

FAITH: THE PRIMARY THING

By Bill Irby

Thomas Carlyle was a 19th century Scottish philosopher. He said: "What a man believes and lays to heart and knows for certain concerning his vital relations to this mysterious Universe, and his duty and destiny there...that is in all cases the primary thing for him and creatively determines all the rest." Carlyle also said "popular opinion is the greatest lie in the world." Perhaps we can consider that thought another time.

The concept of the word "primary" is interesting. It has in it the idea of "principal, chief, and of major importance." In the mind of our Scot a man's thought system or world view is the most important thing about him. It does not take much of a leap to see that this is close to the fully developed idea of Biblical faith.

Faith is the primary thing for a child of God. The verb associated with believing and having faith carries the meaning of trust joined with obedience. The noun form frequently contains the idea of knowledge based on evidence. The word for faith can also refer to a system of belief and its content. The concept of faith includes the ideas of trust, conclusions based on evidence and a system by which one lives. Passages that bear out these ideas are Romans 10:17, Hebrews 11:1 and 6, John 8:32, Ephesians 4:4-6, Romans 5:1, and 2 Corinthians 5:7.

Let's examine these contentions about faith as the primary thing in greater detail through the use of three questions. First, where does this primary thing called faith come from? In other words, whence cometh faith? The answer is that faith begins to exist when the human mind confronts evidence provided by God. There are two ways God does this. The first is by the existence of His Creation. The universe is a continual testimony to the reality of God. This is that which the theologians call the general revelation of God. The world is evidence that God is. Paul said that the evidence is so plain that a man who denies God is without excuse (see Romans 1:18-32).

The second way God provides this evidence is in the Bible, the specific revelation of the mind of God. God has seen to it that the Bible exists and that it contains all that we need to know about Him to be saved (see 2 Timothy 3:16-17). An example relating to the resurrection of Christ is 1 Corinthians 15:1-8. Had the religious parties that opposed early Christianity been able to debunk the claims of the apostles they would have done so. But the evidence in favor of the resurrection was overwhelming ("above five-hundred brethren at once"). Add to this the conversion of Saul of Tarsus to Christianity. These and other evidentiary points lead us to believe the truth claims of Christianity.

The second question I have in mind is this: How important is this primary thing called faith? It is, of course, essential. Without faith it is impossible to please God (see Hebrews 11:6). We know from the history of the people of Israel the dangers of unbelief (see Hebrews 3:12ff.).

The third question has to do with the real spiritual and metaphysical power of faith: What is the scope of activity and application of this primary thing called faith? The answer is that faith, this primary thing, this unique Christian worldview, has application everyday and everywhere and in every way. The rhetorician Richard Weaver helped me to see that the system of faith informs three areas of our thinking. First, it informs our specific ideas about things (e.g., what is a baby?). Second, our general beliefs and convictions (e.g., is ethnic cleansing good? Why not? May I say catty and hurtful things about my fellow Christians?). Third, our metaphysical concept of the world...what one really thinks is important about this life. Christian faith answers these all-inclusive questions in rather specific ways (2 Corinthians 5:7).

Faith then is the primary thing. We all operate out of some sort of system or worldview. The same world is here for everybody...it itself is not a variable. It is what you think about the world that makes you unique. Do you look at the world with the eye of Christian faith, the primary thing?