

Chapter One

CONTROVERSY

Mary had been ill for some months with Epstein Barr Syndrome, commonly called ‘Yuppie flu’ or ‘the disease of the nineties’.

Her doctors had tried many medications to bring her back to the healthy young lady she had been a year before, but they were perplexed, as were all the medical profession, by this disease which attacks the immune system, causing its victim to be very low in energy with continual weariness.

There was no known cure and ignorance of its causes began to produce fear in many of Mary’s friends. Some associated it with AIDS, that other scourge affecting the immune system. She had been very active in her church but now she stayed away as no one was sure if this disease was contagious. She read many books and watched television documentaries about the disease, even trying some of the experimental ‘cures’ recommended. Few friends came to visit her though some did telephone regularly to see how she was doing. They told her that the church were all praying for her and that she should remain encouraged.

Since her teen years, Mary had been a believer in the Lord Jesus, having given her life to Him at a church service. Over the years her belief and trust had grown as she studied the Scriptures, prayed and faithfully attended the church services. Through the trying months of her sickness she had held on to her trust in the Lord, believing that *all things work together for good to those that love the Lord*. Even though she did not understand, she would still trust Him.

Though she was not from my church, it was my practice to visit Mary a couple of times a month. We had become friends through another ministry in which we had been involved, so it concerned me to see her so weak in this dreadful disease. She would always be cheerful and grateful as I drove her to her bank or the shops, something she could not do for herself in that debilitating condition.

One day, however, when I arrived at her home, I found her greatly distressed. It took quite some time for her to compose herself enough to tell me what had happened. She had received a telephone call from one of her closest ‘friends’ at church, telling her that the prayer group had decided to stop praying for her recovery. The reason given was that ‘she obviously did not have faith, or she would have been healed by now’. The implication was that, as she was ‘faithless’ they could no longer consider her a part of their family!

What a terrible misunderstanding of the nature of FAITH and how it operates in our lives! As I study the Scriptures I see nothing that justifies the actions, or beliefs, of that church prayer group. To them, evidently, faith was something one could whip up at will, by one’s own effort or diligence. If Mary had been able to create enough of this mysterious ‘essence’ called faith, God

would have been compelled to meet her need of healing! ie; faith is quantitative; a sufficient measure pleases God. She only needed to believe *more!*

I believe in 'divine healing' as one of the riches afforded us in the victory of the cross, but have discovered that there is *no formula* to obtain it. God is still sovereign in granting healing and good health, and no amount of believing, hours of saying prayers, or buckets of tears measure up to His sovereign grace.

Like the father of the demonic child whose story is recorded in Mark 9, Mary cried out "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" In that story, the disciples had *believed* that they could heal the boy but they had failed. Jesus pointed out to them that it was *faith* they needed, not belief. One could add, "even the devils believe!".

Belief is NOT faith.

Pastor John was worried! Just two years earlier, he had seen the attendance at his small church mushroom as many new people came into fellowship. Whole families had been converted and there had been talk of revival. They had soon passed the two-hundred mark in regular attendance, financial offerings were up by more than 100% over previous years and an excitement pervaded the sanctuary each week. It had been easy to preach and there were always volunteers to man the many ministries springing up in every department of the church.

"Pastor, we need to build a bigger sanctuary," said his elders. "God is obviously doing a major work in our community." It had not been difficult to persuade the congregation to go along with this and soon plans were being made for a sanctuary that would hold over a thousand worshippers. Anyone who expressed apprehension over the grandiose plans was branded as 'lacking faith'. Indeed, as God was evidently in this, greater faith ought to be exercised. So, the plans escalated until a building was planned that would ultimately cost over three million dollars!

What John had not planned for was a great increase in mortgage rates at the same time as a major employer pulled out of that small town, leaving many unemployed, several of whom were members of John's church. The interest payments soon became too large for the congregation, and the problem was compounded as people started to leave that fellowship rather than be in a church shackled with a large financial burden which was, in their opinion, not of their own making.

What had gone wrong? Had God failed them when they had exercised such great *faith* ? Or had John - and his elders - mistaken faith for presumption? Indeed, had they ever understood what faith is? To them, faith was *sanctified risk taking* with the unspoken rider that, if things don't work out, it must be God's fault!.

In His temptations by Satan, recorded for us in Luke 4: 1 - 13, Jesus shows us clearly the difference between faith and presumption.

Jesus had a real need - He was hungry after spending nearly six weeks in the wilderness. He had been led there by the Holy Spirit after His baptism in Jordan.

Though Scripture is silent, I believe it was there that He communed with His heavenly Father concerning the things that must happen to Him. He knew that His cup would be bitter. He also knew that He had a choice - His will or the Father's. After those days, Satan challenges Him with real temptation.

“If You are the Son of God, change these stones into bread.”

If He had done so, His hunger would have been assuaged and He would have proved Himself to be more powerful than His adversary. Surely that would have shown Him to be truly the Son of God. He knew He could do it! Why not name it and claim it? He could have, but that would not have been faith - it would have been presumption and would have been contrary to His Father's will.

In the third temptation, Satan even quotes Scripture to Jesus.

“You know that God will not allow you to be harmed. Even if You throw Yourself down from the topmost point of the temple, no harm will come to You. The angels will bear You up. Imagine what the people will think if You should do that! They will all flock to follow You, so You do not need to suffer and die on a cross.”

Jesus could have performed the miracle, claiming the promises of God's Word, but it would not have been

faith; it would have been presumption, again contrary to His Father's will.

Presumption is NOT faith.

Like Satan, there are many believers who will quote the Scriptures as their grounds for 'faith'. For example, I heard this taught on my television just this past week. The text was James 3: 2.

“The letter of James declares that if a man can control his own tongue, he is able to bridle the whole body. Therefore make sure you speak only positive things. If you do, you will never be sick!”

Such teachers justify their position with expressions of *faith*. “The Bible says it; I believe it; that's it!”

I am aware of major denominations who base their doctrines on such a misunderstanding of faith. They would group themselves under the generic title of *WORD OF FAITH* churches, more cynically called by terms such as *Name it, claim it!* or *Blab it, grab it!* or *Confess it, possess it!*. I seldom watch Christian TV but, when I do turn on my set on a Sunday morning, I will invariably find a station where such a message is being proclaimed.

I must confess that there is much good teaching in what they say. We need to be a people who can base our lives on the solid foundation of God's Word, with its many wonderful promises and riches that are ours *in Christ*. However, we must be very careful to correctly exegete the Word, claiming only those promises which apply to us, and being obedient to the conditions for such promises where conditions apply.

To claim that *nothing can separate me from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus* is the unconditional blessing for all believers. However, the promises of the Upper Room - *peace which the world cannot give or take away, a joy that is full* - are conditional upon the covenant of the Upper Room. There the disciples covenanted to *encourage and refresh one another* ("wash one another's feet"), *to obey His*

commandment to love one another and to be obedient to His Word.

I am convinced that there is another error in their understanding of faith. In reality, they should call themselves *WORD OF HOPE* churches, as hope has far more to do with belief than faith does! It is HOPE that says, "God said it! I believe it! That's good enough for me!"

We speak so little about Christian hope because we have confused it with worldly hope. Whenever the world speaks of hope, there is a negative possibility associated. "I hope it will not rain tomorrow." (it may do so!) "I hope I pass my exams!" (I may fail!) "I hope you will be happy in your marriage." (there may be a divorce!) Christian HOPE has no such negative connotation. It is an eager expectation of what is certain! So, when we speak out the truths of God's Word, when we claim its promises, we are expressing hope, not faith.

Hope is an attribute of the mind and is evidenced in confidence. Faith is an attribute of the heart and is evidenced in obedience.

Hope is NOT faith!

Another aspect of the power of belief is seen in the area of positive thinking. The world understands that *what you believe you are, you are*, so company executives regularly attend courses on positive thinking. "How to think yourself to success." Now, we have seminars for church leaders based on the same premises and practices.

Sadly, there are many churches, some very large with TV ministries, who would preach *faith* but, in reality, present positive thinking. In recent years, we have even introduced such New Age practices as *visualisation techniques* to produce healing from sickness, mistakenly equating the positive thinking of visualisation to faith.

“Imagine the cancer within your body. Can you see it? Now imagine the hand of Jesus reaching into that sick place and pulling the cancerous cells out. He’s doing it right now as you see Him! Hallelujah! You are now healed!”

As strange as it may seem, there are many people today who will give you testimony that the Lord has done such a healing for them. They will claim it to be the result of faith - exercised in visualisation. I was actually present in the small group where the above directions were given to a woman who had come forward for prayer.

Positive thinking is NOT faith!

There are great controversies raised whenever men speak about faith. Just what is faith? What, again, is a work of faith (1 Thess.1: 3 KJV) and further, what is the walk of faith? (2 Cor 5:7). To understand what faith is should be the desire of every believer as “without faith, it is impossible to please God.” (Heb 11:6).

Paul declares several times that we are “justified by faith” (e.g.; Ephesians 2:8,9 and Romans). James argues that “faith without works is dead” (2:17). Some who side with Paul (or rather, their interpretation of Paul) consider that James has no place in Holy Writ! Martin Luther, that great instrument of Reformation, declared that the book of James is “a book of straw” and should not be in the Scriptures! Others would side with James (or their interpretation of James), classifying all Pauline believers with derogatory terms such as “fundamentalists”.

Even the words of Jesus enter the controversy!

To Nicodemus He said those wonderful words, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16). However, when He commissioned His disciples to go into all the world to preach the good news, He added, “.. He who believes *and is baptized* shall be saved.”

Paul adds further confusion. “If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus Christ, and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved.” (Rom 10:9).

So, are we justified by faith? If so, is faith believing? Or is it trusting, or confessing, or being baptized, or?

Even the translators of the King James Version showed their confusion when, in Hebrews 10:23, they write, “Let us hold fast the profession of our faith ...”, translating the Greek word *elpis* as ‘faith’ when it is translated as ‘hope’ in every other context. Indeed, it seems to me that faith

and hope are regularly confused by the average believer! Hope has far more to do with belief than faith does!

Let me repeat: *Hope is an attribute of the mind and is evidenced in confidence. Faith is an attribute of the heart and is evidenced in obedience.*

But I am rushing ahead of myself