

## **BOOK REVIEW**

Thank you for sending me the book “ The Salvation Equation. What They Never Taught You in Sunday School “ by Adriel Loh. I am delighted to find a lay Wesleyan putting his thoughts in print. It is a compendium of topics relating to how one can make faith meaningful and workable.

From the opening Chapter:

**“ Everyone tells me I must grow up in God but nobody has told me how it works . . . Here finally is teaching on how it works, how everything fits together.”** ( pp 1,2 ) .

This is a bold claim. The book has been adopted as part of the syllabus for Sunday School. I was interested to see how the book succeeds in fulfilling its mission statement.

The book is well written and certainly has helpful insights. I find the contents, particularly Chapters 3 and 4 on Faith Surrender and Faith Relationship respectively, invigorating. However, in accepting only concepts that can be ‘experientially verified ’ (of necessity, from his personal experience ) the author tips the balance on several issues which I will touch on.

Faith is the dominant theme of the book. Its source and nature must therefore be clearly explained. There are two ways of looking at faith. In a general sense, faith is accepting as true what we cannot fully comprehend. Faith rests upon evidence, however incomplete. Just as much as knowledge also rests on evidence. Faith has to do with the mind. The more evidence presented and understood, the more assured the faith.

Saving faith is God’s gift to people to enable them to believe as true what God has revealed in His Word and to accept Jesus as their personal Saviour, with all that it entails. This faith is the work of the Holy Spirit. No one can be a Christian without faith.

But this saving faith is not blind, in the sense that it needs no evidence. For instance, it has to be explained to the person his or her need of a Saviour and how Christ meets that need. Intellectual difficulties will crop up and that is why apologetics is useful.

### **FAITH**

There are several apparently contradictory statements about faith in the book that need to be explained because it is not clear whether it teaches that faith is a gift or a work.

**( 1 )** “ Faith is **not a work** that gains or merits us grace but a posture that puts us in a position to receive grace “ ( p 3 )

**( 2 )** “**The gift of faith** is often a preceding occurrence before the manifestation of other spiritual gifts.” ( p 84 )

**( 3 )** “(God’s ) part is the work of grace. Our part is **the work of faith.**” ( p 4 ) Here faith is depicted as work and we have a responsibility to acquire that faith. Or as the author puts it elsewhere, it is “**our part in the business of spiritual growth.**” ( Preface ix )

### Faith is always a gift from God

The important introductory Chapter Two, describes “faith appropriation” as the first aspect of faith. Appropriation, it says, requires “the conviction of the mind and heart accompanied by a positive action.” What is this conviction of the mind and heart from which such a faith is supposed to spring ?

To illustrate this, the book quotes two stories from Matthew’s Gospel. First, we have the story of Jesus healing the man with the withered hand. After answering his critics on the matter of healing on the Sabbath, Jesus turned to the man and said to him,

“ Stretch out your hand !”

So the man stretched out his hand and was healed.

Note that the man received his faith from the Lord’s command.

( Matthew 12 : 13 ).( All quotations from NASV )

So it is with the second story about Peter stepping out of the boat into the stormy sea. ( Matthew 14 : 28, 29 )

“ And Peter answered Him and said, ‘ Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.’

So He said, ‘ Come ! ’

And Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus. First there is Peter’s doubt, then the command from Jesus, followed by Peter’s response of faith.

Therefore, the “conviction of the mind and heart accompanied by a positive action”, referred to above, comes after God acts to confer faith. And it has always been that those who receive faith must possess a humble receptive attitude, knowing that it is not within themselves to produce faith. Indeed, in the case of the man with the withered hand the Bible does not tell us whether the man, unlike Peter in the boat, expected Jesus to do anything for him. Faith was an outright gift from a compassionate Saviour to enable the man to stretch out his hand for healing.

As Scripture attests, “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.” ( Romans 10 : 17 )

The apostles’ cry to the Lord was, “Increase our faith !” ( Luke 17 : 3–5 )

The apostles fervently sought for more faith to help them understand Christ’s teaching and to obey Him. This has been the cry of Christians of every age.

Paul chastised the churches in Galatia on this very point when he stressed the continuity of saving faith and daily faith:

“This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law or by hearing with faith ?

Are you so foolish ? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh ?” ( Galatians 3 : 2, 3 )

### Reason for writing at length on the point of faith

The reason I write at length on this point is because of the centrality of faith in the salvation equation. In his preface the author informs his readers that he will show them “**what it takes to get there. In short, it tells you ‘how it works’.**” ( Preface ix )

Young Christians might get the impression that it is a 'do-it-yourself' project. Subtly, pride creeps in, something I am sure the author wants to avoid, as he emphasises reliance on God throughout his book. We do not want to raise a generation of young people who imagine that they have "arrived" by the application of sure-fire principles of spiritual growth. Should they fail themselves, they would be very discouraged.

Relying on God for faith in the manner I have described is not just sitting on our hands and doing nothing. That would be a wrong conclusion from what I have written. It is to maintain a humble and teachable attitude with hands open to receive the faith for which we pray. We can be at peace because we know the source of our true strength lies not with us but with God.

The principle of living by humble faith goes back to Habakkuk.

"Behold, as for the proud one, his soul is not right within him; but the righteous will live by his faith." ( Habakkuk 2 : 4 )

Elsewhere Paul speaks of the gift-nature of faith.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, that no one should boast."

( Ephesians 2 : 8, 9 )

Faith remains a gift after salvation. In other words, the faith needed to put in practice the salvation equation is itself the gracious gift of the Lord. Young Christians should be taught this. For that is where their strength and treasure really lie - in Jesus, the author and also the finisher of our faith. ( Hebrews 12 : 2 )

## INTELLECT

On p 23, we read that unbelief, besides grieving God, is the reason why the contemporary church climate is "characterized by intellectual pride, the glorification of science and scepticism about the unseen spiritual world" because of which "miracles and manifestations of the Spirit are few and far between."

The reader of this book cannot fail to notice the rather dismissive attitude it takes towards the intellect. Elsewhere we read that "one of the key factors that inhibits the reception of the gift ( *of speaking in tongues* ) by the believer is the rational mind " ( p 86 )

"If our meddling intellect tries to dissect the words, we will lack the faith to speak it forth ." ( p 87 ).

Paul has not said that the intellect is a hindrance to the reception of this gift of the Spirit. ( 1 Corinthians 14 ) True , Paul says that he who speaks in tongues does not speak to men but to God. But that is not the same as saying that the intellect interferes with the gift of tongues. But he does say that "he who speaks in a tongue edifies himself but he who prophesies edifies the church." ( v 4 ). The mind of the man speaking "mysteries" in a tongue is not blank. The spiritual truths he utters are appreciated only by his own mind and so he himself is edified. Paul also says that praying in the spirit is not enough if that is done without the mind ( vv 13 – 15 ). Whether edifying oneself or edifying the church at large one still employs the mind.

Returning to the quotation from p 23 above, the author touches on the modern obstacles of belief in the gospel. These are "intellectual pride, the glorification of science and scepticism about the unseen spiritual world."

How are these concerns to be tackled by Christian witness if not by appeal to man's intellect ?

The section on "Breaking spiritual blindness by the truth encounter" surely requires, as the author readily acknowledges, that "we attack the lies of the devil with the truth of God to set the person free." ( pp 75,76 ) He continues: "To this end, the role of preaching, exhortation and apologetics becomes crucial."

If these roles are to be taught and effectively exercised let us not belittle the mind. Or give the impression to young Christians that we do.

Sunday School teachers and preachers should emulate Paul who "reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating . . ."

( Acts 17 : 2,3 )

"And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks." ( Acts 18 : 4 )

In 2 Corinthians 10 : 4,5 ( which the author also quotes ) Paul speaks of "casting down of arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ."

The problem is not with the intellect, Christian or nonChristian, but the use to which it is put. The highly recommended Faith Walk of the book with its four pillars of Faith Appropriation, Faith Surrender, Faith Relationship and Faith Community are, in the last analysis, exercises and decisions of the mind. As teachers we help our students form a Christian mind that understands and ably grapples with the issues confronting the church today in the fields of personal and church growth, science and ethics.

**"Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be babes, but in your thinking be mature." ( 1 Corinthians 14 : 20 )**

### **RHEMA and LOGOS**

On p 10 we read that the Holy Spirit "takes the intellectual concepts of what we have read ( logos ) and speaks it forth as the voice of God ( rhema )."

The dictionaries and word books make a distinction in the meanings of the two words. But their use in the Bible frequently overlaps.

Take the Ephesian passage popularly quoted in such discussions. The sword of the Spirit in Ephesians 6 : 17 is the Word of God ( rhema theou ). This is because the word 'rhema' is derived from another Greek word 'ereo' which means 'to utter, speak or say'. The Ephesian passage is about the oral use of the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God. Rightly 'rhema' should find its use here. Similarly in Romans 10 : 8 'rhema' is used because confession of faith with the mouth is being emphasised.

Now, in Matthew 8 :8 the centurion says to Jesus, " But just say the word (logos), and my servant will be healed " where 'rhema' would have been just as appropriate but the Spirit has chosen the word 'logos'.

Also: "And all were speaking well of Him, and wondering at the gracious words ( logoi ) which were falling from His lips." ( Luke 4 : 22 )

Jesus said that heaven and earth will pass away but not his words ( logoi ) ( Matthew 24 : 35 ). Surely His spoken words are not sterile theological concepts but the very power of God's voice bringing light and life to all who heed them. In this case, again, ( rhemata ) would be just as preferable.

As for the spiritual power of 'rhema' compared with the presumed overly-intellectual character of 'logos', consider the following passage:

“ For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit.” ( 1 Corinthians 12 : 8 ).

These passages are as practical as can be. They impact the community life of the church. Praising these two gifts, the author writes: “Such a gifting of the Holy Spirit is extremely useful in situations of ministry and counselling. . . “ ( p 83 )

Here, there is no doubt that wisdom and knowledge are spoken truths with power and 'rhema' would seem to be more appropriate. But 'logos' is used by the Spirit for both the word of wisdom as well as that of knowledge.

### **OVERSIMPLIFYING DIFFICULT ISSUES**

Perhaps because the language of the book tends to be incisive there appear several sweeping statements.

**1** “ In God’s moral universe, white is white, and black is black. Those who try to grey the issues succeed only in deceiving themselves.” (p 28). One is reminded of that verse in John’s first letter: “ If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” ( 1 John 1 : 8 )

A little thought will show that these two statements are not saying the same thing. There is quite a lot in the Bible about the mercy of God tempering the justice demanded by His holiness. Besides the Gospels, the Old Testament books of Exodus and Deuteronomy are worth studying in this regard. It is not a simple black and white picture. Nor will it appear to be so for young Christians who need help to sort things out.

**2** Or take this statement on healing and miracles. “Such manifestations are often absent in modern-day evangelism simply because out of faithlessness, the church has failed to appropriate the power of God, thereby grieving the Holy Spirit into inaction.” ( p 85 ).

It is not quite fair to surmise that lack of healing and miracles is simply due to faithlessness. On spiritual principles, as sound as those claimed by the author, there are evangelists who avoid making such manifestations the drawing power of their preaching. One cannot speak on behalf of the Holy Spirit as to how He regards the labours of those who hold their view.

Elsewhere the author says of things supernatural; “To throw the baby out with the bath water can only be foolishness. To discern the right and proper use is the path of wisdom.” ( p 53 ) May God grant us all the humility and wisdom to do that.

I hope that what I have written has been helpful. Good as it is, the book could be improved by having its obscurities explained and its stand on certain issues, if not modified, at least more convincingly defended from Scripture for the sake of those who have to use the book as resource material.

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