

CHAPTER XIV.

OF SAVING FAITH.

Section I.—The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts; and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word: by which also, and by the administration of the sacraments, and prayer, it is increased and strengthened.

EXPOSITION.

“He that believeth, and is baptised, shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned,” is the solemn announcement of the Saviour himself. The place thus assigned to faith in the matter of salvation, shows that the subject of this chapter possesses the deepest interest. If a Saviour was necessary to the recovery of lost sinners, faith in that Saviour is no less necessary to the actual enjoyment of salvation. The vast importance of having scriptural views of the nature of saving faith must, therefore, be obvious. The present section teaches us—

1. That the subjects of this faith are elect sinners. All whom God from eternity elected to everlasting life are in time brought to believe to the saving of their souls. An apostle affirms: “As many as were ordained to eternal life believed;” and Christ himself declares: “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me.”—Acts xiii. 48; John vi. 37. “The faith of God’s elect” differs from every other sort of faith. Saving faith is supernatural—the act of a renewed soul—a living principle, which purifies the heart, works by love, and overcomes the world; it must, therefore, be widely different from a natural, a dead, or a common faith. It is denominated “precious faith,” “faith unfeigned,” “the faith of the operation of God;” and that faith to which the Scripture applies so many discriminating epithets must surely possess some quality peculiar to itself. Accordingly, we read in Scripture of many who believed, and yet did not possess saving faith. Simon the sorcerer believed; Agrippa believed; the hearers compared to the stony ground believed; and many believed in the name of Jesus, when they saw the miracles which he did; “but he did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men.” It is manifest, then, that a they do not speak accurately, cautiously, or safely, who represent all sorts of faith to be of the same specific nature; because they may all agree in some bare simple act or persuasion of the mind. It must be a great and dangerous mistake to think that the belief of any ordinary fact upon human testimony, and every assent given by men, or even devils, to any doctrines or facts

recorded in Scripture, is of the very same kind with that which is saving, although wanting so many things essential to the latter, of which so much is spoken, and which is so highly celebrated in the Book of God.

2. That this faith is wrought in the hearts of the elect by the Holy Spirit. Some unequivocally affirm, that every man has perfect power to believe the gospel, independently of the Spirit's influences; and others, who seem to recognise the necessity of divine influence, do yet deny that any direct special influence is either needed or bestowed; and therefore ultimately ascribe the existence of faith in one rather than another to the freewill of man. That man, in his fallen state, "has lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation," we have formerly endeavoured to establish, and shall only now appeal to the explicit testimony of Scripture. Faith is declared to be "the gift of God"—to be of "the operation of God"—and to require the exertion of "mighty power, like that which wrought in Christ when God raised him from the dead."—Eph. i. 19, ii. 8; Col. ii. 12. The Holy Ghost is called "the Spirit of faith" (2 Cor. iv. 13); and faith is mentioned among "the fruits of the Spirit" (Gal. or 22); because the production of faith in the hearts of the elect peculiarly belongs to him, as the applier of the redemption purchased by Christ.

3. That faith is ordinarily wrought in the hearts of the elect by the ministry of the Word. "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God."—Rom. x. 17. Some allow of no other influence in this matter but the outward means. They explain away the plain import of those passages of Scripture which ascribe the production of faith to an immediate divine influence, as if no more were intended than that God furnishes men with the truth and its evidence. According to their interpretation, that emphatic declaration of Christ, "No man can come to me except the Father draw him," simply means, that the Father gives them the Scriptures. This is to substitute the means in the place of the efficient agent; and if the work is effected simply by the external means, there can be no propriety in speaking of the Holy Spirit as having anything to do in the production of faith. But our Confession clearly distinguishes between the work of the Holy Spirit and the ministry of the Word. There is a distinct and immediate influence of the Spirit on the heart; but the Spirit usually works by means, and the Word read or preached is the divinely appointed means by which he usually communicates his influence. Lydia, in common with others, heard the Word preached by Paul; but "the Lord opened her heart." The apostle clearly distinguishes between the gospel and the power which renders it successful: "Our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in popover, and in the Holy Ghost."—1 Thess. i. 5.

Section II.—By this faith, a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God himself speaking

therein; and acteth differently, upon that which each particular passage thereof containeth; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come. But the principle acts of saving faith are, accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.

EXPOSITION.

1. The general object of divine faith is the whole Word of God. As faith, in general, is an assent to truth upon testimony, so divine faith is an assent to divine truth upon divine testimony. Saving faith, therefore, includes an assent of the heart to all the truths revealed in the Word of God, whether they relate to the law or to the gospel, and that, not upon the testimony of any man or Church, nor because they appear agreeable to the dictates of natural reason, but on the ground of the truth and authority of God himself, speaking in the Scriptures, and evidencing themselves, by their own distinguishing light and power, to the mind.

2. The special and personal object of saving faith is the Lord Jesus Christ. To know Christ, and God as manifested in him, is comprehensive of all saving knowledge—a term by which faith is sometimes expressed.—John xvii. 3. Hence, this faith is called “the faith of Jesus Christ,” and the scope of the apostle’s doctrine is thus described: “Testifying both to the Jews and the Greeks repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.” “This faith consists in believing the testimony of God concerning his Son, and the life that is in him for men. It respects him in his person and whole character, according to the revelation made of him, and according to the measure of knowledge a person has of him as thus revealed, especially as now manifested, and more clearly exhibited, and freely offered in the gospel. It views him in his supreme Deity as ‘Immanuel, God with us;’ as vested with all saving offices, so as to bear, in the highest sense, the name Jesus or Saviour, Lord or King, the great High Priest, Messiah, or the Christ; and as exercising all his offices for the benefit of mankind sinners, with whom he entered into near affinity, by the assumption of their nature, that he might be capable of acting the part of a surety in obeying, dying, meriting, and mediating for them.” It will not do to limit the object of saving faith to any one doctrinal proposition—such as, that Jesus is the Son of God—or, that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh—or, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. This, at the utmost, would only be giving credit to a certain doctrine; but saving faith is a believing on the person of Christ, or an appropriating of Christ himself, with all the benefits and blessings included in him.

3. The principal acts of saving faith are, accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ. Romanists make faith to be nothing more than "a bare naked assent to the truth revealed in the Word." This notion was strenuously opposed by our Reformers, and is renounced in the National Covenant of Scotland, under the name of a "general and doubtful faith;" yet, many Protestants, in modern times, represent saving faith as nothing more than a simple assent to the doctrinal truths recorded in Scripture, and as exclusively an act of the understanding. But, although saving faith gives full credit to the whole Word of God, and particularly to the testimony of God concerning his Son Jesus Christ, as has been already stated, yet, its principal acts are "accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ." True faith is the belief of a testimony; but it must correspond to the nature of the testimony believed. Were the gospel a mere statement of speculative truths, or a record of facts in which we have no personal interest, then, a simple assent of the mind to these truths—the mere crediting of these facts, would constitute the faith of the gospel. But the gospel is not a mere statement of historical facts, or of abstract doctrines respecting the Saviour; it contains in it a free offer of Christ, and of salvation through him, to sinners of every class, who hear it, for their acceptance. Saving faith, therefore, that it may correspond to the testimony believed, must include the cordial acceptance or reception of Christ, as tendered to us in the gospel.

As Christ is exhibited in Scripture under various characters and similitudes, so faith in him is variously denominated. It is expressed by coming to him—by looking unto him—by fleeing to him for refuge—by eating his flesh and drinking his blood—by receiving him, and by resting upon him. It is to be observed, that the terms employed in our Confession do not denote different acts of faith, but are only different expressions of the same act. Believing on Christ is called a receiving of him, in reference to his being presented to poor sinners, as the gift of God to them; and it is styled a resting on him, because he is revealed in the gospel as a sure foundation, on which a sinner may lay the weight of his eternal salvation with the firmest confidence. It is manifest, that all the figurative descriptions of saving faith in Scripture imply a particular application of Christ by the soul, or a trusting in Christ for salvation to one's self in particular; and this is what some have called the appropriation of faith. It is no less evident, that in the phraseology of Scripture, faith is not simply an assent of the understanding, but implies an act of volition, accepting the Saviour and relying on him for salvation. This does not proceed upon any previous knowledge which the sinner has of his election; nor upon any persuasion that Christ died intentionally for him more than for others, for it is impossible to come to the knowledge of these things prior to believing; nor does it proceed upon the persuasion that Christ died equally for all men, and therefore for him in particular; nor upon the perception of any good qualities in

himself to distinguish him from others; but it proceeds solely upon the free, unlimited offer and promise of the gospel to the chief of sinners.

4. That the true believer receives and rests upon Christ alone for salvation. This distinguishes the true believer from such as rest their hope of salvation on the general mercy of God, without any respect to the mediation of Christ, or upon their own works of righteousness, or upon the righteousness of Christ and their own works conjoined.

5. That the true believer receives and rests upon Christ for a complete salvation. He trusts in Christ for salvation not only from wrath, but also from sin—not only for salvation from the guilt of sin, but also from its pollution and power—not only for happiness hereafter, but also for holiness here. In the language of the Confession, he rests upon Christ "for justification, sanctification, and eternal life;" and that "by virtue of the covenant of grace;" that is, as these blessings are exhibited and secured in that covenant.

Section III.—This faith is different in degrees, weak or strong; may be often and many ways assailed and weakened, but gets the victory; growing up in many to the attainment of a full assurance through Christ, who is both the author and finisher of our faith.

EXPOSITION.

Different interpretations have been put on this section. Some have maintained, that "assurance is here plainly made a fruit and consequent of saving faith, and not an essential act." Others have held that assurance is here supposed to be essential to saving faith, and that it belongs, in some degree, to every believer, strong or weak, but is always in proportion to the degree of his faith. "How faith," says the illustrious Boston, "can grow in any to a full assurance, if there be no assurance in the nature of it, I cannot comprehend." And another, amplifying this idea, says: "If there was not some degree of assurance in the nature of faith, it could never grow up to full assurance. To what degree soever anything may grow, it cannot, by its growth, assume a different nature. It may increase to a higher degree of the same kind, but not into another kind." Perhaps this difference of opinion has arisen from attaching a different meaning to the word assurance. Those who deny that assurance belongs to the nature of faith, understand, by that word, an assurance that a person is already in a state of salvation; but this sense of the term is disavowed by those who maintain that assurance is essential to faith. "It would greatly conduce to clear views of this subject," says one of the latter class of divines, "were the distinction between the assurance of faith and the assurance of sense rightly understood and inculcated. When we speak of assurance as essen-

tial to faith, many suppose we teach that none can be real Christians who do not feel that they have passed from death unto life, and have not unclouded and triumphant views of their own interest in Christ, so as to joy under the manifestations of his love. 'My beloved is mine, and I am his.' But God forbid that we should thus offend against the generation of his children. That many of them want such an assurance may not be questioned. This, however, is the assurance, not of faith, but of sense; and vastly different they are. The object of the former is Christ revealed in the Word; the object of the latter, Christ revealed in the heart. The ground of the former is the testimony of God without us; that of the latter, the work of the Spirit within us. The one embraces the promise, looking at nothing but the veracity of the promiser; the other enjoys the promise in the sweetness of its actual accomplishment. Faith trusts for pardon to the blood of Christ; sense asserts pardon from the comfortable intimations of it to the soul. By faith, we take the Lord Jesus for salvation; by sense, we feel that we are saved, from the Spirit's shining on his own gracious work in our hearts." The distinction between these two kinds of assurance has been accurately drawn by Dr M'Crie, and extremes on both hands judiciously pointed out. "Assurance," says he, "is of two kinds, which have been designed the assurance of faith and the assurance of sense. The former is direct, the latter indirect. The former is founded on the testimony of God; the latter, on experience. The object of the former is entirely without us; the object of the latter is chiefly within us. 'God hath spoken in his holiness, I will rejoice,' is the language of the former; 'we are his workmanship, created anew in Christ Jesus,' is the language of the latter. When a man gives me his promissory-note, I have the assurance of faith; when he gives me a pledge, or pays the interest regularly, I have the assurance of sense. They are perfectly consistent with one another, may exist in the soul at the same time, and their combination carries assurance to the highest point.

"Those who deny the assurance of faith, appear to labour under a mistake, both as to the gospel and as to believing. The gospel does not consist of general doctrines merely; but also of promises indefinitely proposed to all who hear it; to be enjoyed, not on the condition of believing, but in the way of believing. 'I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions, for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins.' 'I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean.' 'I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts.' 'Behold, I bring you glad tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.' Can a person believe these promises, truly and with understanding, without having some assurance of the blessings promised? There appears also to be a mistake as to the nature of faith, and the place which it holds in the application of redemption. It is a trusting in Christ, a relying upon him for salvation upon the ground of the divine testimo-

ny respecting him; and does not this always imply some degree of assurance or confidence?

“Others go to an opposite extreme. They maintain, that every true Christian always enjoys an absolute and unwavering certainty as to his final happiness—that he is a true believer, and in a state of salvation; and they dwell on the assurance of faith, to the neglect of the evidence which arises from Christian experience and growth in holiness. This is apt to cherish a spirit of presumption, on the one hand, and to throw persons into a state of despondency, on the other. There are various degrees of assurance, and in some genuine believers it may be scarcely perceptible. He who is the author and finisher of our faith, was careful not to break the bruised reed, or quench the smoking flax. While he rebuked the unbelief and unreasonable doubts of his disciples, he never called in question the reality of their faith. He received the man who said, ‘Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.’ While he said to Peter, ‘O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?’ he took him by the hand and lifted him out of the water. Grant that doubting is sinful; is there a just man on earth that doeth good and sinneth not? Are not the love and patience, and other gracious dispositions of a Christian, also sinfully defective? Urge the admonition, ‘Be not faithless, but believing;’ but neglect not to urge also, ‘Be ye holy, for I am holy.’ ‘Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect.’ Would it not be dangerous to the interest of holiness, and discreditable to religion, if a person were supposed to be in possession of perfect assurance, while subject to imperfection in every other respect? Is there not a proportional growth in all the members of the spiritual man? Would he not otherwise be a monstrous creature? Or is the exploded doctrine of sinless perfection in this life to be revived among us? He whose faith is faultless, and his assurance perfect and unvarying, sees Christ as he is, and is already completely like him. He would not be a fit inhabitant of earth; and the only prayer he could put up would be, ‘Now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace.’” [M’Crie’s Sermons. pp. 281-283]