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THE ETHICS OF "BELIEVE" IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL

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I.—Introduction: Point of view and method of this paper.

Without doubt, the best scientific method of reaching any conclusion has been set forth by Prof. E. D. Burton in his "Principles of Literary Criticism." The method of "multiple hypotheses" is ideal, and if perfectly applied, will bring perfect results. It implies a complete suspension of judgment until all possible hypotheses, except the one which proves to be correct, have been eliminated. It is extremely doubtful, however, whether many instances could be found in which a conclusion has been reached in this way. We seldom, in actual fact, come to the investigation of any subject without some preconceived hypothesis which we believe to be more or less probable; and the usual course of investigation is the testing out, modification, abandoning, or verification of our hypothesis. Though the method of "multiple hypotheses" may be logically ideal, yet I believe that, instead of this method, or in addition to it, as the case may be, the method by which we frankly recognize our preconceived hypotheses, however slight they may be, and set them down as factors to be reckoned with, is more psychologically practical. I acknowledge, therefore, that before coming to any detailed study of the ethical content of "*pisteuo*" in the fourth gospel I had a rather firm conviction on the subject which was not based on an exhaustive study of it. The preparation of this short paper has been a process of verification of an hypothesis which I felt very sure would prove true. I believe it neither scientific nor unscientific to have a conviction based upon evidence which is not exhaustive; it is merely human. But a scientific method does require that whatever conviction of this nature is held must be frankly acknowledged. I have endeavored to test out my conviction at every point, and I believe that it has proved to be correct.

I shall endeavor, then, to prove that the word "believe" as used in the fourth gospel has a very definite and strong ethical content; that the author categorically states that it has, and puts forth his book (among other purposes) with the definite purpose of confuting his contemporaries who considered "believing" to be non-ethical. "Believing" to the Jews was based upon "signs and wonders," and ethics was a matter of legalistically doing the will of God. To the Greeks "believing" was based upon logic, and ethics was variously set forth in their philosophy. To the men of his day, then, the writer of the fourth gospel comes forth with the proposition that "believing" in Christ is not only a moral question, but it is *the* moral question which decides all other moral questions in human life.

It is his very evident purpose to give a new content to ethics, and for this reason the whole work is sometimes called non-ethical. We do not find in the fourth gospel any of the earmarks of the ordinary kind of moral teaching. Little is made either of personal purity, or of legal righteousness, or of what we nowadays term "social service." We find only the repeated injunction to "believe." It seems to make no difference whether the thought is expressed absolutely, or with "in," or "into," or "on," or "that," we simply must "believe" with reference to Christ. Those who do not "believe" are under "the wrath of God," and those who do shall "have life in his name." I shall endeavor to show that this "believing" is not merely an intellectual assent, nor unquestioning credulity, but a positive reaction of a man's whole being toward Jesus Christ as the Son of God.

II.—Lexicographical Authorities.

I turn first of all to the great lexicographers for the probable meaning of "*pisteuo*" in the fourth Gospel. The following quotations, which it seems best to present *en bloc*, give to the word a decided ethical color. (Italics are my own.)

Thayer. "Lex. of N. T."

Pisteuo l. b. "spec., in a moral and religious reference, "*pisteuein*" is used in the N. T. of the conviction and trust

to which a man is impelled by a certain inner and higher prerogative and law of his soul; thus it stands . . . (gamma) used especially of the faith by which a man embraces Jesus, *i. e.*, a conviction, full of joyful trust, that Jesus is the Messiah—the divinely appointed author of eternal salvation in the kingdom of God, *conjoined with obedience to Christ.* . . .” (Abundant references to the fourth Gospel follow.)

Cremer. “Bib. Theol. Lex. of N. T. Greek.”

Pisteuo. “Whereas in the O. T. the application of the verb to religious behavior constitutes only a part, and that not the largest, of the usage, (*Pisteuo*) in the N. T., excepting Jn. 9:18, and the construction “*pisteusomai ti*” . . . occurs only in the religious sense.” “Like ‘*pistis*,’ it denotes that bearing on man’s part which alone answers to God’s saving revelation. . . .” (Cremer argues that the verb is used by John instead of the noun, under the influence of the O. T. usage of “believing” in the “Servant of Jehovah.”)

Abbott, E. A. “Johannine Vocabulary.”

(1467 and 8 and 1478) John uses the verb “believe” instead of the noun “faith” to get away from the synoptic conception of wonder-working faith, and gives a more comprehensible content to “believing” by substituting the verb for the Synoptic noun, and by adding various objects or modifying phrases. . . .”

(Abbott almost uniformly translates *pisteuo* as “trust.”)

(1479) John’s purpose in using *pisteuo*:—“For the sake of the Greeks, then, it was necessary to point out the immense difference between “believing *that*” a conclusion is logically deduced from premises, or “*that*” a fact is proved by evidence, and that other kind of belief, or trust *in* a Person, which, as the Christians asserted, made men become the children of God.” 1561, “Believing” is to be regarded, in different aspects, not as consummation or goal, but as a number of different stages, by which different individuals pass, in accordance with their several indi-

vidualities, toward the one center, "Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God," in whom they are to "have life."

(Abbott's illuminating chapter on the development of the theme of "believing" in the fourth Gospel is somewhat aside from the purpose of this paper. I shall classify the uses of "*pisteuo*" from the point of view of the fourth Gospel as a finished whole.)

Burton, E. D. "Lexicographical Studies of N. T. Words." 1920. Pages 9, 10.

"The words translated 'faith' and 'believe' in the N. T. are from the same root, and cognate in meaning. In the N. T. the idea common to them both is expressed more fully and definitely by the verb than by the noun . . ."

"While in James the separation of (intellectual) belief of the truth from the corresponding moral attitude toward God is contemplated as a possibility, this is yet regarded as distinctly abnormal. The language of other N. T. writers is based on the *normal relation of intellectual acceptance of truth and moral action*; especially in the writings of John, it is commonly assumed that to believe the truth about Christ, or to believe him, *is to take the position which such belief normally calls for*, viz.: acceptance of him and committal of one's self to him."

III.—Study of the particular uses of '*pisteuo*' in the fourth Gospel.

1. Classification.

For convenience I have classified the uses of "*pisteuo*" in the fourth Gospel as follows: (a) Explicit: those in which ethical content is explicitly given to the word by the context. (b) Positive: those uses in which the meaning seems clearly ethical, though the context is not quite explicit. (c) Doubtful: those in which either an ethical or a non-ethical meaning may be understood. (d) Negative: those in which the immediate context requires no ethical interpretation.

a. Explicit—In the following passages, I believe, there can be no doubt that the author explicitly gives an ethical

content to the word "*pisteuo*": 3:15, 16, 18 and 36; 4:48, 53; 6:29, 30, 35, 36, 40, 47 and 64; and 16:9.

b. Positive—In the following passages the ethical content of the word seems to me quite positive, though it is not explicitly given in the context: Jn. 1:12; 5:24, 38, 44; 7:38, 39; 8:24, 45, 46; 9:35, 36, 38; 11:25, 26; 12:36, 37, 44, 46; 14:12; 16:27; 17:8, 20; 20:29, 31.

c. Doubtful—In the following passages either an ethical or a non-ethical meaning may be understood: 1:7; 3:12; 4:39, 41, 42, 50; 5:46, 47; 7:48; 8:30, 31; 10:25, 26, 37, 38, 42; 11:15, 40, 42, 45, 48; 12:11, 38, 39, 42; 13:19; 14:1, 10, 11, 29; 16:30, 31; 19:35; 20:8.

d. Negative—In the following passages no ethical content is required by the immediate context: 1:51; 2:11, 22, 23, 24; 4:21; 6:30; 7:5, 31; 9:18; 11:27; 17:21; 20:25.

2. Discussion of classes of uses.

a. Explicit—I shall take up the passages above denoted as "explicit" in the order of their definiteness.

John 16:8-11. "And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they believe not on me; of righteousness, because I go to my Father, and ye see me no more; of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged."

I know of no words in human language by which the writer could have given a more definite ethical content to the word "believe." He says, categorically, that the sin (sin cannot be a non-ethical word) of which the Paraclete will convince the world, is that they did not "believe" on the Christ. Moreover, this sentence is a climax in the theme of "believing" in the book, for it stands here in the heart of the last discourse.

John 6:28, 29, 30, 31, 35, 36, 40, 47, 48, 63, 64, 68 and 69. "Then said they unto him, What shall we do, that we might work the works of God? Jesus answered and said unto them, this is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent. They said therefore unto him, What sign shewest thou them that we may see, and believe thee? What dost thou work? Our fathers did eat manna in the desert; as it is written, He gave them bread from

heaven to eat. . . . And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life; he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst. But I said unto you, That ye also have seen me, and believe not. . . . And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: And I will raise him up at the last day. . . . Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me hath everlasting life. I am that bread of life. . . . It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing; the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life. But there are some of you that believe not. For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were that believed not, and who should betray him. . . . Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God."

"Believing" is, of course, the theme of John 6:22-71. "The works of God" was the content of the ethical conception of the Jews. Jesus accepts their expression, and gives to the very phrase which they used a new significance: "This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent." I know of no means of human speech whereby "believing" could be given a more definite ethical content. The "works of God" and the "works of the Devil" are always in contrast in the fourth Gospel. "The one work which God wants men to do," says Jesus here, "is the act of the will by which they believe on him whom he hath sent." The questioners here mistake the meaning, however, and ask for a "sign." "Why?" says Jesus, "I am the bread of life. My message, and all that I represent, is that by which men must live. Those who will not recognize spiritual bread, must die. Those who will recognize, and accept (believe) shall have eternal life." And so the argument goes on, and is finally summed up for the disciples (verses 63, 64): "It is the spirit that giveth life, the flesh profiteth nothing. My words are just as clearly spirit and life as bread is bread. Those who refuse to believe my words are just as blameworthy as men who will

not eat. And yet there are some of you who do not believe!" That the disciples did understand the value which Jesus attached to believing in his words is shown by the saying of Peter, "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life. And we have believed and know that thou art the Holy One of God."

To give a sacramental interpretation to the above passage seems to me to do violence to the clear meaning of the passage as a whole, as well as to the history of the sacramental controversy. The clear meaning is that the person, words, and works of Jesus are so clearly Divine that the belief or unbelief of them is no longer an intellectual, but a moral question.

John 4:48, 49, 50, 53. "Then said Jesus unto him, Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe. The nobleman saith unto him, Sir, come down ere my child die. Jesus saith unto him, Go thy way; thy son liveth. And the man believed the word that Jesus had spoken unto him, and he went his way. . . . So the father knew that it was at the same hour, in the which Jesus said unto him, Thy son liveth; and himself believed, and his whole house."

In verse 48 it is evident that Jesus is looking for more than intellectual "believing." If that were all, why then did he object to a demand for "signs?" Nor was it credulity which Jesus wanted, for the fact of the man's coming gave evidence that he was already credulous. Jesus evidently wanted here as elsewhere, a full acceptance of his person, word, and work, together with the moral reaction which this would logically involve.

The fact that an obvious distinction is drawn between the "believing" of verse 50 and that of verse 53 is evidence that the author intends a deeper religious and ethical meaning in the latter instance.

John 3:14-21 and 36. "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned; but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God. . . He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him."

How can anyone give these verses the attention which they deserve without catching the author's intense feeling that the one burning moral question before the human race is the reaction of the individual to the Christ? Those who believe on him are already in possession of eternal life. "Believing" is equivalent to coming voluntarily out of darkness into light. Refusing to "believe" on him is evidence of greater love for evil deeds than for the light of Christ. (See also Jn. 8:24.) "*Pisteuo*" is interchangeable with "*peitho*," for which an ethical content can hardly be denied. Those who do not believe ("*Peitho*" is used here) are under the wrath of God, the basis of their condemnation being their preferring of darkness and evil to the light of God's Son.

b. Positive, Doubtful, and Negative classes. The limits of this paper will not permit a detailed discussion of the remaining three classes of uses of "*pisteuo*." I believe, however, that the above passages are sufficient to show that for the writer of the fourth Gospel, "believing" with reference to Jesus was a moral question. There are many other passages in which the ethical content seems to me equally clear, though the immediate context is not so explicit. In other instances the ethical significance might be doubted, and it is not surprising that there are also numerous passages in which "believing" may well be given a non-ethical content. The uses of "*pisteuo*" I have listed

and classified above, but I would not, even for a moment, endeavor to defend all the details of my classification. I simply maintain that the author does explicitly give to "*pisteuo*" an ethical significance. He is at liberty to use the word in other ways whenever he chooses.

c. Sidelights—I want to introduce here two passages which throw an interesting sidelight on the author's conception of the blameworthiness of not "believing." John 9:41, "Jesus said unto them, If ye were blind ye would have no sin; but now ye say we see: your sin remaineth." John 15:22, "If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin."

The sin of not "believing," to the author, is not ignorance, nor the simple state of being unconvinced. These two passages, one taken from a controversy, the other from the last discourse, show clearly that those who have not had ample evidence are not blameworthy. "Not believing" is conscious willful rejecting of the obvious truth.

The following passage also throws an interesting sidelight on our problem—John 7:17: "If any man willet to do his will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it is of God, or whether I speak of myself."

This verse gives the positive side of that of which the two verses quoted immediately above give the negative side. "Believing" is not a matter of abtruse "intellectualization," nor yet of simple credulity, but to anyone who is really in earnest about doing the will of God (this was the heart of ethics for the Jews), the Divinity of the message of Jesus will be perfectly clear. "Believing" is a voluntary acceptance of what is obviously true, in accordance with the fundamental desire to do the will of God.

IV.—Conclusion: Modern application.

In the above sections of this paper I have attempted to keep within the bounds of historical investigation, and to determine what thought the author of the fourth Gospel intended to convey. If Prof. Case be right ("Evolution of Christianity"), we scarcely dare hope that in the

thought conveyed to contemporaries in the first centuries we shall find anything of much value for ourselves. My conviction is, however, that the conception of "believing" with regard to Jesus, which we find in the fourth Gospel, is remarkably true today, and pertinent to our modern circumstances. There is in the history of man something around which we stand in blank astonishment. Some call it myth; some call it half myth, and some call it the historic advent of God incarnate in human form. This matter can never be bounded by a creed nor comprehended by a theology, but whatever our rationale may be, the person, word, and work of Jesus Christ are spirit, light, bread. Men with an honest will to do the will of God will find it so and "have life in His name." But men who "love darkness rather than light" will still refuse to "believe." And the "Wrath of God abideth on them."