

Book Report: *Faith and Saving Faith* by Gordon H. Clark

Gordon Clark's book *Faith and Saving Faith*, is a short monograph on a topic that is as pertinent now as it was when Clark wrote it. The motivation for this study for Clark is the edification of Christians. Clark asks some very penetrating questions, such as:

- Is it necessary to have saving faith?
- Must we know what saving faith is?
- Does one have to read the Bible or listen to sermons?
- What is the relation between faith and knowledge?

In an example given by Clark using the thief on the cross next to Jesus, it is clear that he did not know much, but he knew more than most people give him credit for. For instance, he knew:

- The charge of Christ
- The charge on himself
- That his condemnation was just
- God
- That Jesus had done nothing wrong
- He himself would die soon

He didn't know much, but he obviously knew enough. However, Clark states specifically that, "To suppose that ignorance is sufficient for a Christian life is to be ignorant of what a Christian life requires." Clark begins his monograph by exploring the nature of Generic Faith before he explores the meaning and extent of saving faith. Faith can be Christian or non-Christian, religious or secular. Firstly, Clark looks at secular philosophy of faith.

According to Brand Blanshard, as quoted in Clark, “Belief, as central as it is in the life of thought, and perhaps because it is so essential, is indefinable and probably indescribable.” Many Christians and non-Christians and some secular philosophers, consider belief to be an emotion or a feeling. Blanshard, on the other hand, does not at least consider faith or believing to be sensing, emotional, or a desire. People can have no sensation of “blue,” for instance, without the intellectual interpretation of it.

Clark looks at the writings of H.H. Price. He states that believing something for many years may not be an instantaneous act, but there must have been some point at which a person passes from ignorance, inattention, or even disbelief to a conscious acceptance of the proposition in question. Price also distinguished between believing “in” something or someone and believing “that” something or someone. Pilate believed that Jesus was innocent, but did not believe in Jesus. Price also discussed a distinction between “knowledge by acquaintance” and “knowledge by description.” However, to define and describe this difference can be complex at best and unintelligible at worst.

Price also notes that in religious circles, “belief in” is more important than “belief that.” However Clark notes an objection to Price, that the difference between various beliefs lies in the objects or propositions believed, not in the nature of belief. Clark and Price agree somewhat that belief is not merely a cognitive attitude. There is the possibility that belief is a volitional act.

Clark moves on to Roman Catholic views of faith or belief in the early Christians. For Augustine, faith was a voluntary assent to the truth. For Thomas Aquinas, faith concerns a reality, not a proposition. However, Clark argues that it is hard to credit the

idea that truth can be non-propositional. The single word “cat” is neither true nor false. The proposition, “This cat is black” may be true. But how can a subject minus a predicate be true all alone by itself? Thomas also stated that nothing can come under faith except God’s truth. Nothing false has any place and nothing false can be an object of faith. Clark, however, shows that this is not true, because many people believe in false propositions all the time. However, Clark does note that saving faith must be belief in something God said, as opposed to something someone else said. Therefore the object of saving faith must be true and not a falsehood, because no one can be saved through believing a falsehood.

Thomas, at length, considers that faith is assent to an understood proposition. It should be clear, notes Clark, that no one can believe what he does not know or understand. If the people do not know, then how can they say, amen? The Biblical writers constantly emphasize doctrine, knowledge, wisdom, and edification. Matthew 28:20 states to teach disciples all that Jesus commanded. A person cannot observe a doctrine or obey a command unless he knows it. Faith is strictly limited to knowledge.

Clark discusses another catholic writer, D’Arcy. He defines faith as the act whereby we believe without doubting whatever God has revealed. However, he confuses the definition of assent.

Clark in section 5 discusses the Biblical data. He reviews both the Old Testament and the New Testament verses that use the term “faith” or a derivative of “believe.” The role of faith in the OT, he states, should not be minimized. Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Gideon, David, and Daniel are all examples. Clark warns us that faith has two

distinct meanings in the Scriptures. One meaning is the mental act of believing, and the other, prominent in the pastoral epistles, means namely the set of propositions to be believed. A person can indeed hear words without understanding them, but he cannot believe them. Some theologians contrast faith and knowledge, but the contrast should not be between faith and knowledge but the different objects known or believed.

Clark also reviews a number of other theologians that have something to say on faith. One is John Calvin. Calvin emphasizes knowledge, in particular the knowledge of God's promises. Hence, the object of belief is a proposition. Calvin denies in many places that the fall of man made man an irrational being. Calvin does much to expose the fallacy of the Romanist view of implicit faith (that one may believe the proposition that what the church teaches is true without actually knowing or believing in the content of that teaching), and supports explicit faith. He states that one actually has to know something to believe in it.

Thomas Manton has an excellent commentary on James, but flounders on a few points, according to Clark. Dead faith, it is true, cannot save someone. This faith that James mentions is merely the belief in monotheism, and even the Muslims believe this. For salvation, men must not only accept the monotheistic position, but as well other propositions relating to the atonement. However, Manton marks that it was a mistake of the reformation age to make the promise rather than the person of Christ to be the formal object of faith. Clark asks, which Christ? A person can only be identified by a set of propositions. Manton makes the popular assertion that faith consists of *notitia*, *assensus*,

and fiducia, but he doesn't define his terms, and makes faith consist of understanding, assent, and faith!

John Owen, a tower of reformed theology, states that justifying faith is a subset of general faith, asserts that if one does not know what general faith is, then one cannot know what faith that justifies is. According to Clark, Owen does not make sufficiently clear the distinction between the two. Owen seems to say that all faith is assent, but justifying faith is a different variety of assent. Clark asserts that all of the evidence that Owen puts forth seems to show that it is not a different nature of faith, but a different object of faith, that matters. Justifying faith also seems to be the assent to some truths, but not all. Owen also says that faith is faith in Christ. But Clark states that if we substitute the word "believe" for "faith," when we believe in a man, we actually believe what he says. Owen does state that believing is voluntary assent to an understood proposition.

Charles Hodge also states that faith is assent to the truth. However, Hodge, according to Clark, is confused on some points because of his empirical epistemology. He seems to put too much dependence on sense and reason. Hodge seems to limit reason to the deduction of physical laws from sensory perceptions, but Clark would rather define it as the deduction of conclusions from premises. Some anti-Christian writers have taken advantage of this vagueness to say that faith is irrational or unreasonable. Clark, however, holds that it is rational to believe what God reveals. However, Hodge is still orthodox, and states, "Faith is not blind irrational conviction. In order to believe, we must know what we believe, and the grounds upon which our faith rests."

Clark then breaks and discusses an important topic, especially in today's church, the Biblical definitions of the head and the heart. Because so many theologians and pastors seem to differentiate between the head and the heart, Clark pauses to look at the Biblical use of the two terms, specifically to show as clearly as possible what the term "heart" means. Clark shows extensively through Scriptures that the heart is connected with thinking, non-emotional, propositional, and intellectual activity. There is ample Scriptural evidence that the term "heart" means the mind, intellect, the understanding. The NT uses the term "heart" about 160 times, and the basic meaning of the word is mind or intellect. Volition, usually the assent to intellectually understood propositions, is also a meaning, and emotion is rarely the point of the passage.

B.B. Warfield begins his study of faith with word studies of "believe." However, Warfield, while not denying the object of the verb believe can be a theological proposition, stresses the personal object more than Hodge. However, even Warfield acknowledges that any study of the OT cannot avoid the idea of promise, and that requires the object of faith to be a proposition.

Other people that Clark discusses are John Anderson and J.H. Bavinck. Anderson seems to hold, after some discussion, that the object of faith is propositional. Bavinck, on the other hand, believes that language itself is inadequate to speak about God, and Clark then shows that if this were true, then why talk about God at all. The words of Jesus would have no meaning nor give us any knowledge. Clark also reviews the writings of John Theodore Mueller, a Lutheran theologian. He agrees that saving faith is always an explicit faith rather than the Romanist implicit faith.

After this extensive historical review of faith and what it means, Clark then moves to a discussion where he attempts to assemble together the data and show that faith is necessary to salvation. Clark reviews many Scriptures to show that without faith, salvation is impossible. Clark briefly discusses the issue of infants, and how can faith be necessary for salvation if infants can't understand or believe in anything? He does not come to a conclusion about this but stresses the fact that John the Baptist was filled with the Spirit while in his mother's womb.

Clark spends several pages explaining the need to be precise in our definition of theological terms. After some examples of the use of the term *pisteuo*, it is clear that the proper translation is "to believe." It would have been much better, Clark states, had the noun *pistis* been translated "belief." Verses that Clark cites show that the object of belief is usually the truth. To "believe in" and to "believe that" are used interchangeably, in John especially.

Understanding the words of the evangelist is an intellectual act and it does not save; believing those words after having understood them saves. The object of each of those propositions differs greatly. One may understand that the evangelist thinks and is saying that Christ died for my sins. A second act is that one believes that it is true Christ died for my sins. Both are cases of volitional assent, but the objects differ immensely. Clark then sums up the question of person, or proposition. To believe in the person of Christ is still to believe certain things, propositions, truths, about Christ are true.

So what is the object of saving faith? If the object of saving faith is a proposition, then what is that proposition? There are obviously a number of combinations of

propositions, and Clark shows that it is neither commanded, encouraged, or permitted to be satisfied with a bare minimum number of propositions or a half a dozen doctrines. In Matthew 28:20, Jesus commands his disciples to teach people *all* that he had commanded.

In conclusion, Clark defines saving faith as assent, truth as propositions, the inerrancy of Scripture, with the outright rejection of all rationalism, are integral parts of the system. Faith by definition is assent to understood propositions. Not all cases of assent, even assent to Biblical propositions, are saving faith. But all saving faith is assent to one or more Biblical propositions.