

July 20, 2008
Elijah the Prophet

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In the New Testament, faith is presented as both a gift of God and an act of man. Although both aspects should be considered, it seems better to begin the study of faith by thinking of it as the gift of God.

There are three reasons, I submit, to adopt this preference. First, as a general consideration, it conforms to the biblical principle that God's activity has priority over man's. *Gabe* comes before *Aufgabe*; God's endowment precedes man's duty: "We love Him because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19; cf. 2 Corinthians 3:5).

Second, as a particular consideration, Holy Scripture explicitly identifies faith as a gift of divine grace: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8).

Third, this approach to faith---treating it first as a gift of God---better insures that the nature of faith is left in the realm of divine mystery. Treating faith first as a gift of God renders less likely the temptation to reduce the study of faith to an inquiry of either epistemology or religious psychology.

That is to say, I see the two specific dangers in starting the study of faith by treating it as a human act.

First, relative to epistemology, one detects among apologists a tendency to think of the assent of faith only as certain as the evidence by which it is elicited. Indeed, the question of faith really is one of the major areas in which apologetics tends to obfuscate theology. Thus, some apologists speak of a "web of belief," a connected series of assumptions that make the act of faith a rational assent to a well argued, but yet only probable, apologetic case. Faith is reduced to a rational acquiescence, a decision to concur in a very plausible and most likely proposition. On this account of the thing, faith is not, in itself, an act of absolute and unshakable certainty.

These apologists forget that the earliest Christian account of faith describes it as not "in word only [*en logō monōn*], but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in full certainty [*plerophoria*]" (1 Thessalonians 1:5). One cannot safely consider faith, I submit, except by starting with the light of conviction infused by the Holy Spirit.

Second, with respect to religious psychology, there is a tendency among theologians to consider faith only as a conscious psychological state. Some of them do not think of faith as an ontological change, a new condition of being, of which human consciousness is hardly ever aware of more than a fraction. These theologians, consequently, do not sufficiently consider---if at all---the subconscious, pre-conscious, implicit, and even physical aspects of faith. At most, they regard faith as the transformation of the mind and heart, not of the whole human person as such. This has bad results.

For example, treating faith as, first of all, a conscious human act, these theologians deny that little children---to say nothing of infants---are capable of faith. According to this line of thought, very young children, being incapable of faith, cannot be baptized. Thus, these theorists violate the Lord's injunction to let the little children come unto Him.

There is a profound heresy involved in this limitation on the gift of God, this denial that union with Christ is not available to tiny children. If, in the matter of faith, God's gift is theologically prior to man's act, why can't this priority also be chronological? What prevents the power of God from getting a jump of several years on man's awareness of it? More than any other case, I contend, infant baptism best exemplifies the priority of grace in salvation. In fact, this is why we find in Holy Scripture the baptism of entire families, not just adults.

In respect to this example, it is worth recalling that the biblical model of the true believer is not simply the child, but even the infant, the suckling child. The Psalmist tells us that the power of God, His 'oz, is established *mippi 'olelim weyonqim*---"from the mouth of babies and nursing children" (Psalm 8:2). His assertion about God's power, moreover, is the context in which he goes on, two verses later, to inquire, "What is man?"

It was nursing children, after all, that Jesus insisted should be brought to Him (Luke 18:15), because in their case it was most obvious that faith is a gift. They received their faith exactly as they received their mothers' milk. This milk nourished them, though they knew absolutely nothing about nutrition. They received the gift of faith the same way---implicitly, pre-consciously, and physically, with no uncertainty or fuss.

©2008 Patrick Henry Reardon

All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641
Church Office: (773) 777-0749
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor
phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html
Pastoral Ponderings:
http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php