and by things invisible, the things that can not be so perceived. Wherefore the things that pertain to the hidden life of a *person* must ultimately rest on faith. His deeds alone belong to the visible things. Certainty in regard to these can be obtained by the perception of the senses. But certainty regarding his inward personality,

his thoughts, his affections and their sincerity, his character and its trustworthiness, and anything pertaining to his inward life, certainty regarding all these can be reached *by faith* only.

If we were to enter more deeply into this matter, we should maintain that all *certainty*, even regarding things *visible*, rests always and only upon faith; and we should lay down the following propositions: When you say that you saw a man in the water and heard him cry for help, your knowledge rests, *first*, upon your belief that you did not dream but was wide awake, and that you did not imagine but actually saw it; *second*, upon your firm belief that since you saw and heard something there must be a corresponding reality which occasions that seeing and hearing; *third*, upon your conviction that in seeing something, *e.g.*, the form of a man, your senses enable you to obtain a correct impression of that form.

And, proceeding in this way, we could demonstrate that in the end, all certainty in regard to things visible, as well as to things invisible, rests ultimately not upon perception, but upon faith. It is impossible for my ego to obtain any knowledge of things outside of myself without a certain bond of faith, which unites me to these things. I must always believe either in my own identity, that is, that I am myself; or in the clearness of my consciousness; or in the perception of my senses; or in the actuality of the things outside of myself; or in the axiomatica from which I, proceed.

Hence it can be stated, without the slightest exaggeration, that no man can ever say, “*I know this or that,*” without its being possible to prove to him that his knowledge, in a deeper sense and upon closer analysis, depends, so far as its certainty is concerned, upon *faith* alone.

But we prefer not to consider this deeper conception of the matter, because it confuses rather than explains the being of faith; for it should be remembered that in Sacred Scripture the Holy Spirit always uses words as they occur in the ordinary speech of daily life, simply because otherwise the children of the Kingdom could not understand them. And, in the daily life, people do not make that closer distinction, but say, in the case of love referred to: “*I know* that there is a man in the water, for I saw his head and I heard him cry.” While, on the other hand, it is said, in the ordinary speech of daily life: “If you do not *believe* me, I can not talk with you”; indicating the fact that, in regard to a *person*, faith is the only means by which certainty can be obtained.

And, keeping this in view, we shall, for the sake of clearness, present the matter in this way: that the Lord God has created man in such a way that he can obtain knowledge of two worlds, of the world of visible things, and of that of invisible things; but so that he obtains such knowledge concerning each in a special and peculiar manner. He obtains knowledge of the world of *visible things* by means of the senses, which are instruments designed to

bring his mind into contact with the outside world. But the senses teach him nothing concerning the world of invisible things, for which he needs altogether different organs.

We have no names for these other organs, as we have for the five senses; yet we know that from that invisible world we receive impressions, sensations, emotions; we know perfectly well that these mutually differ in duration, depth, and power; and we also know that some of these affect us as real and others as unreal. In fact the invisible world, as well as the visible world, exerts influences upon us; not through the five senses, but by means of unnamable organs. This influence from the invisible world affects the soul, the consciousness, the innermost ego. This working makes impressions upon the soul, excites sensations in the consciousness, and causes emotions in the inward ego.

This is done, however, in such a way that there is always room for the question: "Are these impressions real? Can I trust these sensations? Is there a reality corresponding to these sensations, impressions, emotions?" And to this last question faith alone can answer "yes," in precisely the same manner as the question, whether I obtain certainty from my own consciousness and from my senses and from the axiomata, receives its "yes" exclusively and only by faith.

To obtain certainty regarding the things invisible, such as love, faithfulness, righteousness, and holiness, the mystic body of the Lord—in a word, regarding all things that pertain to the mystery of the *personal life* in my fellowmen, in Immanuel, in the Lord our God, *faith* is the proper and only divinely ordained way; not as something *inferior* to knowledge, but equal to it, only much more certain, and from which all knowledge derives its certainty.

As regards the objection, that the Sacred Scripture declares that faith shall be turned into sight, we say that this "sight" has nothing in common with the sight by means of the senses. God sees and knows all things, and yet He does not possess any of the senses: His sight is an immediate act of penetration, with His Spirit, into the essence and consistence of all things. To Adam in Paradise something of this immediate wisdom and knowledge was imparted; but by sin he lost that glorious feature of the image of God. And Scripture promises that this glorious feature shall be restored to God's children, in the Kingdom of Glory, in much more glorious measure than in Paradise.

But, while we still sojourn as pilgrims, not yet possessing the glorified body any more than the glory of our inward status, our contact with the invisible world does not yet consist in sight; our mind still lacks the power to penetrate immediately into the things invisible; and we still depend upon the impressions and sensations produced by them. Wherefore we can have no certainty regarding these impressions and sensations, except by direct faith. Still, existing and living as pilgrims together, we believe in each other's love, good faith, and honesty of character; we believe in God the Father, in our Savior, and in the Holy Spirit; we believe in the Holy Catholic Church; we believe in the forgiveness of sin, the resurrection

of the body, and the life everlasting. And we do not believe in all these with the secret afterthought that we would really prefer to *know* them, instead of *believing* them; for that would be just as absurd as to say, of an organ concert: "Really I would prefer to *see* this." Music can not be seen any more than one can become conscious of things invisible by means of the senses. And as the *sense of hearing* is the only proper means of hearing and enjoying music, so *faith* is the peculiar and only means whereby certainty can be obtained regarding our contact with the world unseen and invisible.

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This being thoroughly understood, it can not be difficult to see that this faith in reference to things visible is far inferior to knowledge; for the visible things are intended to be ascertained, carefully and accurately, by means of the senses. Imperfect observation renders our knowledge uncertain. Hence, in regard to the visible things, no other knowledge than that obtained by the senses ought to be considered reliable.

But in a number of unimportant cases accurate knowledge is needless; *e.g.*, in the difference concerning the respective heights of two steeples. In such cases we use the word "believe," as, "I believe that this steeple is higher than the other." And again, visible things impress their image upon the memory, which in the course of years becomes dim. Meeting a gentleman I have seen before, and fully recognizing him, I say, "This is Mr. B.;" but being uncertain, I say, "I *believe* that this is Mr. B." In this case we seem to be dealing with visible things, for a gentleman stands before us; yet the image which recalls him belongs to the inward contents of the memory. Hence the difference of speech.

We reach, therefore, this conclusion:

First, that all certainty regarding things visible as well as invisible depends in the deepest sense upon *faith*.

Second, that in ordinary speech certainty regarding things visible is obtained by means of the *senses*, and regarding things invisible, especially things that pertain to personality, by *believing*.

For this reason Brakel's effort to interpret the verb *to believe*, according to the Hebrew and Greek idioms, as meaning *to trust*, and not as *a means to obtain certainty*, was a failure. Such meanings are the same in all languages, and there is no difference, because they are the direct result of the organism of the human mind, which, in its fundamental features, is the same among all nations. Confidence is the direct result of faith, but is not faith itself.

"To believe" refers, in the first place, to the certainty or uncertainty of the consciousness concerning something. If there is no such certainty, I do not believe; being consciously certain, I believe. When a person introduces himself to me as a man of integrity, the first question is, whether I believe him. If I am not certain that he is a man of integrity, I do not believe him. But if I believe him, confidence is the immediate result. Then it is impossible

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not to trust him. To believe that he is what he claims to be, and not trust him, is simply impossible.

Hence “to believe” always retains the primary meaning of “*assuring the consciousness*”; and saving faith requires me “*to be certain* that Christ is to me such as *He reveals and offers Himself* in Sacred Scripture.”

XXXVI.

Brakel and Comrie.²⁴

“If in anything ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you.”
—*Phil. iii. 15.*



We call the attention of our readers to the two lines which in the last century were most correctly drawn by Brakel and Comrie respectively; and we do not deny that of the two, Comrie was the more correct.

This is not intended to hurt the friends of Brakel, for then we should wound ourselves. However, altho the name of “Father Brakel” is still precious to us; altho we appreciate his courageous protesting against church tyranny, and heartily acknowledge our indebtedness to his excellent writings; yet this does not render him infallible, neither does it alter the fact that in the matter of faith Comrie judged more correctly than he.

To do justice to both men, we will cite their respective arguments, and then show that Comrie, who did not always see correctly either, was more strictly Scriptural, and therefore more strictly Reformed, than Brakel.

In the chapter on Faith (“Rational Religion,” ii., 776, ed. 1757), Brakel writes:

24 Brakel and Comrie were celebrated Dutch theologians in the eighteenth century.— Trans.