

On Believing With the Heart

by Charles Finney

The sermon emphasizes the importance of heart faith, which is true confidence and involves an earnest committal of one's self and interests to the demands of the truth believed.

Scripture: Proverbs 3:5, Romans 10:10, Hebrews 11:1, James 2:19

Topics: "Trust in God", "Faith"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the distinction between intellectual faith and heart faith, arguing that true faith involves a deep, voluntary commitment of oneself to God, which leads to righteousness. He explains that while intellectual faith may acknowledge truths, it often lacks the transformative power of heart faith, which is rooted in love and trust. Finney illustrates that heart faith is essential for understanding God, especially in the face of mystery and contradictory evidence, and it is characterized by a willingness to believe without needing to comprehend all the reasons. He encourages believers to cultivate this heart faith, which naturally leads to obedience and a deeper relationship with God, despite life's uncertainties. Ultimately, Finney calls for a simple, voluntary act of trust in God, urging individuals to commit themselves fully to Him.

Transcript

"For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness." -- Romans 10:10

The subject brought to view in this passage requires of us, that we should,

I. Distinguish carefully between intellectual and heart faith.

There are several different states of mind which are currently called faith, this term being obviously used in various senses. So, also, is the term heart used in various senses, and indeed, there are but few terms which are not used with some variety of signification. Hence, it becomes very important to discriminate.

Thus, in regard to faith, the Scriptures affirm that the "devils also believe and tremble," but it surely cannot be meant that they have heart-faith. They do not "believe unto righteousness."

Faith in the intellect is a judgment--an opinion. The mind so judges, and is convinced that the facts are so. Whatever the nature of the things believed, this is an involuntary state of mind. Those things believed may be truth; they may relate to God and may embrace the great fundamental facts and doctrines of religion; yet this faith may not result in righteousness. It is often true that persons have their judgments convinced,

yet this conviction reaches not beyond their intelligence. Or perhaps it may go so much further as to move their feelings and play on their sensibility, and yet may do nothing more. It may produce no change in the will. It may result in no new moral purpose; may utterly fail to reach the voluntary attitude of the mind, and hence, will make no change in the life.

But, heart-faith, on the other hand, is true confidence, and involves an earnest committal of one's self and interests, to the demands of the truth believed. It is precisely such a trust as we have in those to whom we cling in confidence--such as children feel in their friends and true fathers and mothers. We know they are naturally ready to believe what is said to them, and to commit themselves to the care of those they love.

The heart is in this. It is a voluntary state of mind--always substantially and essentially an act of the will. This kind of faith will, of course, always affect the feelings, and will influence the life. Naturally, it tends towards righteousness, and may truly be said to be--"unto righteousness." It implies love, and seems in its very nature to unify itself with the affections. The inspired writers plainly did not hold faith to be so purely an act of will, as to exclude the affections. Obviously, they made it include the affections.

I must now proceed to notice some of the conditions of intellectual faith.

1. Sometimes, but not always, faith of the heart is essential to faith of the intellect. Thus, it may be necessary that we have heart-faith in a man before we are duly prepared to investigate the facts that relate to his character. So, in relation to God, if we lack heart-faith in him, we are in no state to deal fairly with the evidence of his works and ways. Here it is well to notice the vast difference between the irresistible assumptions of the mind respecting God, and those things which we arrive at by study and reasoning. Heart-faith seems essential to any candid investigation.

It is also essential to our conviction as to the truth. I am not prepared to judge candidly concerning a friend, unless I have some of this heart-faith in him. Suppose I hear a rumor about my best friend, affirming something which is deeply scandalous. My regard for him forbids my believing this scandalous report unless it comes most fully sustained by testimony. On the other hand, if I had no heart-confidence in him, my intelligence might be thrown entirely off, and I might do both him and myself the greatest injustice.

Many of you have had this experience in regard to faith. Often, in the common walks of life, you have found that, if it had not been for your heart-confidence, you would have been greatly deceived. Your heart held on; at length, the evidence shone out; you were in a condition to judge charitably, and thus you arrived at the truth.

Heart-faith is specially essential where there is mystery. Of course there are points in religious doctrine which are profoundly mysterious. This fact is not peculiar to religious truth, but is common to every part of God's works--which is equivalent to saying--it is common to all real science. Any child can ask me questions which I cannot answer. Without heart-confidence, it would be impossible for society to exist. Happily for us, we can often wisely confide, when we cannot, by any means, understand.

In the nature of the case, there must be mysteries about God, for the simple reason that He is infinite and we are finite. Yet, he reveals enough of himself to authorize us to cherish the most unbounded confidence in him. Therefore, let no one stumble at this as though it were some strange thing, for, in fact, the same thing obtains to some extent in all our social relations. In these, we are often compelled to confide in our friends where the case seems altogether suspicious. Yet, we confide, and by and by, the truth comes to light, and we are thankful that our heart-faith held us from doing them injustice.

Again, heart-faith is specially in place where there is contradictory evidence.

Often it may seem to you that God must be partial. Then, the mind needs the support of confidence in God. You go on safely if there is underlying all, the deep conviction that God is and must be right. See that woman, stripped of every thing--husband, children, all;--how can she give any account of this? You may remember the case of a woman who traveled West with her husband and family; there buried her husband and all but two little ones, and then made her weary way back with these on foot. Pinching want and weariness drove her into a stranger's dwelling at nightfall; there a churlish man would have turned her into the street, but his wife had a human heart, and insisted on letting them stay, even if she herself sat up all night. Think of the trying case of that lone widow. She does not sleep; her mingled grief and faith find utterance in the words--"My heart is breaking, but God is good!"

How could she make it out that God is good? Just as you would in the case of your husband, if one should tell you he had gone forever, and proved faithless to his vows. You can set this insinuation aside, and let your heart rise above it. You do this on the strength of your heart-faith.

So the Christian does in regard to many mysterious points in God's character and ways. You cannot see how God can exist without ever beginning to exist; or how he can exist in three Persons, since no other beings known to you exist in more than one. You cannot see how he can be eternally good, and yet suffer sin and misery to befall his creatures. But, with heart-faith we do not need to have everything explained. The heart says to its heavenly Father I do not need to catechise Thee, nor ask impertinent questions, for I know it is all right. I know God can never do anything wrong. And so the soul finds a precious joy in trusting, without knowing how the mystery is solved. Just as a wife, long parted from her husband, and, under circumstances that need explanation, yet when he returns, she rushes to meet him with her loving welcome, without waiting for one word of explanation. Suppose she had waited for the explanation before she could speak a kind word. This might savor of the intellect, but certainly it would not do honor to her heart. For her heart-confidence, her husband loves her better than ever, and well he may!

You can understand this; and can you not also apply it to your relations to God? God may appear to your view to be capricious; but you know He is not; may appear unjust, but you know he cannot be. Ah, Christian, when you comprehend the fact of God's wider reach of vision, and of his greater love, then you will cry out with Job--"Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him." When you have trusted so, think you not that your heart will be as dear to Christ as ever?

Let us next consider, what are not, and what are, conditions of heart-faith.

It is not conditioned upon comprehending the facts to be believed. We may know a thing to be a fact, while yet we are entirely unable to explain it. The reasons and the explanations are quite a different thing from the evidence which sustains the fact, and commends it to our belief.

Let it also be borne in mind that it is not half as necessary to know all the reasons in the case of God's ways as in man's. The ground of the difference is, that we know, in general, that God is always right--a knowledge which we cannot have in regard to man. Of God, our deepest and most resistless convictions assure us that all is right. Our corresponding convictions in the case of man are far from being irresistible. Yet, even in regard to men, we often find that a conviction of their rectitude, which is far less than irresistible, lends us to trust. How much more should our stronger convictions as to God, lead us evermore to trust in him!

Again, this heart-faith in God does not rest on our ability to prove even that God exists. Many an earnest Christian has never thought of this, any more than of proving his own existence. An irresistible conviction gives him both, without other proof.

But, positively, God must be revealed to your inner being so that you are conscious of his existence and presence. There is not, perhaps, in the universe, a thing of which we can be more certain than of God's existence. The mind may be more deeply acquainted with God than with any other being or thing. Hence, this heart-confidence may be based on God's revelations to the inner soul of man. Such revelations may reach the very highest measure of certainty. I do not mean to imply here that we are not certain of the facts of observation. But this is a stronger assurance and certainty. The mind becomes personally acquainted with God, and is conscious of this direct and positive knowledge.

A further condition is, that the soul be inwardly drawn to God. In our relations to each other, we are sometimes conscious of a peculiar sympathy, which draws us towards a friend. This fact is a thing of consciousness, of which we may be quite unable to give any explanation. A similar attraction draws us to God, and seems to be a natural condition of the strongest forms of heart-faith.

It is quite essential to heart-faith that we have genuine love to God. In the absence of good-will towards God, there never can be this faith of the heart. The wife has no heart-faith in her husband, save as she loves him. Her heart must be drawn to him in real love--else this heart-faith will draw back and demand more evidence.

In view of this principle, God takes measure to win our love and draw our hearts to himself. As human beings do towards each other, so He manifests his deep interests in us--pours out his blessings on us in lavish profusion, and, in every way, strives to assure us that he is truly our friend. These are his methods to win the confidence of our hearts. When it becomes real to us that we owe everything to God--our health, gifts, all our comforts--then we can bear many dark and trying things. Then, we know that God loves us even though he scourge us, just as children know that parents love them, and mean their good, even though they chastise them. Under these broad and general manifestations of love, they confide, even though there be no present manifestations of love. You may remember how Cecil taught his little daughter the meaning of gospel faith. She came to him, one day, with her hands full of little beads, greatly delighted, to show them. He said to her calmly--"You had better throw them all into the fire." She was almost confounded; but, when she saw he was in earnest, she trustfully obeyed and cast them in. After a few days, he brought home for her a casket of jewels. "There, said he, my daughter, you had faith in me the other day, and threw your beads into the fire; that was faith; now I can give you things much more precious. Are these not far better?" So you should always believe in God. He has jewels for those who will believe, and cast away their sins.

Again, I observe, heart-faith is unto righteousness--real obedience. This trustful and affectionate state of heart naturally leads us to obey God. I have often admired the faith manifested by the old Theologian Philosophers who held fast to their confidence in God, despite of the greatest of absurdities. Their faith could laugh at the most absurd principles involved in their philosophy of religious truth. It is a remarkable fact that the greater part of the church have been in their philosophy necessitarians, holding not the freedom, but the bondage of the will;--their doctrine being that the will is determined necessarily by the strongest motive. Pres. Edwards held these philosophical views, but despite of them, he believed that God is supremely good. The absurdities of this philosophy did not shake his faith in God. So all the really Old School Theologians hold the absurdities of hyper-Calvinism, as for example, that God absolutely and

supremely controls all the moral actions of all his creatures.

Dr. Beecher, in controversy with Dr. Wilson, some years since, held that obligation implied ability to obey. This Dr. Wilson flatly denied. Whereupon Dr. B. remarked that few men could march up and face such a proposition with winking. It is often the case that men have such heart-confidence in God that they will trust him despite the most flagrant absurdities. There is less superstition in this than I used to suppose, and more faith. Men forget their dogmas and philosophy, and despite of both, love and confide.

Some men have held monstrous doctrines--even that God is the author of sin and puts forth his divine efficiency to make men sin, as truly as, by his Spirit, to make them holy. This view was held by Dr. Emmons; yet he was eminently a pious man, of childlike, trustful spirit. It is indeed strange how such men could hold these absurdities at all, and scarcely less so, how they could hold them and yet confide sweetly in God. Their heart must have been fixed in this faith by some other influence than that of these monstrous notions in philosophy and theology. For, these views of God, we absolutely know, were contrary to their reason, though not to their reasonings--a very wide and essential distinction--which is sometimes overlooked. The intuitive affirmations of their reason were one thing; the points which they reached by their philosophical reasonings, were quite another thing. The former could not lie about God, the latter could. The former laid that sure foundation for heart-faith; the latter went to make up their intellectual notions, the absurdities of which, (we notice with admiration,) never seemed to shake their Christian faith. While these reasonings pushed them on into the greatest absurdities, their reason held their faith and piety straight.

The faith of the heart is proof against all forms of infidelity. Without this nothing is proof. For if men without piety drop the affirmations of their intuitive reason, and then attempt, philosophically, to reason out all the difficulties they meet with, they almost inevitably stumble.

Heart-faith carries one over the manifold mysteries and difficulties of God's providence. In this field there must be difficulties, for no human vision can penetrate to the bottom of God's providential plans and purposes.

So, also, does this faith of the heart carry one over the mysteries of the atonement. It is indeed curious to notice how the heart gets over all these. It is generally the case that the atonement is accepted by the heart unto salvation, before its philosophy is understood. It was manifestly so with the apostles; so with their hearers; and so, even with those who heard the Lord Jesus Christ himself. The Bible says but very little indeed on the point of the philosophy of the atonement.

So, also, of the doctrine of the Trinity; and so of other doctrines generally. They were known and taught as practical truths, and were accepted as such, long before their philosophy was specially investigated. If any difficulties arose in minds specially inquisitive, it was overcome by heart-faith, or settled by the intuitive affirmations of the reason, and not by speculative reasoning.

It is in no sense unreasonable that God should require us to have such faith in him. Properly considered, he does not require us to believe what we do not know to be true. He does not ask us to renounce our common sense and exercise a groundless credulity. When we trust his general character and accept certain dark dispensations of providence as doubtless right, what is it that we believe? Not the special reason for this mysterious dispensation, but we believe that, despite of its dark aspect to us, God's hand in it is both wise and good, and we believe this because we have abundant ground to confide in his general character. It is as if you were to tell me that a known and tried friend of mine had told a lie. I should say, I

cannot believe it. I know him too well. But you say--"Here is the evidence. It looks very dark against him." "Very likely," I reply, "but yet I cannot believe it. There will be some explanation of this. I cannot believe it."

Now I consider myself fully authorized to reject at once all surmises and rumors against my known friend. I am bound to do so, until the evidence against him becomes absolutely conclusive. This is altogether reasonable. How much more so in the case of dark things in God's doings!

For it should be considered that man may deceive us; God never can. We do not know man's heart always, to the very core; and if we did, it may change; what once was true, becomes false. But not so with God; our intuitive convictions affirm that God is always good, and always wise; and, moreover, that there can never be any declension in his love, or any revolution in his character.

Consequently Christians are often called on to believe God, not only without, but against, present evidence.

Abraham, called out of his home and country, to go into a strange land, obeyed, not knowing whither he went. He might have asked many questions about the reasons; he does not appear to have asked any.

Commanded to offer up Isaac, he might, with apparent propriety, have expostulated earnestly. He might have said, "Lord, that would be murder! It would outrage the natural affection which thou hast planted in my bosom. It would encourage the heathen around us in their horrid abominations of making their children pass through the fire of Moloch." All this, and more he might have said; but, so far as appears, he said nothing--save this; "The Lord commands, and I obey. If he pleases he can raise up my Isaac from the dead." So he went on and virtually offered up his son Isaac, and "in a figure, received him again from the dead." And God fixed the seal of his approbation on this act of faith, and held it out before all ages as a model of faith and obedience, despite of darkness and objections.

So Christians are often called to believe without present evidence, other than what comes from their knowledge of God's general character. For a season, God lets everything go against them, yet they believe. Said a woman, passing through great trials, with great confidence in God--"O Lord, I know thou art good, for thou hast shown me this; but, Lord, others do not understand this; they are stumbled at it. Canst thou not show them so that they shall understand this?"

REMARKS.

The demand for reasons often embarrasses our faith. This is one of the tricks of the devil. He would embarrass our faith by telling us we must understand all God's ways before we believe. Yet we ought to see that this is impossible and unreasonable. Abraham could not see the reasons for God's command to offer Isaac a bloody sacrifice; he might have expostulated; but he did not. The simplicity and beauty of his faith appears all along in this very thing--that he raised no questions. He had a deeper insight into God's character. He knew too much of God to question his wisdom, or his love. For, a man might understand all the reasons of God's ways, yet this knowledge might do him no good; his heart might rebel even then.

In this light you may see why so much is said about Abraham's faith. It was gloriously trustful and unquestioning! What a model! No wonder God commends it to the admiring imitation of the world!

It is indeed true that faith must often go forward in the midst of darkness. Who can read the histories of believing saints, as recorded in scripture, without seeing that faith often leads the way through trials. It would be but a sorry development of faith, if at every step God's people must know everything before they

could trust him, and must understand all his reasons. Most ample grounds for faith lie in his general character, so that we do not need to understand the special reasons for his particular acts.

We are mere infants--miserably poor students of God's ways. His dealings on every side of us appear to us mysterious. Hence it should be expected that we shall fail to comprehend his reasons, and consequently we must confide in him without this knowledge. Indeed, just here lies the virtue of faith, that it trusts God on the ground of his general character, while the mind can by no means comprehend his reasons for particular acts. Knowing enough of God to assure us that He must be good, our faith trusts him, although the special evidence of goodness in particular cases may be wanting.

This is a kind of faith which many do not seem to possess or to understand. Plainly they do not confide in God's dealings.

It is manifestly needful that God should train Christians to exercise faith here and now; since in heaven we shall be equally unable to comprehend all his dealings. The holy in heaven will no doubt believe in God; but they must do it by simple faith--not on the ground of a perfect knowledge of God's plans. What a trial of faith it must have been to the holy in heaven to see sin enter our world! They could see few, perhaps none of the reasons, before the final judgment, and must have fallen back upon the intuitive affirmations of their own minds. The utmost they could say was--We know God must be good and wise; therefore we must wait to see the results, and humbly trust.

It is not best for parents to explain everything to their children, and especially, they should not take the ground of requiring nothing of which they cannot explain all the reasons. Some profess to take this ground. It is for many reasons unwise. God does not train his children so.

Faith is really natural to children. Yet some will not believe their children converted until they can be real Theologians. This assumes that they must have all the great facts of the gospel system explained so that they can comprehend their philosophy before they can believe them. Nothing can be further from the truth.

It sometimes happens that those who are converted in childhood become students of theology in more advanced years, and then, getting proud of their philosophy and wisdom, lose their simple faith and relapse into infidelity. No, I do not object to their studying the philosophy of every doctrine up to the limits of human knowledge; but I do object to their casting away their faith in God. For there is no lack of substantial testimony to the great doctrines of the gospel. Their philosophy may stagger the wisest man; but the evidence of their truth ought to satisfy all, and alike the child and the philosopher. Last winter I was struck with this fact--which I mention because it seems to present one department of the evidences of Christianity in a clear light. One judge of the court said to another--I come to you with my assertion that I inwardly know Jesus Christ, and as truly and as well as I know you. Can you reject such testimony? What would the people of this State say to you if you rejected such testimony on any other subject? Do you not every day, let men testify to their own experience?" The judge replied, "I cannot answer you."

"Why, then," replied the other, "do you not believe this testimony? I can bring before you thousands who will testify to the same thing."

Again I remark, it is of great use to study the truths of the gospel system theologically and philosophically, for thus you may reach a satisfactory explanation of many things which your heart knew and clung to and would have held fast till the hour of your death. It is a satisfaction to you, however, to see the beautiful harmony of these truths with each other, and with the known laws of mind, and of all just government.

Yet Theological students sometimes decline in their piety, and for a reason which it were well for them to understand. One enters upon this study simple hearted and confiding; but, by and by study expands his views; he begins to be charmed with the explanations he is able to give of many things not understood before; becomes opinionated and proud; becomes ashamed of his former simple heart-faith, and thus stumbles fearfully if not fatally. If you will hold on with all your simple heart-confidence to the immutable love and wisdom of God, all will be well. But it never can be well to put your intellectual philosophy in the place of the simplicity of gospel faith.

Herein is seen one reason why some students do not become pious. They determine that they will understand everything before they become Christians. Of course they are never converted. Quite in point, here, is a case I saw a few years since. Dr. B., an intelligent but not pious man, had a pious wife who was leading her little daughter to Christ. The Dr. seeing this, said to her--Why do you try to lead that child to Christ? I cannot understand these things myself, although I have been trying to understand them these many years; how then can she? But some days after, as he was riding out alone, he began to reflect on the matter; the truth flashed upon his mind, and he saw that neither of them could understand God unto perfection--not he anymore than his child; while yet either of them could know enough to believe unto salvation.

Again, gospel faith is voluntary--a will-trust. I recollect a case in my own circle of friends. I could not satisfy my mind about one of them. At length, after long struggling, I said, I will repel these things from my mind, and rule out these difficulties. My friend is honest and right; I will believe it, and will trust him none the less for these slanders. In this I was right.

Towards God this course is always right. It is always right to cast away from your mind all those dark suspicions about him who can never make mistakes, and who is too good to purpose wrong. I once said to a sister in affliction--Can you not believe all this is for your good, though you cannot see how it is? She brightened up, saying--I must believe in God, and I will.

Who of you have this heart-faith? Which of you will not commit yourself to Christ? If the thing required were intellectual faith, I could explain to you how it is reached. It must be through searching the evidence in the case. But heart-faith must be reached by simple effort--by a voluntary purpose to trust. Ye who say--I cannot do this--Bow your knees before God and commit yourself to his will; say, "O, my Savior! I take thee at thy word." This is a simple act of will.

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