

By Grace Through Faith

J. D. BLAIR and A. R. MACBETH

One of the points of general agreement in the Plan of Church Union in North India and Pakistan—a point which no one would wish to dispute—is the statement (Plan I, iv) that we 'are saved by grace through faith'. The phrase is taken from St. Paul (Eph. 2:8) and since many are now looking forward to the time when the Plan can be brought to fulfilment it may be worth while to examine it in some detail so that we may more clearly understand just what it means or implies.

The phrase, we have said, is St. Paul's and we do not need to be reminded that the word *faith* is one that is a great favourite of his, one which is, as they say, central to his theology. But when he is speaking of the fruits of faith he does not by any means always use the same Greek expression. It is not safe to rely on translations in this matter, because, as in the Authorized Version 'by', 'through', 'out of' and 'in' (faith) are liable to become in translation 'by (faith)', so doubtless in the various Indian Versions there is the same difficulty in adequately representing the Greek of the New Testament.

For instance there are the quotations of Habakkuk 2:4, in Romans 1:17, and Gal. 3:11 (as well as in Heb. 10:38), 'the righteous shall live by faith'. In all cases, 'by faith' is the translation of *ἐκ πίστεως* (*ēk pisteōs*, out of faith). So, also, in Romans 3:30; 5:1; 9:30, 32; 10:6; Gal. 2:16; 3:8, 24, in all of which cases we are said to be justified or to receive justification (*δικαιοσύνη*, translated *righteousness* in R.V., but we shall have a word to say about that in a moment), such justification arising from our faith, just as the *promise* (Gal. 3:22) arises from faith.

Or there is the simple dative *πίστει* (*Pistei*, by faith) with or without the definite article. In Acts 26:18, Paul, quoting the words heard in his vision, speaks of 'them that are sanctified by faith in Me', just as in Acts 15:9 Peter had spoken of God cleansing the hearts of the Gentiles 'by (the) faith'. In Rom. 3:28 (in spite of 5:1 to follow where we read 'out of faith') we are justified 'by faith' (*πίστει*) and in 5:2 again our approach to God is 'by (the) faith'. The simple dative also occurs in similar contexts in Rom. 4:19f.; 11:20; 2 Cor. 1:24 (as well as many times in Hebrews in contexts not relevant to the present discussion).

'In faith' (*ἐν πίστει*) comes only once, in Gal. 2:20 'that life which I now live in the flesh I live in Faith, the faith which is in

the Son of God'. Similarly, ἐπὶ πίστει 'on the ground of faith' is only found in St. Paul in Phil. 3:9. But 'through faith' (διὰ πίστεως) is found in a number of places—Rom. 3:22, 25, 30f.; Gal. 2:16; 3:14, 26; Eph. 2:8; 3:12, 17; Phil. 3:9; Col. 2:12; 2 Tim. 3:15. We might note specially that in Gal. 2:16 ('justified . . . through faith in Jesus Christ') the phrase 'through faith' is immediately followed by 'out of faith' (ἐκ πίστεως) in exactly the same sense, saying positively what was previously said negatively. Again, the promise of God which was 'out of faith' in Gal. 3:22 is 'through faith' in Gal. 3:14. And in Ephesians 3:12 our 'access' which is in Romans 5:2 is 'by faith' (τῇ πίστει) is 'through the faith' (διὰ τῆς πίστεως).

We cannot help concluding that St. Paul uses all these cases and prepositions fairly indiscriminately. Indeed we might say that he used them loosely if that did not imply that he did not think that there was much difference between them and that one was as correct as the other. The fact is they are all correct. This does not only mean that St. Paul spoke of faith so often in his letters that he felt bound from time to time to vary the preposition he used with it in the interests of style. It means that faith was to him so fundamental a thing that he was compelled to use every possible expression so that he might convey to others something of the fullness of meaning which the word had for him.

What was that meaning? It was something to do with the great thing that had befallen Paul on the Road to Damascus, the great change in his life, his outlook, his activities, his attitude to God and men which had there begun. God—no one else, certainly no human agency, could have done it—had there lifted him up and turned him round to face a different direction, to accept that Jesus, whom he had previously persecuted, as his Saviour. He accepted the fact that God had done this (there was for him no other course)—he believed it (πιστεύειν), but that belief, that faith (πίστις) was not a dry academic thing, it coloured and transformed all his life, his mind, his will, his emotions, his thoughts, words and deeds. This change wrought by God and the corresponding result in his life he again and again contrasts with his previous efforts at serving the same God by a strict observance of the Jewish Law. Now he had a place of standing before God (Rom. 11:20, cf. 2 Cor. 1:24), a relationship which he had not realized before, an entry into the presence of God which he had never known to exist (Rom. 5:2; Eph. 3:12). But especially he loves to say that he has been 'justified' (δικαιωσθαι) or has become possessed of 'righteousness' (δικαιοσύνη)—and in the case of both words thus translated it is unfortunate that no better English equivalent could be found. To be 'justified' really means to have been granted, by an act of God through sharing in the risen life of Jesus Christ, admission into God's Kingdom, and 'righteousness' is the corresponding noun. Neither of the words has reference to any human merit or act or condition of life.

All this, St. Paul says, comes 'out of', 'by', 'in', 'on account of', 'through' faith—that is, through his response to the vision of God given to him. And this he emphasizes so strongly (and those who, like St. Augustine and Martin Luther, have shared an experience similar to his, have emphasized it still more) that among Christians 'by faith alone' (*sola fide*) has become a sort of watchword. Such Christians forget two things—they forget that by 'faith alone' is not a phrase to be found anywhere in the Bible, and they forget that all have not shared St. Paul's experience of a sudden conversion. It is perhaps almost inevitable that those who have not had the same immediate apprehension of the overwhelming power of God's might and love should also fail to perceive equally clearly with St. Paul what faith in its fullness means. To them, the response to God's mighty love may be lifelong struggle, not a once-for-all experience, and consequently faith becomes not so much a lasting state in which they can continually rejoice, as a thing to be striven for. 'Faith', it has been said (Sanday and Headlam, Romans, p. 26), 'is the "yes" of the soul when the central proposition of Christianity is presented to it'—but that 'yes' does not come equally naturally or equally easily to all. And the result of striving for it as a *thing* leads imperceptibly into a frame of mind which sees it as something which may become a possession of *mine*, something which *I* hold, something which belongs (at least potentially) to *me*. So that those who must emphasize that salvation and justification are not of works but of faith are frequently guilty of making that faith itself a work—something of *mine*, on which I can rely. When that happens, 'by faith alone' may be a most misleading phrase.

But as we have said, it is not a phrase which St. Paul uses. Indeed, he is careful to teach his converts that faith 'should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God' (1 Cor. 2:5). Justification, sanctification, the promise of God all come indeed 'out of faith', 'by faith', 'through faith', but this is all of *God's grace*, His kindness, His free gift. Christ Jesus is indeed 'a propitiation, through faith', but what we are justified by is 'His (God's) grace' (Rom. 3:24f.). The promise to Abraham and his seed is indeed 'of faith', but only 'that it may be according to grace' (Rom. 4:16). Most clearly of all, in the place where St. Paul has occasion to describe the whole process, he says, 'by grace have ye been saved through faith', and he emphasizes this by adding, 'not of yourselves; it is the gift of God' (Eph. 2:8).

'It is the gift of God'—in the life of a Christian the importance of the phrase can hardly be exaggerated. Our standing in the sight of God is not the result of our works, or even of our faith, as if that faith had value in itself, as if something belonging to me was at least in part, or in some sense, responsible for my salvation. There was once a woman who came to our Lord in the midst of a crowd thronging a narrow street, unknown, unnoticed, and touched the hem of His garment. At once she was healed; and then Jesus told her (as He had told so many others) 'thy faith

hath saved thee ; go in peace ' (Mark 5:34, marg.). In what sense did the faith of the woman save her ? Was it her faith that healed her ? Or was it the power of God proceeding forth from our Lord ? She could not remain hidden because our Lord felt the gift proceeding from Him. It was the gift of God that healed her ; her faith enabled her to receive the gift. ' By grace . . . through faith . . . it is the gift of God.' ' Thy faith hath saved thee ' ; yes, in a sense ; and our Lord, in His desire to draw attention away from Himself to the goodness of His Father, and to prepare us all for the great dignity of being children of God (in and through Himself) and of living in faith in Him, calls the woman's attention to what was her own part in her healing, her faith, which opened herself to the inflowing stream of God's grace. So she was (and we are) encouraged to have faith in God, and to wait for His gift.

A misinterpretation of our Lord's words ' thy faith hath saved thee ' (or rather a false emphasis placed upon them) has led to the attitude which Leslie Weatherhead* deprecates in those who desire spiritual healing, an attitude characterized by the words, ' I suppose I could not get well because I had not enough faith '. Here faith is exalted into an active principle by whose power I may be healed—if I have enough of it, I shall get well. So, also, among those who emphasize salvation by faith, and faith alone ; consciously or unconsciously they tend to think of faith as an active power by which I, as it were, take hold of a salvation which God has left lying about for such as have faith to pick up. But salvation is not something which I take, let alone something which I earn ; it is the gift of God which He is waiting to pour on those who turn to Him. And faith, whether for healing or for eternal salvation is not a power in itself ; it is a belief in the power of God, coupled with a turning to God to receive that power. So it is not the size of my faith that matters ; it is the size of the goodness of God, and His faithfulness and power.

We said above that many people make faith into a work, and by that is meant precisely this, that for them faith becomes an active power, and something for which a man has merit. He earns salvation by his faith. But if this is so, salvation is not the free gift of God. If salvation be by faith alone, what is the need of Baptism ? Baptism becomes only the declaring of *my* faith, and therefore might be regarded as dispensable. By faith alone, also, I might receive the Body and Blood of Christ—what need of a Sacrament ? Surely one of the great reasons why Sacraments are necessary is that man may always understand that the grace which he receives through them is by the act of God. The grace does not come as wages for his own faith. His faith indeed accompanies the Sacrament, it brings him to it, it prepares him to receive the grace. But the Sacrament itself is the deed of gift performed by God through the appointed ministers of the Church,

* *Psychology, Religion and Healing*, p. 428f.

which is Christ's Body, a solemn pledge and assurance of the reality of that gift ; so that we may know that it is *by* grace that we are saved *through* faith. It is not by works that we are saved, lest anyone should boast, even of his faith : for it is not of ourselves, it is the gift of God.

'When we once begin to form good resolutions, God gives us every opportunity of carrying them out.'

ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM : Homilies