

FAITH AS OPPOSED TO DOUBT

Sermon delivered before the Southern Baptist Convention, at Greenville, South Carolina, May 10, 1882, by Rev. T. T. Eaton, D.D., Kentucky.

"I would thou wert cold or hot" (Rev. 3:15).

In his essay on the Apocalypse, Godet says of the epistles to the seven churches ^{ad:2} "They contain the portraiture of all the spiritual states either of good or evil in which Christianity on earth may find itself."

They seem to me to give also the mental state in which the human race may find itself, not only with reference to the Christian religion, but also with reference to its own ideas and activities. And no such true picture of this generation has been drawn by any pen as that which is ~~to~~ given to us in the letter to the church at Laodicea.

It was a self-satisfied church, thoroughly impressed with its own advantages and its own successes. It was so absorbed with its riches and increase of good, that it was very indifferent towards religion, boasting, we may suppose, of its charity, its moderation, its freedom from narrowness and bigotry. Was it not in its self-satisfaction, a true type of this age? Is not the air full of boastings of the wonderful works of this century? of its works, too, which have a money value, and which add, or are supposed to add, to the material riches of the world? You can scarcely open a newspaper or magazine, scarcely hear a speech which does not allude with much complacency to the "great progress" of the world in these days.

We go so much faster than our ancestors, we are "developing the resources of our country," and that generally means we are destroying them. We are cutting down forests, opening mines, burning coal, in fact acting as if the earth belonged solely to this generation, and we believe with the French king, "after us the deluge."

We are told to weariness of how many miles of railroad there are, while telegraphs and telephones are continually sounding in our ears, electric lights flashing in our eyes, and our lives made a burden by the chanted praises of phonographs and microphones. This might well be represented as the cackling age. Nothing can be done without telling the stars what a wonderful age this is, and what wonderful things it has done. "I am rich and increased in good," is the burden of the song the Nineteenth Century is singing to its own glory. Does Christ listen to this self-adulation with any more favor than he felt for that self-satisfied church at Laodicea?

This age is also remarkable for its lukewarmness. It seems impossible for it to show any deep earnestness, except in the matter of its riches. It is earnest enough in asking of any enterprise, "Will it pay?" in dollars and cents?" I have actually heard of Foreign Missions considered with reference to the opening of commerce and furnishing a market for the wares of Christian nations. But outside of trade, how little earnestness do we see? What does the world seem to have ^{thorough} ~~through~~ faith in, save in money? Our age has come to such a pass of lukewarmness that it cannot understand the earnest ages, and thinks the crusaders must have been influenced by a desire to open trade with the East in their wild efforts to capture and retain the Holy Land. In money-getting, we see earnestness, in all else, indifference--willingness that men shall believe what is wrong, or

rather doubt everything under the pretense of charitableness and moderation. The age is lukewarm to the punishment of its criminals, to the maintenance of its laws and to the prevalence of its principles, or rather of its opinions, for a lukewarm age cannot have principles rightly so called.

But there is this difference between the church of Laodicea and our century. That church was proud of her riches and her need of nothing, not of her indifference and lukewarmness; while this age thinks everything connected with it is altogether lovely. It praises its own flabbiness of intellect, its own impossibility of being either hot or cold on any subject. It looks with self-complacent pity upon the ages that were terribly in earnest as beneath it in "Sweetness and light." The jelly fish of the centuries, it hugs its flabby slimy softness and is thankful that it is not as those vertebrates, filled with narrow, hard, and angular bones! Yes, bones are just that--narrow, hard, and angular, yet give a boneless of flesh grace and beauty, if you can, much less strength and power.

It seems to me that if there can be anything new under the sun, it is this modern glorifying of doubt and attacking faith; this boasting of agnosticism; this priding oneself on believing nothing heartily. One might as well pride himself on having a partly paralyzed hand which could take a firm hold on anything, or boast of having the St. Vitus Dance which prevents there being any certainty which way one will go when once one starts. That doubt should be considered praiseworthy in itself and evidence of anything but feebleness of intellectual grasp, is one of the marvels of time. That men should

refuse faith in Christ is explicable, but that they should attack faith in itself and regard it as proof of narrowness, this is what fills me with wonder, and shall I add, disgust. And without any reference, save incidentally to the faith of the Christian, I would like to emphasize the grandeur and power of faith as an exercise and faculty of the human mind, as contrasted with the feebleness, the powerlessness and the misery of doubt. To believe something heartily is proof of a nobler and greater mind than to hold even truth itself in doubt. "I would thou wert cold or hot."

If there is no question involved higher than being comfortable in one's own mind, everyone should still strive to bring himself up to the capability of earnest faith. I tell you, brethren, doubt comes from feebleness of mental grasp and coldness of heart. It seems as constitutional with some men as does cold blood with fishes, and proves ~~not~~ only that they belong to a lower order of being. I mean no disrespect to doubters, any more than to fishes, when I assert that strong faith, like warm blood, marks a higher type of creature. It is only when they boast of their weakness and assert themselves the flower of humanity that it becomes necessary to tell them their true position in plain words.

Doubting makes us miserable, no matter what we doubt. Doubting the love of our friends is called jealousy and is more cruel to the heart that feels it than the grave. What is the loss of dear ones, in whom we had unshaken confidence, compared to doubting their fidelity and affection? Why even concerning historical matters

which do not affect us personally, doubts are uncomfortable. The old heroic stories of Rome I believed firmly in my youth and found pleasure in believing them. Niebuhr came along and proved that they were only legends and myths. Very well, I am ready to believe them myths and yet be comfortable in my mind. But when some one rises and declares that we cannot be sure, they may be myths or they may be veritable histories and I am left in doubt ^{at} ^{no} to believe concerning them, all the pleasure of the beautiful stories is gone. I have/certain standpoint from which to contemplate Horatius at the bridge or Scaevola with his burning right hand. If I think of them as myths of a great people, then the doubt as to whether they were not veritable men comes in to disturb me. If I think of them as real men, the pleasure and advantage of contemplating their self-devoted heroism are lost by the doubts of their existence; and my mind loses all the grandeur of the histories in going over the arguments for and against the reality of the stories. Whose heart can thrill and glow over the heroism of Judas Maccabeaus and Leonidas with their immortal bands at Eleasa and Thermopyloe, if he doubts whether there ever were such men or such battles? So long as you can believe firmly that a given event did or did not take place, histories of noble deeds and heroic characters can thrill and elevate you, but only so long.

The very fact that doubts are uncomfortable shows that we were meant to have as few of them as possible and to get rid

of them the best we may. No man filled with doubts is a happy man, nor, I may add, does he contribute to the happiness of those around him. Remember that doubting does not mean disbelief, but half belief. It is believing with a but and a perhaps that takes all the beauty, the pleasure and the power out of faith. Let us believe what we do believe with our whole hearts and disbelieve in the same thorough fashion. Shakespeare has well said---

"Our doubts are traitors
And make us lose the good we oft might win
By fearing to attempt."

Lukewarmness is as nauseating everywhere as it was to that church at Laodicea. To glorify doubt as a proof of a great mind and to condemn faith as narrow, is to glorify chaos against cosmos, darkness against light, and death against life. Doubt has never accomplished much. False theories have been overthrown after they had been implicitly believed for ages, but this has not been done by men who doubted those theories, but by men who discovered some facts in which they believed firmly, which were inconsistent with the theories. It was unshaken faith in the contradictory facts that met and overthrew the false theories. Men with faith in what was untrue have still done good and valuable work in science. We have reason to thank for their labors many of the old astronomers who held firmly to the Ptolemaic system and worked on that theory. But we have no work for them for which to thank any man who doubted alike the Ptolemaic system and the Copernician. Theories and had not faith in any. Even in scientific research

the very place where it has been most glorified, doubt has ever been feebleness, paralysis, death.

Ruskin claims that faith means literally "the doing," and that the Romans showed their wisdom in this name they gave it. He says: "In so far as it alone assuredly did, and it alone could do, what it meant to do, and was therefore the root and essence" (mark these words) "of all human deed, it was called by the Latin fides, or the 'doing,' which has passed into the French foi and the English faith. And therefore because in his doing always certain and in his speaking always true, His name, who leads the armies of Heaven is 'Faithful and True.' Faith is at once the source and substance of all human deed rightly so called." Now this was no Christian nor theological view of faith. It was an influencing and moving men without reference to religion that the Romans are said to have called faith "the doing." Whether Ruskin's etymology be admitted or not, there is this relation between the things, if it does not exist between the words, and remembering this we can see new forces in the declaration of James, "Faith without works is dead"—what is doing without deeds?

Faith is the basis of all knowledge. Suppose an infant born without faith, a babe without narrowness filled with the beauties of agnosticism and the grandeur of doubt. As he grows in years what could he know? If he doubted his mother, discredited his father and was skeptical toward his nurse; if he believed nothing till he had for it the evidences of his senses, what could he learn? That fire will burn and that the floor is hard when struck by young heads would comprise the sum total of his knowledge. Happiness of course would be impossible to a child without faith

8

in his parents' love, and all sense of safety would be gone if he lacked faith in his parents' wisdom and strength. Such a child, without faith, could acquire no education. We can imagine him in the schoolroom refusing to believe that the name of the first letter is "a." He has no evidence of his senses to that effect, only the word of the teacher, and that he doubts. Of course history would be a sealed book to him and geography, beyond his own town. He has never seen George Washington nor the river Nile, therefore he doubts the existence of both. What could such a child learn, beyond a little mathematics, even if he could get up faith enough in his teacher to believe what he said about the alphabet and the numerals? Suppose he doubted the veracity of all around him and had no faith in their honor and kindness. What would life be to him? Think out for yourselves what would be the condition of a child growing up without faith, and you will see that faith is at the foundation of all education, all love, all hope and all happiness.

There can be no increase to the sum of human knowledge without faith. No man can verify all the facts in any department of science. He must have faith in his predecessors, or he can do nothing. Suppose an astronomer doubted all the recorded appearances of comets and eclipses of the sun and moon--what would he accomplish? Till men cease to be mortal they must build on foundations which others have laid in every department of inquiry, and they must have faith in those foundations, ~~which others have~~ or they can accomplish nothing. No error is ever overthrown by doubt, but only, as some one has expressed it, "by the expulsive power of a new faith." It was not that Luther had doubts in reference to Popery, but that we was sure of the wickedness of selling indulgences and had no shadow of doubt respecting

the great doctrine of justification by faith, that made him a power in the land.

Faith may well be named "the doing"; because no man has ever accomplished anything in the earth who did not have a firm faith in something, his God, his destiny, his cause or his success. Show me any great thing which has been done, and I will show you back of that thing a great earnest soul, soul with unshaken faith. Had Columbus doubted, think you he would have striven so persistently to find a continent he had neither seen, heard, tasted nor heard, and of which experience told him nothing? The man who has no hearty faith in something makes no more impression upon the age in which he lives than the oyster upon the rock to which it has clung. Zoroaster, Gantama, Confucius and Mohamet were no conscious imposters, or they would have won few followers. When the augurs could laugh in each other's faces, the religion of Jupiter was making no converts and was dying even in Rome itself. We cannot make others believe what we ourselves doubt. We cannot move mankind without faith as the fulcrum on which to rest our lever. There can be no earnestness without faith, and what has man ever done without earnestness?

Faith is the sustaining power under discouragements, trials, failures and opposition, and it is the joy-giving power as well. It is faith in his cause and in his general that makes a soldier brave in defeat and steady in battle. Had you taken from Ironsides their faith in Cromwell and in their cause, think you England and all Europe would have crouched before their resistless swords? The bravest men turn cowards when their faith fails them

and the strongest arm hangs powerless when doubts assail. Imagine, if you can, the Apostle Paul troubled with doubts of the messiahship of Jesus and his resurrection from the dead? Imagine him as he stood on Mars Hill, doubting whether the Lord was God, or whether after all Zeus might not be! What would his eloquence, his learning and his ready tact have availed him in convincing the Athenians? But we cannot imagine Paul's doubting the resurrection of Christ. He was a strong man and had strong faith; he was an earnest and resolute man, and these qualities are incompatible with a doubting heart. To imagine a lukewarm Paul is beyond our power--and the heat of that great hot heart of his is felt still through all the centuries.

What would the martyrs have done amid their flames, if they had doubted the inspiration of their Bible? What could the missionaries do if they questioned the existence of God, and as they lie down to die in the fever blasted regions of the East, if they doubted the immortality of the soul? How could any man endure hardship and suffering if he lacked faith in himself, his cause, or his God? Why, our life-paths would be as toilsome and as dangerous as walking over treacherous quicksands, always slipping, if we had not firm faith to sustain us. Of all men most miserable are those who are lacking in faith.

And of all things the most ridiculous is this attacking the religion of Jesus, because it demands faith. Show me something which does not demand faith. It is the foundation of everything and "if the foundations be destroyed what can the righteous do?" or the unrighteous, for that matter? Faith is the basis of love, joy, courage, knowledge, earnestness, and is "the source

and substance of all human deed." On what should religion be founded if not on faith? It would be as reasonable to find fault with the Christian religion because it appeals to men's intelligence and has nothing to say for infants and idiots as to object to it for being rooted and grounded in faith. Christianity demands implicit faith, and so does everything else which requires to be carried out into action. So long as it is not necessary for me to do anything myself or to persuade others to do, so long it makes no difference whether I have faith or doubts; but when doing is involved, then faith is necessary. The cool effrontery with which some modern philosophers insist that we must believe nothing definite in religion which relates beyond to what is ~~beyond~~ our experience; while those same men ask us to believe that men came from monkeys--monkeys becoming men being a plain, common sense, every day experience with everybody--is refreshing, to say the least.

Christians, like other soldiers, have no business with doubts. Judges may weigh and consider and hesitate, but a soldier's business is to fight, and the firmer his faith in his general, his cause, his weapons and his comrades, the more effective will his fighting be. But suppose a Christian is beset with doubts, and this is the way some are chiefly tempted; suppose he doubts the inspiration of Scripture, the atonement of Christ, his divinity or any of these revealed truths? Let him realize that doubting is no sign of breadth of mind or depth of culture, but only of feebleness of intellectual grasp. That is doubt, bear in mind, not disbelief. It is no sign of weakness, though it is a grave error, to believe that Jesus was not divine and that

the Bible is not of God—a strong, earnest, resolute mind may deny these things. But to be in doubt is a sign of feeble mental grasp. Therefore the thing to do is not to coddle our doubts, far less to be proud of them, but let us get rid of them by solving them and putting our feet on solid ground as rapidly as we can. Above all, pray God for strength, so that our yea may be year and our nay, nay indeed.

To be proud of doubting is as foolish as if a man who had put up a frail house should be proud of its tottering in the wind, and imagining it, because it could shake, to be superior to his neighbor's building of tremorless stone. A near-sighted man is not sure whether the object before him is a horse or a man, but he does not therefore praise his liberal, catholic and unprejudiced eyes, nor pride himself on the indistinctness of his vision. He frankly admits that his friend, who can say positively "that is a man coming," has better vision. It is thus in spiritual things; keen sight is positive, while feebleness of vision is uncertain and hesitating. I suppose every man, not an idiot, does believe something heartily. Even about the things that most perplex him there are many points he can settle, and on these he can rest till more is made plain. Let him not become discouraged if all doubts do not vanish instantly because for truth, as for other things, men must

"Learn to labor and to wait."

Let the Christian, then, who is inclined to doubts, make the most of what he does thoroughly believe. Let him live up to that, fight for that, resolve that he will make every man believe that, and he will soon find himself becoming stronger so that he can believe

or disbelieve other things thoroughly.

Doubts are not for ministers of the gospel. It may do for the men in the ranks to be near-sighted, but it will not do for the officers of the army to be so. How can a man "contend earnestly for the faith once delivered unto the saints," if he is by no means sure what that faith is? How can we "warn every one night and day with tears," if we doubt the reality or the greatness of their peril? How can we preach so that men will be convinced of sin if we do not believe thoroughly in the terrible nature of sin and in their need of repentance? Of us, as of no others, is it true that without faith we can do nothing. We cannot make men believe what we do not thoroughly believe ourselves. No actor ever stirs an assembly deeply who does not lose himself in the character. Away with doubts! Let us believe or disbelieve heartily. Earnest faith in an error is better than no firm faith in anything; you can ^{carve} ~~carve~~ an image out of the hardest rock, but you cannot build up a statue from sand. How then can we form the likeness of Christ in a soul that believes nothing firmly. Heathens have been converted, infidels have renounced their disbelief for a child's faith in Christ, but the doubter drifts farther and farther away from his moorings. "I would thou wert cold or hot."

How shall we warm this lukewarm age? How shall we turn its indifference into zeal, its doubting into decision and its faithlessness into faith? The fire of God's love must burn brightly in our own souls. Nothing so moves others as hot hearts. If we doubt, who shall believe? If our arms are paralyzed, who shall fight for the Master? If our light flickers, how shall the pathway be illumined for the human race stumbling on in the darkness?

There is much similarity between the age of the early Romans emperors and this which is now upon us. Men said then, as they say now, "there is nothing new and nothing true, and it does not signify." Into that age ^{so} of doubting and so indifferent came the earnest Paul with a heart on fire and a soul aglow with a resolute faith; and voice, magnetic in its loving zeal, sounded through idle Athens and haughty Rome. This is new, Christ died for our sins and rose again for our justification; this is true, whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but have everlasting life; and it does signify, by all that is lasting in time and in death, by all that is lasting in time and undying in eternity, it does signify that you turn from your sins to this Jesus who will have mercy upon you, to this God who will have mercy upon you, to this God who will abundantly pardon. Shall such earnest voices sound forth today, my brethren? Shall the earnest conviction in our hearts reach the careless souls of men that they may turn from their idols of today as they turned from ~~their idols~~ Diana and Jupiter? "This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith"; there is no other. And that faith is as powerful today as when Paul preached to the augurs who laughed in each other's faces. But now, as then, it shall bring victory only to earnest souls like the great Apostle, only to men who can face doubting Greek and careless Romans with the power of unshaken conviction and can echo from hearts that know no shadow of doubt, those grand words, at once an encouragement in the contest and an earnest of the victory, "I know whom I have believed."