

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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What Is Faith?

John W. Robbins

Long before neo-orthodox theologians thought of saying that faith is an encounter with a divine person rather than assent to a proposition, preachers who ought to have known better taught that faith is trust in a person, not belief in a creed. This writer, when a teenager, was told that some people would miss Heaven by twelve inches—the distance between the head and the heart—because they believed the Gospel with their heads but not with their hearts. Today it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it is to find a minister—a conservative minister—who does not believe and teach that one must have a "personal relationship" with Christ in order to be saved. But what that "personal relationship" consists of is either not made explicit or, when made explicit, contradicts what the Bible teaches about saving faith. The result is that non-Christians are either needlessly confused or deliberately misled. Perhaps the world is not responding to our message because we have garbled the message. Neither we, nor they, know exactly what to do to have eternal life.

Statements such as these about the head and the heart and trusting a person, not believing a creed, are not only false, they have created the conditions for the emergence of all sorts of religious subjectivism, from modernism to the charismatic movement and beyond. No one will miss Heaven by twelve inches, for there is no distance between the head and the heart: "As a man thinks in his heart, so is he." The head/heart contrast is a figment of

modern secular psychology, not a doctrine of divine revelation. St. Sigmund, not St. John, controls the pulpit in all too many churches.

Further, "trust in a person" is a meaningless phrase unless it means assenting to certain propositions about a person, propositions such as "I believe in God the Father Almighty...and in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into Heaven, and sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead." Trust in Christ, unless it means belief of these propositions, is totally without value. "Christ" *means* these propositions—and a lot more, to be sure, but at least these. No one who trusts in the Christs of Barth, Brunner, Renan, or Tillich will be saved.

As for having a "personal relationship" with Christ, if the phrase means something more than assenting to true propositions about Jesus, what is that something more? Feeling warm inside? Coffee has the same effect. Surely "personal relationship" does not mean what we mean when we say that we know someone personally: Perhaps we have shaken his hand, visited his home or he ours, or eaten with him. John had a "personal relationship" with Christ in that sense, as did all the disciples, including Judas Iscariot. But millions of Christians have not, and Jesus called them blessed: They have not seen

and yet have believed. The difference between Judas Iscariot and the other disciples is not that they had a "personal relationship" with Jesus and he did not, but that they believed—that is, assented to certain propositions about Jesus—while Judas did not believe those propositions. Belief of the truth, nothing more and nothing less, is what separates the saved from the damned. Those who maintain that there is something more than belief are, quite literally, beyond belief.

In the pages that follow [in *Faith and Saving Faith*], Dr. Clark defends the view that faith is assent to a proposition, and that saving faith is assent to propositions found in the Bible. Saving faith is neither an indescribable encounter with a divine person, nor heart knowledge as opposed to head knowledge. According to the author of *Hebrews*, those who come to God must believe at least two propositions: that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him. Mindless encounters and meaningless relationships are not saving faith. Truth is propositional, and one is saved and sanctified only through believing true statements. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God.

The anti-intellectual cast of virtually all modern thought, from the university chair to the barroom stool, controls the pulpits as well. It is this pious anti-intellectualism that emphasizes encounter rather than information, emotion instead of understanding, "personal relationship" rather than knowledge. But Christians, Paul wrote, have the mind of Christ. Our relationship to him is intellectual. And since Christ *is* his mind and we are ours, no relationship could be more intimate than that. That is precisely why the Scriptures use the analogy of marriage to illustrate the intellectual relationship between Christians and Christ.

This recognition of the primacy of the intellect, the primacy of truth, is totally missing from contemporary theology. Fifty years ago, one of this century's greatest theologians and writers, J. Gresham Machen, wrote a book entitled *What Is Faith?* His words are as appropriate today as they were then:

This anti-intellectual tendency in the modern world is no trifling thing; it has its roots deep in the entire philosophical development of modern times. Modern philosophy... has had as its dominant note, certainly as its present day result, a depreciation of the reason and a skeptical answer to Pilate's question, "What is truth?" This attack upon the intellect has been conducted by men of marked intellectual power; but an attack it has been all the same. And at last theological results of it, even in the sphere of practice, are beginning to appear. A marked characteristic of the present day is a lamentable intellectual decline, which has appeared in all fields of human endeavor except those that deal with purely material things. The intellect has been browbeaten so long in theory that one cannot be surprised if it is now ceasing to function in practice

As over against this anti-intellectual tendency in the modern world, it will be one chief purpose of the present little book to defend the primacy of the intellect, and in particular to try to break down the false and disastrous opposition which has been set up between knowledge and faith.

That, too, is a chief purpose of this little book [*Faith and Saving Faith*]. The following pages argue that it is rational to believe what God says; it is irrational to disbelieve God. No argument is more urgently needed than that.

Book Review

A Short History of the Early Church

A retired missionary of the Christian Reformed Church's Nigerian work, Dr. Harry R. Boer, has gathered together some of the more important strains of ancient ecclesiastical history into a brief and rather readable book. Much of the material was apparently used in instructing African theological

students originally, but as it stands the book is obviously designed to reach as wide a circle of relatively untaught people as possible. As one who has taught church history to an American adult Sunday school class and a Chinese undergraduate class, I read the book with great interest, especially since I am engaged in editing the initial Chinese translation.

Boer's language is crisp, clear, and concise, and his style possesses none of the dry pedanticism that all too often mars much historical writing of *any* kind. In these respects, the English original is really a rather attractive book. In chronology and recitation of the major controversies of the first six Christian centuries, there are no major flaws, and the reader with little background will be able to piece together the flow of events with little difficulty. Yet there are quite a few points which forbid an enthusiastic endorsement of the work, especially as an aid to the informal discussion group or textbook for a non-seminary class.

First of all, in view of the increasing Jewish-Christian dialogue (theological and evangelistic), Boer's section on the Jewish background of Christianity is quite inadequate, and contents itself with a number of clichés which may have made sense in Harnack's time but which really fail to come to grips with how Judaism actually developed, Judaism's influence on Christianity, and the real conflict between Church and Synagogue. For instance, Boer states (6) that the Pharisees "disappeared from the scene with the destruction of the Jewish state." In fact, the Pharisees were the foundation of the Rabbinic Judaism that nurtured Jewish existence throughout the centuries of Diaspora. The Pharisees disappeared only in the sense that there was no longer any Sadduceean rival left for them to contrast themselves with after the destruction of the Second Temple. They lived on, however, wherever the tradition crystallized in the Talmud lived. This is important, for many well-intentioned Christian witnesses to the Jewish people cause great offense when they say something like, "Jesus was against the Pharisees, not necessarily all Jewish people," for to most modern Jews, the Pharisees were their remote spiritual and physical ancestors. This is not to minimize the very real

errors of Pharisaism's autosoterism, but rather to express a wish that Dr. Boer could have given us a little more practical help in understanding and witnessing to our Jewish neighbors.

Similarly, to characterize Christianity's conflict with Pharisaism as "spiritual attitudes" versus adherence to "outward observance of the law" really misses the point, even though this feeling has a long and too-well respected history in Christendom. A perusal of *Pirquei Avoth*, to cite one example of the voluminous Rabbinic literature available to us, will reveal that the fathers of Rabbinic Judaism stressed such "inward" virtues as humility, charity, and laboring without thought to rewards as surely as the New Testament. What, then, is the real controversy between Rabbinic Judaism and Christian Faith?

Apart from covering the Messiahship of Jesus, a good place to start would be Christ's accusation that the Scribes and Pharisees made the law of none effect through the multiplication of man-made traditions. In the light of Paul's teaching in *Colossians* 2:16, much could be said about the well intentioned but thoroughly misguided attempt not only of ancient Jews but modern Christians as well to transcend God's standard of holiness. How often do modern Christians think of a "holy person" as one who neither smokes nor drinks, attends no films, and attends meetings thrice weekly, who nonetheless is lacking in justice, mercy, and kindness! Perhaps by analyzing the motives of both Pharisaism and certain kinds of "evangelical traditionalism" we might find a common tendency to autosoterism in both, and an unwillingness to seek justification of the sinner in Christ alone.

Again, Boer sees Diaspora Judaism as "more liberal" than Palestinian, and hence more receptive to the Gospel and better suited to serve as its forerunner. While there is no doubt that the Diaspora was a providential preparation for the spread of Christianity, is it correct to see it as "more liberal?" It would probably be better to say that any "diaspora" is better suited to dealing with outsiders than "the folks back home," rather than characterize it as "more liberal." This is true of Chinese and other dispersed people. By its very nature, a diaspora community must adapt to "them" or die.

Yet what the clichés of Liberal Diaspora/Conservative Palestine fails to take into account is the fact that much of the Pharisaic tradition grew up in Babylon rather than in Palestine, and that Saul of Tarsus, before his conversion, was no less rigid for his having hailed from the Diaspora. Moreover, the *am-ha'aretz*, the People of the Land, who figure in Rabbinic literature as frequently lax in their observance of the Torah were a Palestinian phenomenon.

In dealing with Judaism, Boer's work is admittedly intended to be brief, but his acceptance of such outworn clichés as those enumerated above can only encourage Christian complacency and self-righteousness in facing the Jewish people and certain tendencies perennially apparent in Christendom itself. There is indeed a chasm that has existed and grown since late Roman times between the church and Jewry, yet failure to at least build an adequate telescope to look across it has been bad for the church; and Boer does not add anything that will remedy the situation.

More serious, though, is his willingness to state that the various ancient heresies "died" somewhere in the Eastern Mediterranean world sometime in the ancient past. But as anyone who has sought to instruct people in the doctrine of the Trinity can testify, Modalism, Arianism, Adoptionism, Nestorianism, and Monophysitism are all alive and well and living in Evangelicaldom—even though they may lack an organized expression. In all fairness to Dr. Boer, he does make concise and accurate statements as to why the orthodox Church opposed these ancient heresies, and what some of the issues at stake were. Yet it would have been a valuable service if Arianism's similarities to modern Watchtowerism and Modalism's similarity to the common "simple person's" reinterpretation of the Trinity were exposed rather than suggesting that these heresies died out between the pincers of Byzantine political persecution and Islamic conquest.

The doctrine of the Trinity is not an easy concept to grasp, and even leaving out all the sophomoric atheists who see it as a vestige of Hellenistic polytheism, it is very widely misunderstood.

Moreover, it is a live theological question everywhere the Gospel has gone, even when some church pretends to be "non-theological." For exposing people to what the Trinity really is there are few opportunities as golden as a church history class. By focusing on the errors of the Arians, semi-Arians, Nestorians, Monophysites, and Monothelites—and what was truly at stake in their omissions—people will be challenged to reassess their own view of God, and the true relationship of the three persons will stand out more clearly. Today, the proliferation of such sects as the Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and "Jesus Only" Pentecostals—as well as the prevailing theological illiteracy of "orthodox" congregations make it certain that the average person whom the pastor or adult teacher deals with will not have an adequate understanding of Trinitarianism. The proliferation of pop quasi-history which purports to give "the real facts" about the origins of Christianity also demands that responsible students of church history be ready to give both adequate and accurate descriptions of what the orthodox faith truly is and is not.

Finally, Boer's book is flawed by his dependence on Harnack in interpreting the New Testament as ecclesiastical history. He is too much of an evangelical to fall for the crude "Jerusalem/Petrine Christianity thesis, Pauline/Gentile Christianity antithesis, Second-century Lukan synthesis reconstruction, but he does accept the liberal chestnut that the relationship between Paul and the Jerusalem/Jewish Church was fundamentally mistrustful, if not hostile. As an ostensibly Reformed scholar, Boer would have served his constituency better had he relied more on J. Gresham Machen's *The Origin of Paul's Religion*, where the fundamental agreement of the Jerusalem apostles with Paul is stressed in Paul's struggle with the Judaizers. This fits the evidence of *Acts* 15 and *Galatians* much more closely.

One is tempted to speculate that this recasting of a liberal theory for the consumption of a conservative readership is probably related more to Boer's dissatisfaction with the current state of the Reformed churches than it is to an honest reliance on one of a very few resources available to a

missionary in the field. In his *Short History*, the Jerusalem Church tends to come off as hidebound, ethnocentric, unable to develop an adequate missionary thrust, and unsympathetic to new theological currents where the Spirit is really at work. It is possible that in this case, Boer is not talking about Hebrew ecclesiastics in first-century Palestine but Dutch-American ecclesiastics in twentieth-century Michigan and Iowa, or at least his conception of them.

Of course, a hallowed theological tradition can never be made so hallowed that it is above criticism. If the Reformed community is made to reflect on its shortcomings through a reading of Boer's book, it will have performed a valuable service. But, getting back to ancient history, is Boer warranted in saying that the hidebound Hebrews of the Jerusalem Church failed? We can answer affirmatively only if we accept the older liberal hypothesis that Palestinian Christianity was somehow a rival that "lost out" to Pauline Christianity. But does the New Testament demand that we see Paul and Peter as rivals? The consensus of conservative opinion is a resounding negative. Perhaps we might say that it is more accurate to describe Jerusalem as viewing Paul more as a co-worker abroad than as a rival. If this is so, then the ancient church of Jerusalem succeeded admirably in bringing the nations to the light of the Holy One of Israel.

Occasionally, bits of questionable theology occur as well. Rather than stating that the Bible is unashamed of God's being the Creator of the visible universe (and everything else as well), Boer states that against the Greek philosophers, the Bible teaches that God created the world out of matter (12). Perhaps this is a slip of the pen. Perhaps it is a sop to the modern cult of science that deifies matter by ascribing eternity to it. He also states that John taught the possibility of a sinless life (39), yet recognizes as well that *I John* 1:8 would seem to contradict this. Perhaps this is due to writing in a hurry, perhaps it is due to a desire to demonstrate that nobody can appeal to a consistent Bible. Either way, it introduces a note of confusion into the book.

Perhaps, in light of Dr. Boer's association with *Reformed Journal*, which represents the more

liberal wing of the Christian Reformed Church, part of Boer's reason for writing may have been to enter a plea for the rebels. He does seem to sympathize with Paul against Jerusalem, and to delight in pointing out that time elapsed between Pentecost and the ordaining of ecclesiastical officers (what a painful kick to the Presbyterian posterior). This tends to give parts of the book a lively, polemical cast. But at the same time, one is tempted to ask if the *early* institution of offices might not suggest that Christian fellowship was never intended to be completely free, unstructured, and open.

A well educated (theologically, that is) instructor might be able to find the book serviceable as an aid to a study group or adult class by offering appropriate criticisms in the right places. Certainly Boer's desire to make Church history intelligible to modern believers is a commendable one, and we should recognize his as an attempt to bridge the gap between the earliest Christians and the modern evangelical congregation. Yet the publication of a work that will truly fill this glaring gap in Christian education still seems to await another day. —Peter Herz

Religion in the News

STOCKTON, Calif.—A minister shot and critically wounded a deacon who disliked his sermon, police said yesterday. Oscar McAlister, 54, interrupted Sunday morning's sermon to tell the Rev. Murphy Lee Paskell he was "getting out of hand," said Police Sgt. James Singer. After the service, Paskell, the pastor of New Testament Baptist Church here, pulled a .25-caliber revolver and shot McAlister four times, Singer said.

McAlister was reported in critical condition at St. Joseph's Hospital yesterday. Paskell was booked into San Joaquin County Jail for investigation of attempted murder. Police did not say why McAlister objected to the sermon.

Police added that someone threw a bottle of flammable liquid on the minister's house Sunday evening, causing \$600 damage. —*The Washington Times*

