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"Faith" In the Fourth Gospel

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A Paper Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies at St. John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Sacred Studies

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St. John's University
Collegeville, Minnesota

"This paper was written under the direction of"

Holt H. Graham

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I. INTRODUCTION

"These (signs) are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name." (Jn. 20:31).

In these words John, at the close of his book, makes known his intention in writing the fourth gospel. He presents his work as the testimony of a believer and desires that his witness might lead into faith those who did not have the privilege of seeing as he had seen. In John's gospel, faith is the great single expression covering everything that Jesus requires of men. In considering the nature of this faith John described, it is significant to note, by way of introduction, that although some form of the verb πιστεύειν (to believe) is used 98 times, never once does the noun form for faith (πίστις) appear.¹ This exclusive use of the verb gives evidence of the fact that in John's continuing interest in faith, believing in Christ is tantamount to knowing Christ or knowing God.

In Johannine faith there is a two-fold activity, initiated by God and responded to by man. Before there is any suggestion of an abstract truth, there is contact made, there is life flowing between God and man, there is revelation and faith. It is dynamic and it is personal, and unlike truths

¹ Gerald F. Hawthorne, "The Concept of Faith in the Fourth Gospel," Bibliotheca Sacra, Vol. 116 (January, 1959), No. 461, p. 117.

that are formulated, it is independent of changing historical conditions.

II. THE DISTINCTIVE JOHANNINE CONNATION.

The Fourth Gospel has a distinctive conception of faith, ascribing to it an active and vital quality which becomes in John a form of vision. No other New Testament author has laid such a stress on faith as vision. Jesus told Martha, "If you have faith, you will see the glory of God." (11:40). In John's perspective, with faith men apprehend and acknowledge Christ's deity through the veil of His humanity. Faith gives a vision of God and of everything in the light of God, so that the believer must renounce the standards of the world and find new standards for himself in the revelation of God that has been given him in Jesus Christ; this is what it means to "see" Jesus. (Jn 12:21-26).²

Opposed to faith is that purely physical vision whereby Jesus' contemporaries saw him without any saving effects. But, according to John (12:44), simple vision with faith leads to a deeper vision. Although no one has a direct vision of God, the man of faith has eternal life. He has the equivalent of the life-giving vision, or knowledge of God. The vision of faith is in every sense of the word a true vision of God and of truth, even though John does not deny that the ultimate

vision is reserved for the time when faith will yield to something even greater (I Jn 3:2).³ Faith remains, however, the capacity for seeing the glory of God, even now when Jesus is no longer visibly present. The believer attains eternal life through the vision and knowledge of God. "He who has seen Christ has seen the Father. To see the Father in Christ is to see His glory."⁴ Faith is therefore, in the distinctive Johannine idea, a form of knowledge or vision peculiar to those who find God in the person of Jesus, the object of saving knowledge, the truth and the life.

John's is indeed a Gospel of vitality, of dynamism, and of confirming faith in Jesus Christ. Through such concepts such as life, light, truth, and freedom, the fourth Gospel presents a rich concept of faith. There is a beautiful joining of objective and subjective elements of faith. God is life, light, truth, and freedom. Man shares this life, light, truth, and freedom through the total commitment and response of faith. John insists that faith is an active thing that involves man's whole life and being. Faith for John means accepting Jesus for what He is. Men can accept Him only to the degree that He makes known His identity - only to the degree that He manifests His glory. This insistence of John

³ Ibid., p. 835.

⁴ John J. Navone, S.J., "Leading Ideas In John's Gospel," The Bible Today, (November, 1965), p. 1314.

on faith leads us to consider in this survey of the manifestations of the concept in his gospel, what is intrinsically involved in it, what prompts this faith, as well as the levels at which it operated; and in the final analysis, the end results of faith. Not all that can or must be said about faith is to be found within the limits of this paper. It is only an attempt to give a cursory exposition of it.

III. HOW FAITH ARISES - DEGREES OF FAITH

John sees in faith a complex phenomenon. The Johanne picture shows faith resulting from witnessing a "sign" ($\sigma\eta\mu\epsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\nu$ 2:11, 23). A sign occasions faith in those who witness it, though not in all (4:50-54; 8:30; 10:42; 11:45-47; 12:9-11). John therefore distinguishes between two kinds of faith, and allows for those who cannot understand, but on the basis of what Jesus said, will follow Him. The various expressions faith can take and the relative value to be assigned them, are dramatized by John in several passages depicting progressive stages of conversion. For example, the Samaritan woman, the crowd of her fellow townsmen, and the Capernaum nobleman in Chapter 4, and the blind man in Chapter 9 are all led by Jesus, in different ways, and sometimes, by several steps, from a less to a more adequate faith. These are some of the major passages where John displays degrees of faith.⁵ Two of the

three passages in Chapter 4 introduce the element of belief in Jesus' word so as to depict a progression of faith. The first (4:39-42), involves the response of the crowd at Sychar to the testimony of the Samaritan woman. The second passage in Chapter 4 (vss. 46-54) deals with the nobleman's son whom Jesus heals. These introduce a preliminary act of faith, and one that is clearly intended as exemplary: both believe without seeing, on the strength only of Jesus' word.

The gradual development of faith is shown most clearly, however, in the dialogue following the healing of the man born blind (ch. 9). There it is not a matter of different bases of belief, but of a deepening awareness on the man's part, consequent to his healing, of who Jesus is. Faith here is not something which the man healed penetrates on his own initiative; it is called forth from him in the self-disclosure of Jesus. The chapter is a complex of scenes, but running through them, in the man's encounters both with the Jewish authorities and with Jesus, is his gradual perception of Jesus' identity. At first he knows only that "a man named Jesus" of unknown whereabouts, healed him (vss. 11f). Then he confesses that Jesus is a prophet (vs. 17). When the question of Jesus' moral credentials is raised, the man at first pleads ignorance (vs. 25) but eventually asserts that he must be "from God" (vs. 33). Finally, Jesus meets him and confronts him re-

garding his faith: "Do you believe in the Son of man?" (35). On being asked for some basis on which to believe (36), Jesus discloses his identity (37), and the man formally professes his faith in him (38). All of this takes place against the background of the authorities' unvarying faithlessness and so provides a kind of model of Christian conversion.⁶ Again, it is evident here that Johannine faith is not merely recognition and assent. As Jesus' vivid encounters with people whom he leads to faith shows, it is both trust and submission. It is worthwhile now to set out the Johannine conception of witness, because it is the objective factor to which faith is the corresponding subjective.

IV. BASIC SIGNIFICANCE OF WITNESS

There are two planes of witnessing: "If we accept the witnessing of men, the witnessing of God is greater, and the witnessing of God is this, that He has rendered testimony about His Son" (I Jn 5:9). On the human plane, the apostles show signs that they are aware of their job as witnesses. The second plane of witnessing is God's sphere. Jn 5:31-32 enunciates this theme. There is ANOTHER who bears witness. From 5:36 it appears that the Father bears this witness by giving into the hands of the Son works (i.e. miracles) which He does

6

Ibid., p. 165.

on earth.⁷ This gives significance to the meaning of "sign-inspired faith in John's Gospel - the perception of Jesus as the ultimate sign, the one sent from heaven to make God known. As we mentioned above, faith in Jesus was initiated in different ways and operated at different levels. It began in the disciples when they saw the miracle at Cana (John 2:11). As Fortna brings out: "After the sources' matter-of-fact assertion that this was Jesus' first sign, John (as we have already noted), has inserted the words "and he manifested his glory." In this way he subtly transforms the subsequent faith of the disciples. What had been belief merely in what the sign had shown about Jesus (a quite sufficient faith in the source's terms) becomes full commitment to him on the basis of his self-revelation."⁸

Faith then, becomes the end result of the acceptance of the witness. This can be further seen as faith was prompted in Nathaniel when he realized that Jesus had the ability to know him before meeting him, and to read his thoughts from a distance (1:48-49). The masses believed because they saw the signs Jesus kept doing in Jerusalem (2:23; 7:31). Some on the other hand believed without seeing miracles (20:29). Others believed because of personal testimony on the part of someone else (4:39; 10:42), and still others believed solely on the basis of what Jesus Himself had said (8:30). Faith that re-

7

Joseph Crehan, S.J., The Theology of St. John, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965, p. 26.

8

R. Fortna, "Source and Redaction in John," Journal of Biblical Literature, Volume 89, (1970), p. 165.

quired a miracle for initiation was not by any means the strongest or the loftiest, nor does it call forth praise from Jesus (cf. 20:29). Yet the miracles recorded by John seemed to be designed to aid in faith. He calls them (*GRMÉTΩ*), signs, not a wanton display of the spectacular, but a careful manifestation of the glory that was an intrinsic part of the person of Jesus Christ - a stepping stone to a mature and complete trust in Him as Saviour.⁹

Throughout his writing, John shows faith as the personal yet mysterious encounter with Jesus Christ, the divine Person, who bears witness to the Father through the Spirit. Following this initial encounter, Christ calls and attracts, and man responds. This response can be either one of rejection or that of free and willing commitment. Besides the affirmation and acceptance of truth, belief also responds by reciprocating love. Belief, therefore, opens the gates of love.

V. THE RELATIONSHIP OF LOVE TO FAITH IN ST. JOHN

The first detailed text which explicitly discusses faith as such in the fourth gospel is that of John 3:14-21, after the prologue. And in this very first detailed text faith stands in a very clear context of love: it is, in a sense, a man's re-

sponse to the advances of God's love. The very first passage in which John's fourth Gospel mentions love treats of it in relation to faith. In fact, John points out, faith is nothing more than a response of love in man's response to God's love. Love, in the Johannine concept is the necessary consequence of adherence to Jesus in faith. St. John does once, in fact, summarize the "commandment of God" in the words, "that we should believe in the Name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another" (1John 3:23).¹⁰

In the Sacerdotal prayer, we hear the words: "and I have made known to them Thy Name, and will make it known, in order that the love with which Thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them." (v.26) Jesus' prayer goes beyond His immediate followers to those who will believe through them, and then, so to speak, returns to include all together in that unity the last word of his teaching. Jesus makes the mystery of union the final end of his work; by achieving it the world will be forced to believe in Jesus' divine mission, God's love for his own will be revealed and show the world the eternal love of the Father for his divine Son.¹¹ In this then Johannine faith binds the believer to adherence to Jesus, to a real "discipleship," as John himself could call it by using the word in a wider sense as it appears in 4:1, 6:60, 61 and 66. Such discipleship coupled with faith are perfected only in love. The "first

10

Rudolf Schnackenburg, The Moral Teaching of the New Testament, New York: Herder and Herder, 1965, p. 320.

¹¹Louis Bouyer, The Fourth Gospel, Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1964, p. 204

farewell discourse (chapter 14) is especially informative on this point. Again as Schnackenburg points out:

The whole of the first part of this (14:1-14) is concerned with the necessity and power of faith in Jesus, which makes the disciples proof against all the shocks of the coming hour of darkness (cf. 13:19; 14:29; 16:4). When such faith is fully mature, it leads to a loving community with Jesus. The second part of the discourse, treating of the mystical communion of the disciples with Jesus and the Father (esp. 14:18-24), replaces faith by love. The exhortation in these verses is that love for Jesus must be confirmed by keeping his commandments. So then effectual love grows out of the actual mystical union with him. This emerges even more clearly from the discourse in chapter fifteen, where John writes that the disciples should remain in Jesus (vv. 4ff), especially in his love (v. 9f), that is, they should do everything to preserve the love and community given them by Jesus.¹²

At every stage John remains faithful to his single-minded and urgent call to faith and love, a call that contains all that God requires of his children in this world. Real faith demands love for Jesus. St. John's gospel resounds with these two balanced themes: love and faith. He harmonizes these into a melodious unity that can probably best be expressed as the mysterious response of human person to divine person. The great

¹²

Ibid., p. 319.

and lasting sign leading to belief is love. The sign of love is to be the main sign directing man to the commitment of belief. Jesus lived this love. If men today are to believe, it is because they are able to see how the witnesses of Christ continue His life of love. The greatest sign is to be the testimony of their love (13:35). Faith for St. John is primarily the full personal commitment in love to the person of Jesus Christ. It initiates communion, a communion that will come ultimately in vision. It is a response, a total, free spiritual commitment of the believing person to the person of God himself. It is a personal commitment that gratefully accepts faith, the gift of God. The concept of faith in John, like love, is a many-splendoured thing. The faith which is characteristic of John in particular is faith in Christ.

VI. JESUS, THE OBJECT OF FAITH IN JOHN

Christ is the object of faith - His person and work are the central reality of John's gospel. John writes to produce a living faith in Jesus. In the prologue to his gospel, John deals with five great facts about Jesus Christ. In summary fashion they consist of the following. First he begins by stating what Jesus Christ personally is. The Word, he says, was God, (v.1). John goes on to state what Jesus did (v. 3). As he progresses, he tells what Jesus Christ became (v. 4), what Jesus gives - here John presents Jesus as the giver of three

gifts: life, light, and new birth.

The prologue is all about Jesus - not simply an illustration of the Christ, the historic one. In John's mind, eternal life is the very person of Jesus Christ, the Word of God. This life was with the Father, was manifested to men and makes possible that fellowship with one another and with God the Father that the Son himself shares. The meaning which stands out as of greatest significance is belief in Jesus, of which He is the object and which is specially directed into Him.¹³ John 3:15-18 illustrates this well:

. . . in the same way the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life. For God loved the world so much that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not die but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to be its Judge, but to be its Savior. Whoever believes in the Son is not judged; whoever does not believe has already been judged, because he has not believed in God's only Son.

Faith, in John's Gospel, is Christological faith, that is, the confession that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God (20:31; cf. 11:27). John gives his evidence essentially as a believer striving to bring his readers to share his faith by believing "that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God."

¹³

George A. Buttrick, editor, The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Volume II, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 233.

This particular verse (20:30), tells us that a choice of narratives was made from a tradition containing many more things and also that the signs chosen for this work were written down in order that John's readers might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Vincent O'Keefe brings this out well in his article in which he says:

This indicates that the choice was not determined by an historical principle but rather by a theological one. Thus, it points out that according to the consciousness of the Evangelist, the Gospel was written by believers for believers, and this final purpose determined the selection and manner of presentation of the Gospel. Yet the author shows in his Gospel that the purpose is to narrate the events of the historical Jesus and at the same time show their relation to the Church. This Gospel brings out the identity between the Jesus of history and the Christ present in the Church. There are numerous references to the sacraments, and this indicates that the author wishes to relate the life of Jesus to the Christian mysteries contained in the sacraments. He wishes to point out that the same Jesus who live, died and rose, as he John, can testify, now lives in the Church, in her sacramental life, in her liturgy. The purpose of the 4th Gospel is to show that the whole Christian faith, cult and theology rely on and are contained in the life, death, and resurrection of the Word incarnate.¹⁴

14

Vincent O'Keefe, S. J. "The Gospel Read As Gospels," Faith, Reason, and the Gospels: A Selection of Modern Thought on Faith and the Gospels, (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1961), p. 241.

In Jesus everything is given to us. He is the key to all history, the center and the explanation of the entire universe. Eugene Joly enhances John's intent in centering his gospel on Jesus when he writes:

History indeed goes on, but it has no other meaning save the growth of Christ in the world, the completion of Christ's Body. When Christ is "total," this world will burst into the new earth and new heaven which will realize for ever the marriage of God with his creation. A hymn of unsurpassable beauty expresses this unfolding of God's plan: the prologue of the Fourth Gospel. It has been arranged below in two columns so as to bring out the parallelism between the last verse and the first, the last but one with the second, and so forth. Read first down and then up:

THE PROLOGUE OF JOHN

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>1-2 At the beginning of
time the Word al-
ready was;
and God had the
Word abiding with
him,
and the Word was
God.</p> <p>3. It was through him
that all things came
into being,
and without him
came nothing that
has come to be.</p> <p>4-5. In him there was life,
and that life was the
light of men.
And the light shines
in the darkness, a
darkness which was not
able to master it.</p> | <p>18. No man has ever seen
God;
but now his only-
begotten Son, who
abides in the bosom of
the Father,
has himself become our
interpreter.</p> <p>17. Through Moses the law
was given to us;
Through Jesus Christ
grace came to us, and
truth.</p> <p>16. We have all received
something out of his
abundance,
grace answering to
grace.</p> |
|---|---|

- 6-8. A man appeared, sent
from God, whose
name was John.
He came for a witness
to bear witness of
the light,
So that through him
all men might
learn to believe.
He was not the Light;
He was sent to bear
witness to the light.
- 9-11. There is one who
enlightens every soul
born into the world;
He was the true
Light.
He, through whom the
world was made, was
in the world,
and the world
treated him as a stranger.
He came to what was
his own,
and they who were
his own
gave him no welcome.
- 12-13. But all those who did welcome him he empowered to become
the children of God, all those who believe in his name;
their births came, not from human stock, not from
nature's will or man's, but from God.¹⁵
14. And the Word
was made flesh,
and came to dwell
among us;
and we had sight
of his glory,
glory such as
belongs to the
Father's only-
begotten Son,
full of grace
and truth.
15. We have John's
witness to him;
I told you,
cried John,
there was one
coming after me
who takes rank
before me;
He was when I
was not.

A whole book would be needed for a commentary on this;
we can in the limits of this exposition, only briefly indicate
the movement of thought. Of such is the synthesis of our faith.
Creation, indeed, is the work of the Word who animates it and

¹⁵
Eugene Joly, What Is Faith? (New York: Paulist
Press, 1963), pp. 117-18.

unceasingly tries to make himself present in the human consciousness and to find hospitality there. As Eugene Joly expresses it: "Jesus Christ is the supreme "epiphany" of God and His dwelling among us, so as to communicate to us the divine sonship and to introduce us into this intimacy with the Father. . . ."16

After contemplating the synthesis of our faith in this passage of St. John's, we are compelled to remember that we can believe in God, who is Love incarnate, only by loving. Believing means loving. Belief in Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, is the only means and the only possible way to attain life; love, however, especially active, fraternal love, is the necessary consequence of such faith. Faith rightly understood in the Johannine concept also includes love for God, Christ, our brothers, and the fulfillment of the moral duties springing from love.

To have faith is to have confidence in God's witnesses, and above all, to have confidence in Jesus Christ, and so to stake one's life on Jesus Christ. The fourth gospel was written "that you might believe . . . Blessed are those who believe without having seen." For Christians, Jesus is at one and the same time the motive and the object of our faith: we believe Jesus and we believe in Jesus. John re-

gards as superior faith-not-dependent-on-signs (14:11; 20-29). Yet faith, even understood in this fuller way, is not the end point of the fourth gospel. That is evident from the all-important addition John makes to the source's ending. The signs are written not only that men may believe in Jesus, but also that "believing you may have life in his name (20:31)."

The twentieth chapter of the fourth gospel was intended originally to form its conclusion, and John, it seems, has put a good deal of thought into its composition as well as into the selection of incidents from the risen life of Jesus, in order to deepen his reader's faith in the paschal mystery. John has carefully chosen four incidents: the astonishing experience of Peter and another disciple at the tomb of Jesus on Easter morning; the commission by the risen Lord to Mary Magdalene of the Good News of His resurrection and ascension; Christ's gift of the Holy Spirit to His disciples on Easter Sunday evening; and the profession of faith made by the incredulous Thomas one week later. These narratives sum up, in John's eyes, the paschal experience of the disciples; and he has arranged them in such a way that they form a coherent unity.¹⁷

The underlying theme in these four carefully chosen incidents portrays very vividly that it is by faith, by the gift of paschal faith in Jesus' divine Sonship and this alone which

17

David Michael Stanley, S.J., "St. John and the Paschal Mystery," Contemporary New Testament Studies, (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1965), pp. 343-8.

enables the disciples, Magdalen, Thomas and us to respond to Jesus' manifestation of the unique "glory which He has as Only-begotten from the Father." Thomas voiced the faith of them all with the words: "My Lord and my God" (Jn 20:28). Here we have one of the rare instances in the New Testament where the title, God, is given to Jesus Christ. John is fully conscious that, as a result of Jesus' resurrection and ascension and of His gift of the Holy Spirit, the divinity of Christ has been revealed to the disciples.

VII. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Once again, David Stanley describes well the impact of authentic faith as portrayed by the author of the fourth Gospel.

John, for his part, knows that it is necessary "to see the Son" in Jesus, and so "believe in Him" (John 6:40). John also knows that this cannot be done without the assistance of Him who is Spirit of Truth, whose role is to lead men into "the full truth" (John 16:13). Finally, John knows that, until the time of Jesus' glorification, "the Spirit was not yet" (John 7:39). That is why it was not yet possible, during Jesus' earthly life, for men to learn the "full truth" about Him, to find complete Christian, paschal faith in Him. But for us who live in the "last days" of the New Creation, such faith is possible, because the risen Christ has given the Holy Spirit to us.¹⁸

¹⁸

Ibid., p. 349.

And so, John's last message applies to us today in this twentieth century of Christianity. We can truly be joyful because we have inherited the faith through the light of the Holy Spirit. We are an "Easter People" who "may persevere in our belief that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that, by perseverance in that belief, may possess LIFE in His Name." (John 20:30-1).

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