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Faith and Reason

Some years ago when I first began to study the Greek New Testament, I was intrigued by a particular word. It is usually translated repent, and means literally change your mind. When I went to my Greek Professor to glean her special knowledge, she preferred to render its meaning somewhat differently. Jesus is saying, "Think with me," she said.

Her somewhat unusual rendering of this word, which is certainly possible, left a meaningful nuance in my understanding of our Lord's call to repentance.

Far from a merely moral admonition, the word metanoete has to do with changing our perspective, the way we think about everything, God, ourselves, and those persons and things around us. From a change of perspective comes a change of behavior and action. Thus the full range of connotations is present in the translation repentance. But to translate this Greek word "Think with me" introduces yet another element.

For those who enter the kingdom of God, reason, thinking, is a necessary part of our way of being with Jesus. Repentance is not just a moral change of mind; it also marks a distinct participation in His person.

And yet, how can such participation be? How can finite and sinful creatures change their total perspective? This New Testament idea of

repentance, understood as a change of mind, as thinking in and with the Lord, raises a number of questions, one in particular, traditionally asked in this way: How is faith related to reason? Are they the same or not, and if they are not the same, how are they different?

I do not propose to try to answer these questions definitively or exhaustively. There are, however, essential qualities of both faith and reason, and once these qualities are recognized, we can see better how faith is related to reason, and how these are both personal.

We begin with faith. Faith is both assent and trust. We believe that Jesus is the Son of the living God. An assent such as this brings the objective identity of who Jesus is before our minds. We also put our trust in His promises and His mercy. To trust in Him is to go beyond mere objectification to enter into a personal relation. These ways of belief that and belief in are the common ways in which faith is described.

Taken together assent and trust reflect the idea of faith given us in the Epistle to the Hebrews. "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." We trust in God for the things hoped for, and we give assent to evidence of things not seen. Faith is, as St. John says, the step out of death into life, a living relation of the believing soul to God who exists.

Faith is therefore a kind of knowledge that does not apprehend its object completely but does so nonetheless truly. Faith is a kind of first movement along the pathway of truth. Its thinking at the beginning is like the blind man whose sight was restored but imperfectly. He saw men, who looked like trees walking about, until Jesus made his seeing clear.

Full knowledge, to know as we are known, is rather a matter of vision, of beholding God face to face. Our knowledge will not be that of vision until God shows us Himself in the splendor of His glory. And so Augustine writes, "I believe in order that I may understand." Faith seeks and grows into full knowledge, which is nothing other than communion. For now we see through a glass darkly.

What then do we make of reason? St. Paul tells us that the invisible things of God, His eternal power and Godhead, are clearly seen, being understood through the things that are made. Reason perceives a kind of general knowledge of God through creation, but because of the sinfulness of man's heart, says Paul, this understanding is of no benefit. This general knowledge of reason does not lead to repentance, to thinking with and in the Lord. With the rest of human nature, reason itself needs to be redeemed.

So then, we can look now into the relation of faith to reason. What is unknown to reason is known to faith, and what is unfamiliar to reason is familiar to faith, but what is precious to reason is also precious to faith. Faith requires reason, thinking, to know the truth. And likewise reason requires faith as the mode of reason's redemption.

In this way of seeing faith as the redemption of reason, the Cappadocian theologian, St. Gregory of Nazianzus said that faith is the fulfillment of reason.

St. Augustine said something similar when he spoke of the conversion of the soul. The Incarnate Word speaks to us in history, and once the Word is heard, by grace we turn within, to the sphere of spirit, where the mind is led to God. Through faith our feeble and sinful reason is converted. Jesus himself is the object of faith as well as its author and finisher.

When Jesus introduced the kingdom of God with the admonition to repent, he called his followers to faith in him. He himself was the logos, the eternal Word made flesh. To accept his teachings and to obey his command-ments required a new way of thinking, a conversion of reason.

As Paul wrote, Jesus is the very wisdom and power of God. By the

power of his grace freely given to all believers, he becomes our all-sufficient wisdom. Through the Gospels he still speaks of God as his Father and of the Holy Spirit as his Advocate. And he speaks of us as abiding in him through faithful obedience. In the last analysis, thinking with and in and by Jesus is the gift and responsibility of every Christ-ian. And so faith, the conversion of reason, is supremely personal. If you would believe in him, if he is precious to you, then it is your mind that must lead your heart to love and follow him.

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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