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# Linguistic Nonsense About Faith

More Politely: Linguistic Incongruence about Faith

Theodore Mueller

“ALL YOU have TO DO is TO BELIEVE in Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” Correct? Well. . . , you will say, something in that statement is inappropriate; I would not use those terms! Yet how often are such sentiments expressed by well-meaning Lutherans. What is wrong with this statement? The following is a brief linguistic analysis to show what meaning is conveyed when such language is used.

## I. The Incongruence: Activity versus State of Being.

Analogous sentences made in an entirely different context usually clarify the meaning of the sentence in question. Consider the following statements:

*All YOU have TO DO is to: ACHE and it will cure you.*

*BE HUNGRY and it will make you grow.*

*SUFFER and the boss will pay you.*

*TRUST your teacher and it will get you good grades.*

Have you ever heard such utterances? or would you ever say something like them? Of course not! It is pure and unadulterated nonsense. In more polite terms—we can use “scientific” language even for absurdities—we talk about incongruence, or the Latin word “non sequitur”. The above examples illustrate such incongruence.

The above statements consist of two clauses: the first specifies what the individual must do, perform, carry out, or achieve, while the second expresses the result. But the two clauses do not make sense—they are incongruent. The incongruences are further underscored when what must be done or accomplished is explained by a verb which expresses a state of being: “to ache, to feel good, to be hungry”, etc.; these verbs tell what the pa-

tient undergoes or experiences—not what he does. The verb “to do” expresses an activity and therefore cannot be equated with the above verbs. In linguistics, verbs expressing a state of being are called psychological verbs; they stand in contrast with verbs of activity.

Note also the differing function assigned to the subject of these verbs when compared with verbs expressing an activity. In the latter case the subject is the actor, performer or agent who conceives the activity, wills it, controls it and carries it out. But with psychological verbs the subject is “the patient” who experiences or undergoes the state of being. He has no control over it; he does not engage in any activity, nor perform any action. He is “passive” hence, he is called the “patient”.

When this type of a sentence is applied to faith, what is implied or expressed? In such a context the verb “to believe” is made to express an activity; something the individual performs, acts out, engages in, or achieves; he conceives, wills and carries out the believing. The believer is then “doing something”, a meaning which is contrary to the scriptural sense. The individual named as subject, furthermore, is responsible for the activity; he becomes the “actor” or the “agent” of his own salvation. Faith is then the minimum work required by God for entrance into His kingdom. With such a statement the rift between Rome and the Lutheran Churches is healed! Rome will most certainly agree to this minimum requirement or performance on man’s part. See what language can do! It is a marvelous tool in the hands of disagreeing diplomats!

In Scripture faith is the antithesis of works, of doing! When the Apostle Paul insists that “a man is justified by faith without observing the law” or when Luther adds the little word “allein”, “only through faith” (Ro 3:28), he excludes any doing, any activity on the part of the individual. Faith is incompatible with doing, performing or achieving. Faith is its antonym. Likewise in Ga 3:2 and 5 “doing the law” (*ergon nomou*) is contrasted with believing the Gospel report (*akoes pisteos*). Even if the translation “hearing of faith” is maintained, the same antithesis between activity and the state of being, namely hearing, is still the point of the passage. Likewise, James brings out the contrast between faith and deeds, deeds merely demonstrating faith. The good works are the activities which are engendered by the state of being, called faith (James 2:18). In

other words, faith is not something one does! "To believe" belongs in the group of verbs called psychological verbs, like to ache, to suffer, etc. It expresses a state of being, the status of the soul. Secular literature about trust further emphasizes that faith or trust is not an activity, performance or achievement of an individual. It is not under the control of someone's will, nor the result of someone's efforts. It is a psychological response to some other person's behavior.<sup>1</sup>

## II. Cause and Result

A cause and result relationship is implied in the sentences cited above. If we replace the psychological verb with an appropriate verb of activity the relationship becomes apparent:

*ALL YOU* have to *DO* is to: *EXERCISE* regularly and it will cure you.  
*TAKE* this pill and you will get well.  
*EAT* your soup and it will make you grow.  
*WORK* and the boss will pay you.  
*STUDY* and it will get you good grades.

The first clauses express the *cause* while the second the *result*: the stated activity is the cause for the following result. In some cases it is a condition which must be fulfilled in order to receive the benefit or reward stated in the result clause: if you *DO* this, then such and such will be the result or the reward; the cure for a backache is regular exercise; health is restored as a result of taking the antibiotic pill; growth is the result of eating, etc.

If the logic inherent in this linguistic formulation is applied to faith, it makes faith the cause of our salvation. Forgiveness of sins and eternal life is the result or the reward for believing. God receives us into His kingdom *because* we believe in His Son, as if God were so pleased that we had achieved such excellence, namely, believing in Christ. And Christ would have died in vain.

The fallacy of these statements is obvious. None of those who use such language intended to say the above. Yet, this is the relationship expressed through this formulation. This is what our language expresses when our Christian faith is couched in

such words and sentences. The rules of language are the same, whether the sentence expresses a secular or a theological thought.

But, aren't we "saved by faith"? NO, we are NOT! We are saved by Christ crucified, on whose account God is gracious to sinners therefore Scripture says that "we are saved by grace". The sole cause of our salvation is the redemption Christ has wrought on the cross. When Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty in our place, He reconciled God to sinful mankind. Our faith is certainly not the *CAUSE* of our salvation. What arrogance and blasphemy to think so highly of our faith! The forgiveness of sins is the result of Christ's suffering, death and resurrection, not of anything in us. Even when St. John states that "if we confess our sins" (1 Jn 1:9), he does not state a condition man must fulfill for obtaining the forgiveness of sins. He concludes the statement by stressing God's justice, "God is just". Forgiveness of sins is the result of His justice, namely the fact that Christ has paid our penalty on the cross mandates God's forgiveness. If we own up to our sins, even such a confession is not the cause of salvation. Acknowledging sin results from faith, is an expression of faith. Faith is no more than an antenna which receives the radio signals for my stereo. Therefore, faith is called "the instrument" of salvation, a salvation which exists apart from my faith. It is the means by which God's gifts are received.

The task of preaching, therefore, is to portray Christ crucified (GA 3:1). The message of the cross, and it only, must be stressed. Whether faith, trust or believing is ever mentioned is totally immaterial. Faith will be the result of preaching Christ. When the grace of God is proclaimed, people will trust this God, even if faith is never mentioned.

The only correct statement which can be made using the sentence under question must be: *ALL YOU* have *TO DO* is *EXACTLY NOTHING*; Christ has done it for you: now heaven is open; your sins are forgiven on account of Jesus Christ who died and rose again.

## Endnote

1. Charles M. Rossiter, Jr. and W. Barnett Pearce, *Communicating Personally*. (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1975), pp. 224-234.

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