

[The Witness Jun: 5-6, 1948]

FAITH AND PROOF

Gordon H. Clark

An Army doctor in a letter to an Orthodox Presbyterian Chaplain wrote: "I have seen medical curiosities, but I know of no miracle which would establish the divinity of the performer. Sometimes people have believed in witchcraft as miracles; only, if a man could perform a miracle he was not divine, but instead he was in cahoots with the devil. It does not weaken this argument that the deeds were actually no miracles. The fact remains that people believed they were, and consequently ought to have declared the 'witches' divine. What proof is there of the divinity of Christ? Nothing but 'faith' in the Scriptures. In what language are 'faith' and 'proof' synonymous?"

This army doctor raises several interesting questions that no doubt trouble the minds of some Christians and that have possibly led some people to renounce Christianity. In this article the first question about miracles will be hastily answered in order to have more space for the last question about faith and proof.

First of all, the Bible does not teach that the working of a miracle is evidence of the divinity or deity of the miracle worker. The army doctor apparently thinks that Christians hold to the deity of Christ for the simple reason that Christ worked miracles. This is not so. Moses performed miracles, too; and yet we do not hold that Moses is God. Not only have the prophets and the apostles performed miracles, but Paul warns us that Satan and his agents can perform miracles (II Thess. 2:9). Also Deut. 13:2 implies that false prophets can perform miracles. Cf. Rev. 16:14; Mt. 24:24. It is clear therefore that some of the doctor's perplexity arises from a mistaken notion as to miracles. To be sure, these Scriptural references do not answer all his arguments; they do not prove the deity of Christ, for example; but if the doctor had known this much Scripture, he could have omitted the first half of his objection.

This brings us down to the last three sentences of the doctor's paragraph. First, what proof is there of the divinity (deity) of Christ? This question, because of the great amount of material that should be included in a reply, cannot be answered in this article. What can be

included is somewhat of an answer to his question, “In what language are ‘faith’ and ‘proof’ synonymous?”

Would the doctor care to answer one or two very easy questions? First, there is a woman that he calls mother. How does he know that she is his mother? What proof has he? And there is a man whom he calls father. How does he know that that man is his father? Has he any proof at all? Does he not simply put faith in his mother’s statement that this man is his father?

What the doctor might reply to these questions is hard to guess. The best reply he could make, if he still wishes to criticize Christianity, is the perhaps reluctant admission that his family connections are only a matter of faith and not of proof. But he would hope that he knows some things by proof, and not by faith.

Before the Christian now proceeds to discuss faith and proof, he may pause to reflect on how important faith is, even in matters that are not particularly religious matters. The solidarity of the family rests on faith. We display faith whenever we eat in a restaurant – or whenever we eat at home, for that matter. We need faith to drive a car. We need faith to study a text-book on physics.

But here the doctor interrupts and says, No. In science faith is not necessary. In physics we have proof.

There is a very excellent science book, entitled *Physical Optics*, by Wood. On the first page he describes how Newton studied the refraction of light. Newton passed white light through a prism and got all the colors of the rainbow. He then passed those colors back again and the result was white light. This experiment proved, at least the book says so, that the prism did not manufacture the colors, as had been previously thought, but that the white light already had the colors and the prism merely sorted them out. The next sentence on the first page of this heavy volume on physical optics then says that, curiously enough, what Newton had proved will be disproved in the last chapter of the book. What is proof?

Scientific law depends on experimentation in which lengths are measured. It may be the length of a column of mercury in a tube, or it may be the length between two marks on a bar of steel; but there must always be a measurement of length. Inasmuch as a human being, even with the aid of microscopes or the most delicate electrical devices, cannot perceive differences in length when they are very small (difference threshold) and cannot perceive at all below a given degree of stimulation (lower threshold), it follows that experimentation permits the scientist to

choose any one of an infinite number of laws as the explanation of his problem. He is not compelled to choose one rather than another. And as a matter of fact it often occurs, and particularly in the twentieth century it often occurs that one scientist chooses one law and another scientist chooses another. And what is more amazing, the same scientist sometimes chooses one and sometimes chooses another. For some purposes a physicist will adopt the nineteenth century theory of the wave motion of light; and then the same man will later choose the newer corpuscular theory. Only it is not newer; it is the theory of Newton that was discarded in the nineteenth century and has again become popular.

The army doctor asked, In what language are faith and proof synonymous? Unless he is willing to agree that faith and proof are synonymous in every language, he will be faced with the problem of identifying an actual "proof" somewhere. Certainly he can find no "proof" in science, for the history of science is but the replacing of one theory by another theory. Science is essentially tentative. The science of today will be antiquated tomorrow. And in view of this indisputable fact, one should be wary of claiming that today's science has been "proved."

This line of argument, this type of problem, leads to the most involved speculation. It is in reality the problem of *what is knowledge*. And no philosophical problem is more delicate, more technical, more complex than this. The army doctor unsuspectingly assumed that there is a clean-cut distinction between faith and proof, between religion and science. But is there? What is proof? And, for that matter, what is faith?