

Editorial--

Faith and Freedom

GEORGE ALLEN TURNER

In the minds of many the two concepts of faith and freedom are antithetical. This is, of course, dependent upon the definitions given the terms. To those who view them as in antithesis, faith would be regarded as a rather credulous and naive acceptance of tradition, while freedom would represent the movement of reason and investigation unfettered and uninhibited by considerations of value. Historically there is considerable justification for this viewpoint. On the other hand the viewpoint rests upon dubious definitions of these terms and may represent an easy, superficial, and erroneous generalization. Indeed it may be shown that freedom is not the alternative to faith, but rather its consequent.

While generalizations are often misleading, they may be helpful in gaining perspective. The sixteenth century may be characterized as an age of faith, a period in western history when credulity and tradition were sloughed off by the discovery of deeper spiritual verities. This resurgence of faith led, in the seventeenth century, to a demand for freedom, first religious and then political. This phase of freedom continued through the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century the pendulum swung back towards the emphasis upon faith. It was the century of progress, of continuity nourished by a basic faith in God, in man, and in the future. By the beginning of the present century religious faith was increasingly disturbed by doubts and uncertainty. In western countries security came to be prized more highly than freedom and individual initiative, especially after the economic depression of the thirties. While the nineteenth century was one of confidence, stability and progress, the twentieth thus far has been one of instability, uncertainty, and, in some respects, retrogression. The rosy optimism reflected in the concept of

building a "brave new world" and its religious counterpart of bringing in the Kingdom of God, could not survive the catastrophes of the two world-wars, the depression, and the atom bomb. Those who have been emphasizing that man is a sinner have at last won a respectable hearing, aided as they have been, not only by Biblical exegesis but also by the shocking realities of contemporary events.

A helpful analysis of British thought in this century appears in J. W. B. Smith, *An Introduction to Scripture Teaching* (Thomas Nelson, 1949). The author describes the period from 1870 to 1918 as one in which traditional views of the Bible and of education predominated. The next period, 1918 to 1944, was one of confusion and transition. The results of higher criticism of the Bible had then made themselves felt in religious education. Since 1944 there has been an attempt at reconstruction, necessitated by the fact that loss of religious faith led to serious moral and social evils. The author seeks to help the situation by suggesting how the Bible may be made more effective and influential without ignoring the "assured results" of modern critical scholarship. The suggested solution is a new curriculum of Biblical studies suitable for teen-age youth in which the teacher leads the pupils to see that the historical inaccuracies of the Bible do not spoil its religious message. The problem thus centers around the use to be made of the Bible. It is still authoritative but not in the old sense, i.e., as the very words of God; it is rather the Word of God mediated through fallible men. Even Jesus, thinks Smith, accepted many of the erroneous concepts of his age, such as belief in demon possession, but this does not destroy his religious *value* for us. In this manner of circular reasoning Jesus is declared to be the ultimate in

truth and the highest revelation of God even though the written records of his life and words afford only an approximation to the historical reality. A way is sought towards a completely trustworthy revelation even though the vehicle of that revelation is not fully trustworthy. Jesus is placed in contrast to the records which portray him. The records are disappointingly human and hence fallible; Jesus is perfect. The question of how Jesus can be known to be infallible when the avenue of that knowledge is not inadequate is not seriously faced. On closer examination even Jesus is not infallible; in him the human is so potent a factor that he is not free from errors even in the spiritual realm. There is a reminder of gnostic dualism and hence docetism here. The court of final appeal is the individual; the ultimate criterion is subjective. The above viewpoint is fairly typical of the contemporary attitude toward the authority of the Scriptures today.

Thus, freedom, of a certain kind, has had its day. This freedom was regarded as relief from dogma, tradition, authority, "verbalism," and the past. It is now seen to have been negative and barren because lacking in positive convictions and affirmations. The weakness of the contemporary movement to rebuild faith is that it is too subjective and does not take a sufficiently serious view of the facts. There is a tendency to divorce faith from history, reminiscent of the method of Ritschl in making value-judgments the primary data of religion. The faith which needs to be summoned must not be mere credulity or the perpetuation of shibboleths. It must be a clear-eyed faith, based upon available evidence, a faith which does not shrink from, but rather welcomes scrutiny. Such a faith emancipates, not so much *from* something as *to* something. It does not fear critical questions nor become apprehensive when its foundations are being investigated. It is confident of confirmation on the basis of *evidence*. The Biblical writers were surprisingly objective and factual. Even the moving chronicle of the passion is related with astonishing detachment. "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you"

is the typical apologetic. When the messengers of John came to ascertain Jesus' messianic role they were not scolded or indoctrinated, but, were directed to present John with the evidence, leaving him to draw his own conclusions.

The importance of distinguishing fact from "mythus" would be less were not Judaism and Christianity both *historical* faiths. Event and belief are so intimately bound together that the task of grasping principles by which the infallible Word is to be extricated from the fallible record cannot be lightly dismissed. This problem has not been faced seriously enough by contemporary theologians. The Bible writers wrote in the conviction that God had revealed himself in historical events, not independently of them. If the historical records are not trustworthy how can one be confident that he has correctly reconstructed that of which they speak? Such a student is like Archimedes trying to lift the world without a fulcrum.

The point is that freedom comes from faith, not apart from it. A faith which grips reality, which apprehends truth by the proper use of the avenues of knowledge, such a faith has a liberating effect. It enables its possessor to distinguish between the chaff and the wheat, between essentials and non-essentials. Historically it can be shown that those who have taken the Scriptures in their simplicity have experienced a spiritual emancipation. This emancipation is not from the word but through the word. "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed, and ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." The faith which liberates, however is not indiscriminate credulity but the enlightened and audacious insight into "unseen reality." Such a faith is paradoxical in nature. It is analogous to the paradox that "this bondage to love sets me perfectly free." It is described as "the evidence of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen," and as the "knowledge which passes understanding." Thus higher synthesis assures one that it is not freedom *or* faith, nor freedom *and* faith, but rather freedom *through* faith.