

CONSTRUCTIVE FAITH

by Charles H. Parkhurst

Parkhurst's sermon collection including 'Divine Calls,' examining how God persistently calls believers by name through the example of Samuel, and awaits their responsive obedience and service.

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Constructive Faith Why is it thought a thing incredible with you that God should raise the dead?—Acts 26:8.

Paul stood before Agrippa to answer to him for the things whereof he had been accused. And one of the charges of which he stood indicted was his belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the publicity with which he had proclaimed that belief.

Such resurrection was to Paul credible, to Agrippa apparently incredible. Why? Why credible to the one, but incredible to the other? Does the difficulty lie in the event or in the method of approaching it? In the event, or, perhaps, in the mental or moral constitution of the people who contemplate it? The question is not one of mere academic interest. It is too deeply involved in the whole Christian scheme to have the door slammed in its face as a mere intellectual or scholastic intruder. The writer of the first Corinthian letter rather brusquely settled that matter when he wrote, "If Christ be not risen then is our preaching vain and your faith is also vain." As Paul understood it, that was one of the fundamentals of the gospel, and he, if any one, was competent to judge what its fundamentals were. And while there is an element of formality, ceremony and parade, in the way in which the Church, after nineteen hundred years, celebrates the event, yet the Church has a great deal of heart for the event, believes in it some and would like to believe in it more. Its attitude toward it today is, "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief." It is too deeply linked in with our thoughts of immortality for us to be able willingly to let go of it. One man slipping through the grave in an immortal way creates a chance for every other man. Even if Christ did not rise in the way predicated of Him, we may still be immortal; but the soul likes one good authenticated instance of a death that was not fatal as something definite to anchor itself upon, and is not always so sure of its anchorage grounds as to be able quite to rest in the hope it tries so hard to cherish. Aside from the fact that even if He did rise it was a great while ago—and the argumentative value of a fact tends to weaken with the centuries—there are other considerations that complicate the case, so that we always welcome whatever promises to relieve a little the strain of an unsettled confidence.

It will be rather to our advantage then, I am sure, that we should distinctly face the fact that the event which the day celebrates is a somewhat severe tax upon that faculty of ours by means of which we are able to become convinced of what is unproved and perhaps unprovable. We can reason toward it a part of the way, but the reasons are all exhausted before we have arrived at an affirmative conclusion; and the gap that still remains we fill in with faith.

It is better to state the situation in that frank way, for then we know exactly what we have to deal with. We can in part attest the fact of Christ's resurrection, but in part we have to accept it by the exercise of faith. That may be a discouraging condition of things, and may not be—discouraging, perhaps, if we mean by it only that we know it in part, and guess or imagine the rest. But we ought to seek for faith a somewhat more dignified and constructive function than that.

There is this, at any rate, to be said about faith—that there is no faculty of which we make more constant use or that we use with greater effect when used wisely; and no faculty in which more of the richest contents of our personality admit of being concentrated. This faculty is going to be quite largely exercised by people today, and it is a favorable time to comment upon it. It is of great use in religious matters and the season an opportune one for encouraging its use and stimulating it to more complete development. It may enable us in some measure to understand why what was incredible to Agrippa was credible to Paul.

While there is a larger field in religion for the exercise of faith than there is anywhere else, we ought to know that it is no more indispensable there than elsewhere. You, of course, are aware that there are very few things that can be absolutely proved—proved in such a way that something over and above is not required in order to insure a satisfactory conviction. Even if mathematical demonstrations seem to be an exception to that rule, you should remember that even there your demonstration has to start with something that is unproved and that can not be proved. As matter of fact, absolute demonstration is one of the rarities, whether in the intellectual, moral or spiritual world, and a man who is not so equipped as to be prepared to piece our logical proof with something else of a different complexion is in no condition to be confident of anything. As a rule, our conclusions contain a good deal more than was comprised in the premises. Logic is well enough in the text-books, is, besides, of considerable practical account, and yet if we never decided to do a thing until we were satisfied of its logical accuracy, we should leave nearly everything undone. In framing our convictions we make some use of reason, but either because the reasoning faculty is weak in us, or still more because the situation is such with us that our convictions do not have to be altogether reasoned out, the conclusions at which we arrive are usually a great deal sounder than can be logically accounted for. There is some reason about us and a good deal of something else—has to be. Otherwise, whether individually or collectively, we should never get anywhere.

We trust people without being more than about half certain that it is safe to trust them, and usually discover in the end that we made no mistake in trusting them. We go aboard an express-train without having one syllable of information about the engineer, the engine, the track of the railroad, and nine hundred and ninety-nine times out of a thousand, and a good deal more, a ticket to Chicago will take us to Chicago. In the same way we talk confidently about the sun, but should make awkward work trying to prove that there is one—seeing that the little ethereal pulse-beat knocking just at the window of our own eye is the only direct information that we have of it. The heroism that is in our conclusions is something tremendous, and we talk about all these matters as though we were perfectly at home with and had intellectually penetrated to the heart of them. It is interesting, and not only interesting but quite suggestive, the very slight degree to which ordinarily our confidence is discouraged by the small amount of distinct fact that we are able to adduce in justification of our confidence; how brave the steps are that we take upon ground that has never been accurately explored and of which, therefore, only the roughest outline map has been prepared. But at the same time how likely we are to find our way through and arrive safely at the terminal.

Such illustrations are sufficient to indicate that this faculty that we have of believing where we are not able perfectly to see is a respectable faculty, a faculty that we are all showing our respect for by the constancy with which we make use of it in all our ordinary modes of thought and usual

methods of action. So that when we talk about religious faith—faith in religious things, and in events of Christian history, we are dealing with an inner impulse that we depend upon every day, the only difference being a difference as to the field in which that impulse works; even as celestial gravity is the same as terrestrial gravity, only in the one case working among the stars, and in the other operating down here on the ground.

Now this faculty that in common affairs we call belief and in religious ones faith, is quite a distinct thing from a disposition to walk in the dark when there is no light. Faith is not credulity. A fool can be credulous and certainly will be, but faith requires for its rooting and growth soil that is deep and strong. The men large enough to be great thinkers and immense workers were they whom the writer of the Hebrew letter describes as prophets of faith. There is a dignity and authority about the faith faculty poorly appreciated by people who give it a degraded position in the scale of human powers: the faculty of finding light enough to walk by when the light is only a twilight with no distinct sunbeams in reach to make the path brilliant.

If faith were simply a process of assumption, a matter of easily and perhaps shiftlessly taking things for granted, then the smaller a man's soul the greater would be the likelihood of the abundance of his faith. But that is not the case. The men of which Scripture history especially predicates faith are the intellectual and moral giants of history, the men who were virile and strongly chivalrous enough to make long excursions into the region of truth and to move out in a large and telling way upon the field of action. Credulousness will grow and blossom with its roots hidden only in dry sand, but it takes something quite different from a human sand-lot to propagate the sort of quality and the modes of thought and activity celebrated in the eleventh of Hebrews.

All men or women who have shown themselves able to be anything or do anything in the world have owed this competence to the fact that they have felt the presence of objects that were too remote from the eye to be distinctly seen, too remote from the mind to be distinctly known. Their field of clear vision has been invariably girt about with an encompassing zone so dense as to be almost impenetrable, but too obvious to remain invisible. It is with them a faltering perception of what is almost altogether out of sight. It is what St Paul expresses when he says of faith that, "it is the evidence of things not seen." It is that captivating apprehension of regions lying beyond the scope of definite vision that creates a sense of no end of great possibilities and so breaks down the obstinacy of antecedent objection. This mysterious discernment that constitutes the genius of faith we see delicately illustrated even in the play of the bodily eye. However transparent the material atmosphere immediately about us, as the eye reaches forth into the distance the outlines become more and more obscure until the vision loses itself in the immensity of the prospect that it can only feel and scarcely distinguish. But even that makes the universe grow great before us as the little world we know is evidenced to be fringed with the bewitching margin of a world that is hardly in view.

When, for instance, we look up into the sky; on a starry night we are delighted, of course, by the stellar spots of distinct brightness, but after all, the charm unspeakable and almost crushing, of such a sky, is not the stars that we can distinctly see, but those whose edges are softened down into tantalizing obscurity, bits of nebulous uncertainty that leave us almost undecided whether they belong to the world of things visible or to the realm invisible; so that our sense of them becomes nearly as much a sense of the unseen as of the seen. And in the presence of celestial scenery in

such manner stimulating to the mind and heart, any declaration in regard to the astronomic world, even fairly authenticated by competent authorities, would secure from us not only willing but eager acceptance.

There pertains thus to the eye a kind of advance-guard of discovery that gives us a feeling of the unknown wonders that are away in the corner of the sky, quite before the eye is able to take strong visual hold upon them. And, as I say, it makes the universe larger and richer, and not only that, it lays out for us a sort of shadowy avenue along which the eye is encouraged to let its vision run out on experimental and adventurous trips with at least some prospect of being able to return from such excursions laden with more or less of the products of discovery. To people who sometimes lift their eyes above the level of the ground, such evasive hints as distant things give of themselves are very provocative; they tend to make the eye alert, to tax it to its utmost endeavor, to fill it with inquiry, and an interrogation is always the outrider of discovery. And that is the way always that things of whatever kind become known to us, by standing as closely as ever we can to the edge of the known and then feeling our way—not seeing our way, but feeling our way—as far as we can over the edge of the known out into the vast space where, in almost, not quite, utter indistinctness, hovers the unknown. That was the process by which Columbus discovered America. He discovered it by sailing along the line of his presentiment. He reasoned toward it as far as he could and then supplemented the insufficiency of reason by a generous contribution of faith; possess, that is, of so long a reach of thought and so roomy a conception of God's world that there seemed space in it for another Europe, which ought somehow to be there in order to fill that space. And the way in which the discoverer who sailed from Palos discovered a new geographical world is the way in which we have to approach the suspected contents of the religious world, suspected events of Christian history. The sense, the mastering sense, of outlying spiritual territory too obscure for us to say a great many definite things about it, but too certainly there to be denied or ignored, is a necessary prerequisite to all successful use or observance of such a day as we are celebrating. A man whose thoughts stop short at the point where those thoughts cease to move in perfect light can celebrate Easter as a formality, but never as a reality. The resurrection of Christ does not admit of absolute demonstration. Undoubtedly the testimony in favor of the event is strong. It was evidently unquestioned by a great number of intelligent people living at the time of its reputed occurrence. So much force as all such evidence has is to be estimated at its logical value. So Columbus estimated at its logical value all the indications that were afforded him of the existence of another continent. To most people of that generation those evidences appeared insufficient to warrant fitting out vessels of exploration, and it was long before funds requisite for the purpose could be secured. And the magnificent result and discovery was due to the fact that in Columbus' mind there was room for America and in the minds of other people there was not. His thought, or whatever you may call it, had in it a vitality that enabled it to move beyond the point where it could give a satisfactory account of itself. He could see beyond the point where he could see distinctly. The scheme of things as it lay drafted in his mind was drawn on a scale large enough to comprehend everything that was already definitely known, everything that was indefinitely surmised, and a good deal beside that neither he nor any one else had ever conjectured.

Now what I want you to realize is that that is the kind of mind that does the world's work, the kind of mind that arrives, that kind of mind that is competent to come up close to the frontier, to venture across the frontier, to do some outside exploring, to bring back some of the products grown on

ground newly explored, and thus practically to push forward the frontier and to add another lot of land to the world's geography, whether it be the geography of country, of thought, or of religious experience. And nothing more is asked for here than is demanded along every other line of life and expansion. It is only the men and women whose minds are sufficiently sensitive to the unknown to be able to take in more than has yet been definitely found that are ever the means by which anything new ever is found. That is true in the departments of astronomy and geology and in every other field of whatever sort in which thought has ever done any work. A presentiment of the undiscovered is the regular prelude to discovery, and to the extent that men, whether from intellectual contractedness or from moral aversion, have not that presentiment they will be unable to allow even the historic proofs of Christian events the argumentative force that belongs to such proofs. The convincing power of an argument depends quite as much upon the size, fiber, quality of the man address as upon the logical compulsions or the argument used in addressing him, which is to say that we are responsible for what we believe as well as for what we know, and that the machinery of faith operates inside the domain of ethics. For example: standing on the basis of the harmonious testimony rendered by the intelligent authors of the gospel narratives, no one would dispute the truth of those narratives were there not in them references to events which lie out of line with things the scheme of which we happen to be familiar with, and which in the unblushing conceit of our unsophisticated humanness we dare to presume to be the whole of things; which means that people do not want the world to be any larger or any different from what they have already decided to have it; nor that any events should occur in it or occur anywhere but what are slow-paced enough to keep step with any most common thing that moves in our workaday life.

Thomas would not believe in the risen Christ because risen Christs were not a part of the universe as he had plotted it. The other disciples did believe in a risen Christ because they were large enough to be able to think farther than they could think clearly, and because they were able to push the chariot of their convictions over a road that had not been logically paved. And undoubtedly when Thomas did finally accept Christ it was not because he had reasoned Him out in his mind nor fingered Him out by pressing his hands into the print of the nails, but because of having had divinely wrought in him a capacity for larger persuasions than his mental and moral contractedness had been hitherto able to accommodate. And that is still the way in which we have to acquire the art of great believing, the art of immense assurance of faith and the triumphant joy that is bound to go along with it. A world that is only large enough to contain our petty employments, or to contain our small pleasures and paltry lusts, is not a world big enough to have room in it for a human Son of God or for His immortal escape from the tomb. We might convert our Church into an Easter conservatory and crowd floor, galleries and chancel with a chorus of as many angels as heralded the advent, and all of this be a splendid tribute to the Lord of the resurrection and a splendid memorial of the great Easter event, but the prime point of all is for us each inwardly to grow to the proportions of so august an event, to be inwardly equal to the cordial and settled entertainment of so thrilling a thought, to have created in us such a sense of vast spiritual territory margining this small world of commonplace, as will give abundant space for transactions conducted on so large a scale as that of the marvelous birth, the death in whose presence the sun was darkened, and the great rising from the grave that broke down the walls between this world and the other, converted the coffin into a cradle of life eternal, and swung wide the doors of paradise.

It is our prayer that the wide view opened before us by this memorial season may stimulate us to higher levels of thought; create for us a world too large to be filled with the small and passing interests and commonplace incidents of life; destroy for us in that way the obstinacy of antecedent objection; mental reluctance and moral antagonism be dissolved in the warm light of the larger prospect, till we become able to recognize Jesus in the gracious face and scarred figure; and in the cordiality of complete conviction to echo the words of the persuaded Thomas, "My Lord and my God."

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