

2 The birth of faith

Babyhood: day one to twelve months

Lee

The first year of life is a whirlpool of experiences for baby Lee. He does not know it yet, but the basic patterns of his future are being formed in these early months. Most basic of all is the experience of simple trust, and it is from this that Lee will develop the capacity for faith. As with many things, this experience began at birth.

Like the rest of the human race, Lee will never consciously remember his birth but, tucked away in the depths of his subconscious, is the memory of that first experience of separation. For the first time, he was no longer physically tied to his mother, no longer surrounded by the warmth, comfort and protection of her womb, but now, instead, a separate being. At the moment of his birth Lee became distinct but dependent. In years to come, he will be told that when he curls up in a warm bed with his knees beneath his chin, he is unconsciously returning to the security of the womb. But for now, Lee knows nothing of that. At only a few weeks old, he instinctively turns to his mother for everything he needs, both physical and emotional. He may be separate from her but is not separated.

Fortunately, Lee's mother loves him dearly. He is not her first child and neither will he be the last. But he is to be her only son. She does not know this yet (which is just as well) and her love for him, although different from that which she lavished upon his older sisters, is no less free and generous. With only instinct to guide him, Lee has, in his first year, come to know the meaning of love and trust in the little world that fills the boundaries of his existence.

This trust has been directed towards *persons*. Or to be exact, one person – Lee's mother. Whenever he has needed her, she has been there.

Food, warmth, safety have all been found in her arms. As time has gone by, Lee has discovered that these things come regularly and reliably. Initially, he was fearful if he woke and his mother was not there. When first this happened, he experienced sheer terror. But he soon learned that his source of love was never far away. The constant experiences of touching and being touched, cuddling and being cuddled, holding onto and being held, have assured Lee that the world is orderly, kind and dependable. They have given Lee a far deeper understanding of love and trust than any later form of words will be able to.

Lee therefore knows what it means to have faith. To be sure, he doesn't have any idea what the words mean – words mean nothing to him yet – but he knows what it is to trust and to have that trust honoured. Lee has taken his first step of faith.

But there are other things Lee has been learning. For the first few months, the world to him was one sensation after another. He loved the colours, the shapes, the noise, the attention – they all captivated him. Everything was the world and the world was everything. And he was in the middle of it.

Slowly Lee came to distinguish one object from another. What he was later to call a pig was distinct from what he would discover to be a duck or a teddy.

And there was another thing. By the time he was nine months old, Lee had begun to realise that these objects could be hidden, and he wanted to search for them. Only a few months earlier, it had been a question of 'out of sight, out of mind'. If they were hidden, he just forgot about them. He had no image of them in his mind. But now, wonder of wonders, Teddy, Piggy and Ball and all the rest of them stuck in his head. If his mother removed them, Lee was soon to be found crawling around in search of them. The world had become a place of permanent objects, persons and places.

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Throughout this period, Lee began to discover the use of his body. Within the continuous flow of sensations and objects he slowly started to distinguish different things and experiences. Lee also began to discover that he could react to and even influence them. He found out, for instance, that if he reached out for Teddy and flexed his fingers, he could hold Teddy's hand and pull him over. Bit by bit this action came to be repeated until Lee understood simple acts of co-ordination.

Not all was easy, though, and some actions brought pain. When he accidentally banged his hand against his highchair while in a tantrum, Lee soon learned that some patterns of behaviour were definitely not to be repeated!

... and Lizzie

Now let's turn to Elizabeth. Although born in the same ward as Lee, she is not destined to be so fortunate in her early months or years. For Lizzie (as she will come to be known) is not really wanted. She was an 'accident'. The youngest of a family of six, Lizzie's mum has had a lifetime of being last. But despite this, she soldiered on to gain some secretarial qualifications and left school to take up a decent job with a firm of computer manufacturers.

No sooner had she done so than she fell in love with a boy at work and within months moved in with him. The thought of starting a family could not have been further from her mind. But nature was to overrule and along came Lizzie within a year.

At eighteen, Lizzie's mother is furious and frustrated. Her career has ended before it has had a chance to begin and she sees herself as tied down for life. Although the baby is not to blame, Lizzie remains the ever-present symbol of the trap in which her mother is caught.

It is little surprise, then, that Lizzie receives none of the warmth and love lavished upon Lee. Not for her the constant affection shown by word and touch. Not even the regularity of feeding can overcome the intense rejection which her mother radiates towards her. From the beginning, baby Elizabeth experiences the most bitter feeling of all - that of not being wanted. As the years ripen, she will come to know the pain that only those who have been rejected from birth can know. In time, she will come to say for herself the words which have not been spoken by her mother but which do not need voicing for they silently fill the air: 'I wish Lizzie had never been born.'

In the meantime Lizzie, like Lee, learns the basic control of her limbs and the permanency of objects. But she does not know the permanency of parenthood. Her mum has left her boyfriend and they are now living as a single-parent family. What's more, she has found a way out of her dilemma: Lizzie is farmed out to a childminder while her mother resumes her career. In the first year of her life, she has no father and a mother who resents her.

Of course, it need not have been like this. But the reality is that Lizzie's relationship with her mum will always be blighted: it could succeed only if there were a genuine sharing of love, affection and trust. However, this will never be the case. As a result her sense of rejection will remain with her for years to come.

Within eighteen months of their births, then, we have two infants whose lives could not be more at variance: Lee who is loved and valued and Lizzie who is unloved and rejected. The one learns faith through the most fundamental of human experiences: the love and affection of the doting parent who sees her child as a gift and a treasure. The other knows nothing of faith for she does not know how (or whom) to trust in a world where adults seem only to care for themselves. When, in time, Lee and Lizzie come to hear of their heavenly parent who they will be told loves them like a father, their differing infant experiences of parenthood will, like a hidden, underground river, flow through their personalities to influence for good or ill their respective capacities for faith.

What is faith?

The stories of Lee and Lizzie are not uncommon. Although fictional, they are drawn from real life – from the observations and recollections of many hundreds of people compiled in the course of research into child development. We do not have to be researchers, however, to recognise the Lees and Lizzies of our lives. For most of us, Lee and Lizzie will ring true. For some who read this book, they will ring all too painfully.

The central point in this early infant period is that children unconsciously absorb attitudes of trust through their relationship with parents, particularly with their mother. The foundations of faith are being laid even at this early stage. A child who does not learn how to trust adults now will have difficulty trusting anybody at more than a superficial level later on.

This extends to trust in God. A valuable exercise in any congregation would be to find out how many adults who once made professions of faith in Christ and then dropped away had experienced disrupted patterns of trust in their early months or years.

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We should not be surprised if high proportions of children, and adults with emotional problems that go back to their childhood, find it difficult to stick with their initial commitment to Christ. Their desire to follow him may be completely genuine and they may long to love and be loved both by God and by Christian people. But, in the crucial first months of their lives, they have missed out on the fundamental experiences of trust-building. As a result they find it hard to trust and to believe that others trust them at the deep levels of their beings. Most of all, they cannot feel that God loves or trusts them. For if even those who brought them into the world do not accept them, why should God?

In this situation the minister, evangelist or friend has to realise that the vital stage of trust-building which was lost in infancy must now be made up for in the life of the child or adult convert. The rejection or lack of acceptance experienced during infancy has to be replaced by the experiencing of *constant*, patient love. This will not be a matter simply of words. The statement, 'We trust you, please trust us', however kindly meant, will not be enough, for the damage that has to be mended has taken place at a much deeper level. The hurt of that child or adult can only begin to be unlearned when they experience our continuous *acceptance* of whatever they can offer – no matter how irregular or incomplete this may be. In many ways, it is not the adult or older child who is acting and speaking to us at this point: it is the infant inside, who has never experienced acceptance and trust. The word of the Lord to us will

therefore be, 'Be patient, be gentle even as I am patient and gentle.' It will not be, 'Castigate and threaten this sinner for backsliding.'

It is imperative, therefore, that we grasp the crucial importance of the first months of life and the spiritual effects of the relationships established during them. The capacity for faith is a wonderful but fragile thing.

Faith, however, is not dependent simply on human development. We are also forced back to *theological* questions: What is faith? How does the development of the capacity for trust relate to biblical teaching about what it means to have faith in God? We shall spend the rest of this chapter examining a theological understanding of faith in the light of what we have begun to see from the study of child development.

The gift of God

The story of Lee and Lizzie so far is the story of the human dimension of faith. But this does not invalidate or squeeze out the divine. Because God is creator as well as redeemer, the natural processes of human development are part of his ordering of the world. The human and divine aspects of faith are bound together like Siamese twins. So before we go on to look at how faith can develop throughout a person's life, we must establish a definition of faith which is true both to Christian theology and to how we develop as people.

The Bible makes it clear that faith is a gift of God. It cannot be won or earned – it is given by God (Philippians 1:29; 1 Corinthians 2:5). But how does this fit in with the idea of faith development, especially in the lives of children who may not be consciously aware of having received faith?

The answer lies in understanding faith as part of God's gift in creation as well as his gift in salvation. The two are intimately connected because God is the Lord of both, as the incarnation demonstrates. When, therefore, we think of children as somehow possessing faith 'naturally', we do not mean that they do so independently of God. He is the author of their lives from the beginning and it is by his grace in creation that they (and we) are capable of trust and of response both to other human beings and to God himself.

So faith is from start to finish a gift just as the whole of life is a gift. It does not begin at the moment we accept Christ as Saviour, though in the work of salvation God takes the faith he has given us as part of his

creation and by grace transforms it into saving faith in his Son. By the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, saving faith arises out of the way God has made us in creation: it is all of a piece, the nature of which is wholly gift.

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The capacity for faith that is given to us as God's creatures, however, is divinely planted but humanly exercised. Although it is given by God, it is nevertheless we who exercise it. James Fowler, the American writer on faith development, has proposed that we should understand this human exercise of faith as an activity which enables us to make sense of our lives. Faith, he says, is 'our way of finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives.' Faith is thus 'a person's way of seeing him or herself in relation to others against a background of shared purpose and meaning'¹.

Fowler's definition has the advantage of treating faith seriously as a human activity, and provided it is understood in a theological context such as we have discussed, it is useful. However, we must insist that it is not the *activity* of faith alone that is decisive: equally important before God is its *content* or *object*. A Hindu, Buddhist, Moslem or humanist may all exercise faith in their different ways. But it is only through faith in the risen Christ that salvation may be found. The capacity for faith given at birth must lead to faith in Jesus for its fulfilment.

From an educationalist's perspective, Thomas H Groome has argued that Christian faith must be seen in three Christ-centred dimensions: faith as believing, faith as trusting and faith as doing.² To these we may add a fourth: faith as imagining. When all are present in the lives of Christians, they are exercising truly biblical faith.

To some, this last point may seem controversial. Surely, to see imagining as on a par with believing, trusting and doing is to lay too great a stress upon its importance? It may be seen as an adjunct to the others (so

the argument might run) but not as an equal partner.

Such a view is understandable but, in my view, misplaced. As I shall argue below, imagination is crucial to faith because none of us has faith in abstract concepts in themselves but in the God who lies behind such concepts. And once we begin to think and talk about God we find ourselves imagining what he must be like. We conjure up all kinds of pictures in our minds to help us get to grips with the abstractions of theology. Images of an elderly gentleman on a cloud, a cosmic judge or even of a brilliant light abound in contemporary culture. They permeate people's conscious and unconscious thinking alike, both inside and outside the church.

Imagination is central, therefore, to faith. And when we come to read the Bible – say, the Gospels – our imaginations get to work with a vengeance. Even to read of the biblical world or to follow the stories of Jesus, requires active imagination. We cannot escape it. The challenge is not to let it have free rein but to ensure it is informed by truth. In this respect, believing and imagining are Siamese twins.

1. Faith as believing

It is a Sunday morning. The congregation is half-way through the weekly service of Holy Communion. The preacher has just finished his sermon and the vicar stands up to lead his flock in making their response to the word of God. At this point, the Anglican service (for example) is quite explicit about what form such a response should take: it should take the form of saying the Creed.

In this way, week by week, the equation of faith with the holding of theological propositions is reinforced. Even the most unintellectual believer cannot escape the conclusion that faith is first and foremost an act of the mind. 'I believe in ... God ... Jesus ... the Holy Spirit ...' is almost invariably translated to mean 'I believe the following about God ... Jesus ... the Holy Spirit ...' This emphasis upon faith as an intellectual activity has frequently been overplayed. But the importance of believing in doctrinal truths should not be understated. Throughout history Christianity has claimed that being a Christian cannot be just a matter of feelings. There must be a core of beliefs which can be propositionally stated and which must be assented to if the believer is to be regarded as an authentic follower of Christ.

The reason for this is straightforward. The church in the first four cen-

turies quickly and repeatedly found that all kinds of groups were ready to claim the authority of Christ for an assortment of views (many of them heretical), especially when it came to controversy about the person of Jesus. Time after time it became essential for the church to set out what it believed in order to sort out the doctrinal sheep from the goats. A glance at the history of heresies shows how necessary this process was. The same is true today with the growth and spread of cults such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Moonies and the rise of the New Age movement. Without a clear idea of truths concerning God, Christ and the Spirit, Christians would be fair game for any sect which came along. As Groome has commented: 'The *activity* of Christian faith, therefore, requires in part a firm *conviction* about the truths proposed as essential beliefs of the Christian faith.'³

Historically, however, this emphasis on the role of the *mind* in the activity of faith came to present a major difficulty. By the time of the Reformation, the intellectual component of faith was regarded as the most important. The Reformers stressed afresh the importance of the heart and will in addition to the intellect, but in the late seventeenth century a new movement in secular philosophy began which came to elevate reason as supreme. This movement was known as the Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment swept over Christian Europe like a tidal wave. It proclaimed human reason as the supreme instrument of progress and the means by which individuals could be freed from superstition. (Christianity was held up as an example of such superstition.) Those who elevated reason above all else were consequently known as Rationalists – a term and a philosophy that has continued down to the present day.

The Christian church reacted to the Enlightenment in two ways. On one hand there were those who spurned reason in favour of reliance upon an inward work of the spirit, a kind of 'inner light' as the Quakers called it. This had the enormous advantage of bypassing reason altogether and thereby avoiding any need to confront the Rationalists on their own ground. When challenged about the intellectual validity or coherence of their faith, all the proponents of the inner light (or *illuminationists* as they were known) had to do was to take refuge in an inward revelation from God or a direct experience of the spirit. They did not need to justify themselves in the court of reason: they merely had to say, 'The Lord has told me this and you cannot disprove it.'

The second Christian reaction of Rationalism was to assimilate it.

This was achieved usually by claiming that God had given reason as his divinely appointed instrument for understanding the world and his will. By itself, this claim was not incompatible with Christian faith. It is perfectly possible, and indeed important, to see reason as *one* of the means God has given us to understand his orderly and coherent creation and to discover his will. But the belief arose, and is still held today, that God could *only* be understood and related to by means of human Reason (with a capital R). Revelation quickly became squeezed out along with miracles. Neither of these could be accepted unless they could be squashed into a Rationalist mould. So the feeding of the five thousand was reinterpreted as an act of communal sharing, misunderstood by the Gospel writers; and miracles such as the calming of the storm were seen as the normal workings of nature dressed up to prove the divinity of the man Jesus.

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It is hardly surprising that the English church of the eighteenth century came close to death and that only the combination of the Wesleyan, Evangelical and Anglo-Catholic revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saved it from becoming merely Rationalism with a religious face.

What we face today, therefore, are the effects of this struggle. If we picture faith as a four-legged stool, believing the truth of theological propositions is one leg, but it is only one. Imagining, trusting and doing form the others; and all four are necessary. Unfortunately, owing to the impact of, and hangover from, the Enlightenment, Christians all too often find themselves forced into a polarised choice between faith as intellectual assent and faith as inner emotional commitment. In biblical terms it does not need to be like this: faith can be both belief about, and commitment to, the One who is both the Truth and the Lord of heart and minds.

2. Faith as imagining

One of the more malign effects of the Enlightenment preoccupation with reason was to squeeze out the role of imagination as an acceptable route to knowing and understanding. As science came increasingly to the fore, a contrast was drawn that has persisted down to the present day. On one hand there was the realm of so-called ‘hard facts’ which could be investigated by scientific experiment; on the other, there existed only subjective opinions, beliefs and prejudices which could not. Thus began the great divide in modern thinking by which only scientifically-verifiable information could be counted as trustworthy fact while everything else had to be regarded as mere personal opinion.

Imagination, of course, fell squarely into the second category. By definition, it is personal and subjective. It is not difficult, therefore, to see how the imagination came to be disparaged as inferior to the rigorous logic of science with its ruthless determination to root out anything that could not be proven as fact. In a world that values success in science and technology above all else, products of the imagination come a poor second. Imagination, as far as everyday life is concerned, is reckoned to be irrelevant to what really counts – the world of hard fact.

This is the climate in which generations of children have grown up. Little surprise, then, that they are encouraged in adolescence to ‘progress’ from imagination to reason as a necessary step towards so-called maturity. Imagination is seen as childish. It is assumed that as they move through adolescence, children will want to jettison it as they shed their childish ways and move onto adulthood. The ‘real’ world is concerned with being ‘productive’ and ‘useful’ as opposed to being an idle day-dreamer. In the words of theological writer James Mackey, ‘imagination is seen as ornamental and peripheral to the main business of life which is carried on by the sciences and in its practical form by technology, by the creation of wealth and the raising of material standards of living.’⁴

What should we make of all this? The most important thing to grasp is that this view of imagination is profoundly anti-Christian. From a theological perspective, imagination is not a childish irrelevance to be discarded in favour of allegedly ‘adult’ reason. Rather, it is a fundamental aspect of God at work in us, and as such, must be valued and encouraged rather than devalued and disparaged.

Theologically, therefore, we must affirm the role of imagination for two reasons: firstly, as the word implies, imagination is concerned with

images. By using our imagination we can conjure up all kinds of mental images or pictures which either carry us into make-believe realities (as, for example, in science fiction) or help us to think about a reality we have never seen but of which we have heard (for example, a country we have never visited but can conjure up in our mind's eye). These are the ways in which we usually think of images and imagination.

We need to remind ourselves again and again that the image of God is not confined to our rational faculties but is to be seen when we creatively allow our imaginations to get to work.

When we use our imagination in this way for *creative* purposes (though not for self-centred or destructive ones), we are doing something very important: we are echoing the creative acts of our Creator God himself. Put another way, our creativity is a reflection of God's own creativity. And for this reason alone we should never despise the God-given instrument of imagination. To do so would be to deny one of His most precious gifts.

But there is a second reason we should take the imagination seriously. As far as we know, it is an attribute peculiar to humanity: other creatures simply do not possess it. The capacity to imagine is thus a feature of the image of God in us. It is part of what makes us, in the Psalmist's words, only 'a little lower than the heavenly beings' (Psalm 8:5). To quote the American theologian Harvey Cox, '... fantasy is the richest source of human creativity. Theologically speaking, it is the image of the creator God in man.'⁵ Cheryl Forbes puts it like this: 'Imagination is the *imago dei* (image of God) in us. It marks us as God's human creatures. It helps us to know God, receive his grace, worship him and see life through his eyes.'⁶

In other words, when we use our imaginations, we are exercising God's image in us every bit as much as when we use our reason. In con-

trast both to the Enlightenment and to much of the church's history, we need to remind ourselves again and again that the image of God is not confined to our rational faculties but is to be seen when we creatively allow our imaginations to get to work. Reason and imagination together serve the glory of God.

But how does imagination work? What does it do? The following points have been identified:

Imagination is a way of seeing life. By using it, we are able to make sense of our lives and create meaning and purpose: 'All the information we receive about God, our responsibility as his stewards, our role as husbands, wives, sons, daughters, siblings, employers or employees is so much dust without imagination to help us act on the information.'⁷

Imagination transforms life. We all know how a boring day or humdrum chore can be transformed by a splash of imagination. Brother Lawrence used to imagine himself doing God's washing up as he washed dishes in the monastery. Some Christians use the opportunity of driving on a long journey to imagine Jesus sitting in the passenger seat. They then have an imaginary conversation with him – an imaginative way of praying indeed. But there is an even more profound point to be made. In Jesus we see a double image in the same person: the image of God and the image of humanity. The incarnation, in speaking of him as the God-Man, presents us, as it were, with a coin that has an image on both sides. When we look at one side we see the humanity of the man from Galilee; when we look at the other, we see the Godhead revealed.

The effect of this is to make us realise that God values us as human beings rather than as unembodied souls to be saved. By taking flesh, he demonstrated beyond doubt his love for humanity. And in the life – and death – of his Son, he revealed what it meant to be truly human. What's more, in Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension, he showed the pattern for a transformed humanity, no longer subject to the dictates of sin or imprisoned by death. The new humanity made possible by the cross and exemplified by the risen Christ, is a transformed humanity made possible by the Son who is at one and the same time the image of the invisible God and the forerunner of a transformed human race.

When we grasp the force of this truth, we begin to see the possibility of all kinds of transformations in our daily lives. Our *self-image* can be

raised as we realise what it means to be precious to God ('if he has made me in his image and loves me I must be worth something after all'). Our *image of others* can change as we see the image of God in them and the ways in which he longs to make them more like the image of his Son. Our *image of the world* is challenged as we no longer see it merely as a playground for our pleasures or as a place of despair – we picture it instead as God's world created, redeemed and loved by Christ. Our *image of the church* as a bunch of misfits and hypocrites is transformed by a vision of it as the body of Christ and the family of God. In short, by faith we re-image (or re-imagine) the whole of life as the creative, image-remaking power of God moves within us.

Imagination opens windows onto another reality. We have noted how, in everyday life, imagination enables us to construct alternative realities, to daydream of imaginary worlds. C S Lewis's Narnia and Tolkien's Middle Earth are two well-known literary examples of this. So are the universes of *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*. But there is yet another reality (not fictional this time, but historical) into which we can gain entry by means of our imaginations – the biblical world revealed to us in scripture. Here there exists a vast array of stories, characters and truths upon which our imaginations can get to work. The liberating power of creative imagination taking us back into the reality of biblical events can, time and time again, bring us to a fresh encounter with Christ in the here and now. The combination of imagination and scripture is a powerful one which evangelical Christians (including me) have frequently overlooked for fear of getting into unsubstantiated fantasy that can so easily lead to heresy. But it need not be like that. Under God, our imaginations – when devoted to his glory and informed by scripture – can open up the riches of his grace in ways not possible through the use of reason alone. Imagination and faith go hand in hand. And, as in so many things, children can show us the way.

3. Faith as trusting

Consider the following statements:

(a) 'Good morning Mr Jones. I trust that you are well today.'

(b) 'Trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.'

Both contain the word 'trust' but there is a difference: (a) represents faith in a state of affairs. We trust *that* poor old Mr Jones is not under

the weather. In (b), however, we are exhorted to trust *in* a person – Jesus. Being happy is tied to a personal relationship of faith and obedience.

Of course, the two may be brought together when we trust that a state of affairs is satisfactory because we have faith in the person responsible for them: ‘I trust you will find this cake to your taste, Vicar. My wife baked it this morning and you can always trust her to turn out a winner.’

When we speak of faith in God as ‘trusting’, we have in mind this combined meaning. We not only trust what God says or does, more fundamentally we trust *him* as a person. As we reflect on this, we begin to move away from a purely intellectual and propositional definition of faith. Christian believing becomes more than assent to a series of statements about God: it moves into the area of personal relationship.

James Fowler has helpfully characterised this as *covenantal faith*. A covenant is an agreement or bond between two persons. Both parties are pledged to each other and there is a flow of trust in both directions. Each has faith in the other that what he promises will be fulfilled. Covenantal faith is thus rooted in relationships which are trustworthy and dependable.

The example *par excellence* favoured by the biblical writers was the covenant between God and Abraham. (Note that the partners in a covenantal relationship do not have to be equals. It is enough that they engage in a bond based on mutual trust.) Between Genesis chapters 12 and 17 (supplemented by Paul in Romans 4), we read that God took the initiative in re-establishing a covenant with Abraham and that Abraham responded in faith.

This covenant involved two-way trust. On Abraham’s side, he had to believe God’s promise that despite his age and the barrenness of his wife Sarah, Abraham would become the father of many nations. Moreover, he had to trust when God commanded him to leave his home and travel to Canaan where he had no kin, no wealth and no security. The trust God demanded could not have been greater: ‘Leave your country, your people and your father’s household ...’ (Genesis 12:1). How many of us today would listen to a sudden command from an unknown God to do away with all our familiar security, and travel abroad where we are promised blessings impossible by any natural standard?

Yet, as Paul says, ‘Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him...’

(Romans 4:18). Covenantal faith won for him blessing and righteousness. God, for his part, trusted Abraham. Abraham's shady dealings with his wife in Egypt make it clear that he was as humanly frail and fearful as the rest of us. Yet the fact is that Abraham persevered and in faith reached the promised land. The trust God placed in him was fulfilled.

But the story of Abraham illustrates a crucial aspect of covenantal faith in God. Paul reminds us that despite the natural odds against the fulfilment of God's promise to him, Abraham 'did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but *was strengthened in his faith* and gave glory to God' (Romans 4:20; italics mine). In his weakness, Abraham found that far from being abandoned by God, God built up his faith and thereby cemented the covenantal relationship. Abraham was not left on his own to fail. The exercise of trust within the divine covenant is thus wholly a matter of grace. We are back to the notion of faith as a gift. The covenant between God and humanity serves as a model for all forms of covenantal faith. It contains the characteristics essential to a bond between persons: it is personal, mutual and gracious. A healthy parent-offspring relationship will exhibit all these in the first months of life. As we have seen, it is here that the human source of faith is to be found.

4. Faith as doing

Luther described the letter of James as 'an epistle of straw'. He believed its emphasis upon good works undermined the Reformation recovery of Pauline teaching on grace and faith. For Luther, surrounded by the corrupt philosophy of salvation by works which had come to characterise the medieval church, the rediscovery of grace and faith brought liberation and hope.

But however right Luther may have been in his context, we cannot ignore the fact that for the New Testament writers, faith and works were inseparable. The mere profession of faith in God must be backed up by evidence of a new way of life – the life of the kingdom. 'Not everyone who says to me "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven' (Matthew 7:21). Likewise, Paul's great teaching on salvation by faith in the first eleven chapters of Romans is followed immediately by four chapters of practical instruction as to what it means to live out salvation in behaviour and relationships.

Faith, then, is not a matter of feeling right before God. It is grateful acceptance of the gift of redemption, and a readiness to do all that follows from it. It is a matter of saying, 'I am saved by the mercy of God. Now what must I do to live out the new life that is within me?' James 2:14–17 has the answer:

'What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.'

It is an unfortunate side effect of the reaction against Rationalism and the retreat into a feelings-based faith, that much modern Christianity has failed to take this biblical command seriously. Such has been the fear either of lapsing into salvation by works or of falling into a dependence upon human reason, that we have neglected the 'doing' aspect of faith.

Of course, it is fatally easy to substitute a works-centred religiosity for a living faith in the free grace of God. But the antidote for this is not to avoid the 'doing' aspect of faith but to understand that our relationship with God through Christ requires us to be doers of the word and not hearers only (James 1:22). If we are to be truly biblical in our discipleship we have no choice.

Faith, then, contains these four dimensions: believing, imagining, trusting and doing. If the task of the evangelist is to present the gospel so that people may *come* to faith, then we must recognise that evangelistic strategy has to be geared up to enabling individuals to *grow* in it. Evangelism which concentrates on only one dimension to the exclusion or minimising of the others is untrue to its name and untrue to God.

Conclusion

It is clear that of these four dimensions of faith, the third – trusting – is the key to relating faith to young infants. The categories of believing, imagining and doing are aspects which must await a later stage of development beyond the experiences of babyhood.

This helps us to understand the importance of the early months, up to one and a half or two years. As we have observed, it is in this period that the 'trusting' leg of the faith stool is formed. When we later come to

speak of God as our heavenly Father and we encourage children (or adults for that matter) to trust him, it will be to the deep wells of infant trust that we shall be calling. For children like Lee, our appeal is likely to find an echoing response. They will at least know what it means to have experienced trust, acceptance and love at the hands of a parent. For children like Lizzie, however, the likelihood is much less. That is not to say that the Lizzies of this world are incapable of responding to the gospel: by the grace of God they are. But the kind of response they make and the emotional soil out of which it arises may be very thin indeed. We should not be surprised to find a response based on a desire to please or to be accepted by the adults. The nature of trust in these circumstances will be fragile and precarious and we shall need to be as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves in seeking to strengthen it.

In the light of all this, is there any evangelism that is appropriate to young infants? The answer, perhaps surprisingly, is 'yes'. But it will consist entirely of a relationship of love. It will contain no intellectual message nor will it call for a response other than to trust in the human who shows love. It will be a gospel of cuddles, smiles and softly spoken words. These are the seeds out of which, by the grace of God, fuller faith may develop.

Notes to chapter 2

- 1 James Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, New York, Harper & Row 1981, p4.
- 2 Thomas H Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, New York, Harper & Row 1980, p57
- 3 Groome, as above.
- 4 James Mackey, *Religious Imagination*, Edinburgh University Press, 1986, p3.
- 5 Quoted in Leland Ryken, *Triumphs of the Imagination: Literature in Christian Perspective*, Downers Grove, IVP 1979, p97.
- 6 Cheryl Forbes, *Imagination: Embracing a Theology of Wonder*, Bromley, Marc Europe 1986, p18.
- 7 Forbes, as above.