

The Concept of 'Living By Faith'

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1. Introduction

One of Peter Cotterell's most striking characteristics – and he has many – is his direct and forthright manner. This surely arises from the keenness of his mind which penetrates to the heart of the matter and cannot accept slick answers; the sense of urgency and the strong commitment which possess him; and his abhorrence of lukewarmness and half-heartedness.

So, whether it be the situation in Northern Ireland, the shortcomings of traditional missionary societies, received concepts of the Christian ministry, the fate of the lost, or whatever, Peter speaks his mind. I hope that he will approve if I speak mine on a subject which has concerned me for some time – the concept of 'living by faith'. I have never discussed this particular subject with him, but I would not be surprised if Peter approves not only my forthrightness but also at least some of the substance of what I have to say in this my tribute to his outstanding life and ministry.

My method of treatment will be a simple one. I will first set out the concept in some detail, and will then attempt a critique.

2. The Concept of 'Living By Faith'

The term is a 'slippery one'. Biblically, as we shall see later, it means nothing more nor less than a life lived in union with Christ. But in some evangelical thinking, particularly in the field of missiology, a concept has arisen which – in practice – restricts the term to a select group of believers who exercise faith not only for their salvation and,

some would add, for their sanctification, but also for the supply of their material needs.

So, instead of relying on any kind of contractual arrangement by which they are guaranteed a regular stipend, or even appealing for voluntary aid, they make known their needs only to God, and look by faith to him to meet them by whatever means he chooses, particularly – some would say only – by moving the hearts of his people to give without otherwise being aware of those needs.

This might be described as the 'rigorist' concept of 'living by faith'. Much more common is the less rigorist concept which excludes only specific requests for material help, and does not exclude the giving of information which, directly or indirectly, draws attention to the existence of needs.

(a) *Historical Development of the Concept*

The concept has become well known through its adoption by a plethora of 'faith missions', the most famous of which was the one which did much to disseminate the idea, the China Inland Mission, founded by J. Hudson Taylor in 1865. Indeed, Hudson Taylor has rightly been regarded as the father of faith missions.¹ The principles of CIM include (as number 4 of 15): 'Missionaries receive no salary, but expect that God will supply their every need through the hands of his children.'² Largely due to the astounding influence of Grattan and Fanny Guinness and their East London Training Institute which spawned a number of faith missions, the concept became dominant among the multitudinous non-denominations which appeared during the last quarter of the nineteenth and the first quarter of the twentieth century.

But the concept did not originate with Hudson Taylor. If he was its father, then George Müller (of orphanage fame) was its grandfather, and Anthony Norris Groves (the Brethren pioneer missionary) its great-grandfather! A.N. Groves' *Christian Devotedness* (1825), a fervent tract advocating strict obedience to the letter of the Sermon on the Mount and the (supposed) practice of the apostles, constituted a fountain from which Müller (who married a sister of Groves) drank deeply. Both were Brethren who applied the concept to full time ministry at home as well as to missionary work abroad. Hudson Taylor and Guinness were both influenced by the Brethren, and though neither retained long term commitment to all their

1 Klaus Fiedler, in his recent, important study of *The Story of Faith Missions* (Oxford: Regnum Lynx, 1994), describes him as 'the most important person to leave his imprint on faith missions' (32).

2 Fiedler, *Faith Missions*, 33.

Brethren tenets, they continued to cherish and propagate the concept of 'living by faith'.³

(b) *Biblical Warrant*

Since the concept (in its modern form) originated with Brethren, we may be certain that it claimed biblical warrant. This is to be found primarily in the pages of *Christian Devotedness*.⁴ There, Groves appeals, primarily, to a literal interpretation of Matthew 6:19-34, supplemented by the teaching of Jesus on the perils of wealth (especially Mark 12:41-44 and Luke 18:22-30) and the example of the apostles and their adherents in pooling their possessions (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32, 34, 35), together with relevant statements in the epistles (e.g. 2 Cor. 8:9, 13-15). The Old Testament is also laid under tribute, with special reference to Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, the command for all male Israelites to worship in Jerusalem three times a year, and the institution of the sabbatical year (all these involving absolute trust in God).

It is significant that both Müller and Hudson Taylor appeal to such Scriptural passages, particularly Matthew 6:34 which may be regarded as the key text claimed in support of the concept of 'living by faith'.⁵ This is in line with their indebtedness to Groves.

Additional biblical warrant is often sought in the instructions given by Jesus to the Twelve and the Seventy to take no money with them when they were sent out.⁶

In an as yet unpublished paper on 'Living by Faith', Timothy Larsen has drawn attention to the intimate connection between the concept and the rejection by Brethren of paid pastors.⁷ He points out that it was one of their primary distinctives. Biblical warrant for this was sought in Paul's refusal to accept payment from the Corinthian (or, for that matter, from any other) church to which he ministered (1 Cor. 9:15). (His delight at receiving a gift from the church in Philippi when he was in prison was rather different, as was his reference to

3 Fiedler, *Faith Missions*, 32-55.

4 The text of the second edition (1829) is reproduced in G.H. Lang, *Anthony Norris Groves: Saint and Pioneer* (London: Thynne & Jarvis, 1949 2nd edn), 69-99.

5 See e.g. G. Müller, *A Narrative of Some of the Lord's Dealings with George Müller, written by himself*, 4 Parts (London, 1895 edn), I:84; J. Hudson Taylor, *A Retrospect* (London: Lutterworth, 1951 edn), 112.

6 E.g. Taylor, *Retrospect*, 16-17, though, according to John Pollock, *Hudson Taylor and Maria: Pioneers in China* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1962), 130, Hudson Taylor admitted that these instructions related to a temporary task, whereas Matthew 6:33 is of universal application.

7 Ch. 2, pp. 6-9. (Each chapter of the script has its own pagination.)

their – unique – practice of sending him gifts when he was serving as a missionary in places other than Philippi, Phil. 4:10-18.)

As Larsen points out, the advocates of 'living by faith' did not hesitate to appeal, also, to biblical precedents. But the biblical bedrock of their case consisted of the 'hard sayings' of Jesus regarding material possessions, interpreted absolutely literally, reinforced by the statements made by Paul in 1 Corinthians 9.

(c) *Theological Perspectives*

Müller strenuously denied that the faith he exercised for the support of his orphans and the wider ministries of his Scriptural Knowledge Institution was a special gift of faith along the lines of 1 Corinthians 12:9. In support, he posits a distinction between the 'gift' and the 'grace' of faith. These he defines as follows:

According to the *gift of faith* I am able to do a thing, or believe that a thing will come to pass, the not doing of which, or the not believing of which *would not be sin*; according to the *grace of faith* I am able to do a thing, or believe that a thing will come to pass, respecting which I have the word of God as the ground to rest upon, and, therefore, the not doing it, or the not believing it would be sin [Müller's emphasis].

Müller uses as an example of the former, faith for the physical healing of others which he claimed to have received in the past (though he admits that 'in some instances... the prayer was not answered') but which he would no longer claim to receive. (This was in the 1895 edition of his *Narrative*.)⁸

Faith for the supply of material needs, he insists, is not a special gift of faith, but a 'grace' which is mandatory for all believers. While denying that it is the 'gift of faith' of 1 Corinthians 12:9, he acknowledges that it is 'altogether God's own gift'.⁹ But it is 'the self-same faith which is found in *every believer* but which, in his case, has been increasing for the last sixty-nine years'.¹⁰ It is the same faith which he exercises for his salvation.¹¹ And it can be increased by reading and meditation on the Word of God, by maintaining 'an upright heart and a good conscience', by not shrinking from 'opportunities where our faith may be tried, and, therefore, be

8 Müller, *Narrative*, I:84.

9 Müller, *Narrative*, I:450

10 Müller's emphasis. He was writing in 1895, in the 9th edition of his *Narrative*, IV:451.

11 Müller, *Narrative*, IV:451.

strengthened', and by making no effort to effect our own deliverance when our faith is under trial.¹²

In all this, Müller is at pains to make it clear that his experience is – or should be – regarded as nothing special. 'Oh, I beseech you', he writes, 'do not think me an extraordinary believer, having privileges above other of God's dear children, which they cannot have.'¹³ Furthermore, 'living by faith' is not to be confined to financial matters. As far as he is concerned, it should 'extend towards EVERY (*sic*) thing, the smallest of my own temporal and spiritual concerns and the smallest of the temporal and spiritual concerns of my family, towards the saints among whom I labour, the church at large, everything that has to do with the temporal and spiritual prosperity of the Scriptural Knowledge Institution, etc.'¹⁴ And, again it must be noted, this goes for *all* believers, since, 'all believers are called upon, in the simple confidence of faith, to cast all their burdens upon Him for every thing and not only to make every thing a subject of prayer, but to expect answers to their petitions which they have asked according to His will, and in the name of the Lord Jesus.'¹⁵

It is, at first sight, curious that Müller paid wages to those who worked for him in the orphanage. If this had been queried with him, his answer would probably have been that faith is a matter for individuals to exercise voluntarily, not something to be imposed on others. Another apparent anomaly was Müller's remark that if Bethesda Chapel, Bristol, wished to appoint a successor to his colleague, Henry Craik, after the latter had died in 1866, they should 'back up their invitation with at least 500 pounds a year'.¹⁶ But this may have been an argument *ad hominem*, with Müller arguing that, if they want to go back to the example of other churches (by calling a man to a pastoral position), they might as well go the whole way (by paying him a fixed salary).

(d) Practical Considerations

A number of practical considerations were felt to underscore the value of 'living by faith', as far as those engaged in full time Christian ministry were concerned.

12 Müller, *Narrative*, IV:454-56.

13 Müller, *Narrative*, IV:450; cf. II:15.

14 Müller, *Narrative*, IV:452-53.

15 Müller, *Narrative*, IV:450; cf. II:15, 'the blessedness of depending upon the living God may be enjoyed by all the children of God.'

16 F.R. Coad, *A History of the Brethren Movement* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1968), 56.

First – and probably foremost – was the independence it provided. Larsen shrewdly points out that both Groves and Müller had had bad experiences with missionary societies from which they had resigned when forbidden to act in ways which their consciences told them were legitimate (and Hudson Taylor also felt obliged to resign from a society). Brethren were well aware of the truth in the old adage that ‘He who pays the piper calls the tune’. Not that they wished to achieve *total* autonomy for Christian workers. They staunchly believed in accountability, but insisted that it should be to God, *not* man. Anything which savoured of a contractual arrangement was felt to involve some kind of restriction of the accountability to God which was of fundamental importance to those who operated in the spirit of Mrs Trotter’s famous verse:

Christ, the Son of God hath sent me
Through the midnight lands;
Mine the mighty ordination
Of the piercèd Hands.

Closely related to this was the consideration that ‘living by faith’ served to eliminate from Christian service those who had not, in fact, received such ordination. If their funds dried up, and they were forced to withdraw from their work, then this was because they had not been called by God to engage in it. For, if, to quote Hudson Taylor’s famous aphorism, ‘God’s work, done in God’s way, will never lack God’s supply’, then it follows, inevitably, that any who imagine they are called to God’s work do not receive adequate supplies must be in error, and the sooner they admit the error, the better.

Another practical consideration, with strong theological overtones, was the belief that ‘living by faith’ provided a powerful testimony to the reality of a powerful, wonder-working God. Müller, for example, made no bones about the fact that his decision to found an orphanage was determined not so much by his concern for the sad state of Bristol orphans (though that is by no means to suggest that he was lacking in concern), as by his desire to demonstrate to a rationalistic and unbelieving world that his God heard – and answered – prayer. Influenced by his experience of the Pietist orphan houses in Halle, Germany (a reminder of the pre-history of the concept of ‘living by faith’ which goes back far beyond the nineteenth century but which space considerations exclude from this study) Müller determined to provide a demonstration that God hears and answers believing prayer without the interposition of any humanly contrived ‘means’. This was one reason – perhaps the main

one – why he so assiduously documented the progress of his orphanage and the Scriptural Knowledge Institution of which it was a part. And he missed no opportunity of pointing out the moral.

A further practical consideration with theological connections was the perceived spiritual benefits of 'living by faith'. In his tract on *Christian Devotedness* which, as have seen, was the fountainhead of modern thinking on the subject, A.N. Groves maintained that it not only constituted obedience to the Lord's commands, the apostolic example, and the divine command to love one another, and promoted 'the general extension of Christ's Kingdom upon earth' (by promoting and facilitating missionary endeavour), but it also promoted 'the happiness and usefulness of the individual, by extirpating carefulness and sloth, and causing to grow in abundance the peaceable fruits of righteousness and love'.¹⁷ The strengthening of faith – by exercise as well as by prayer and Bible reading – was viewed by Müller as a significant spiritual good. G.H. Lang, one of the most thoroughgoing twentieth-century advocates of 'living by faith', makes a similar point, negatively, by claiming, on the basis of fifty years' experience of the practice, that a 'guaranteed or regular income, because it dispenses with direct and constant faith in God as to temporal supplies, is certainly a spiritual loss, not by any means a gain'.¹⁸

Larsen makes an interesting point when he argues that many of the advocates of 'living by faith' were wealthy men who found it 'spiritually exhilarating to abandon their favored (*sic*) position and trust solely in the Living God'. Their experience was so successful, he adds, that they 'enthusiastically endorsed it for all'.¹⁹ Though not all of the early advocates of the practice were wealthy (e.g. Müller and Hudson Taylor), a number of them certainly were, and a hint in one of the footnotes to Groves' *Christian Devotedness* strongly suggests that he saw 'living by faith' as part of the Brethren 'counter-culture': 'provision for future possible wants is almost the only point, in which the Christian and the man of the world stand on the same ground, pursue the same ends, and govern themselves by the same maxims.'²⁰

17 Cited in Lang, *A.N. Groves*, 94-95.

18 Lang, *A.N. Groves*, 66.

19 Larsen, ch. 2, p. 21.

20 Cited in Lang, *A.N. Groves*, 95, n. 2.

3. A Critique

Before proceeding to critique this concept, taking the historical development as read, but looking critically at each of the other aspects set out above, one or two preliminary remarks must be made.

First, from the perspective of evangelical Christian faith, there is nothing inherently dubious in the concept of trusting an all-powerful, loving, and compassionate God to hear and answer the prayers of his people. Far from it. But the point at issue is whether this is the way in which he expects them to meet their financial obligations. Put another way, we might ask whether faith in God is necessarily incompatible with the use of 'means'.

Second, I must take this opportunity to pay tribute to those who have adopted the way of 'living by faith'. Even if we come to the conclusion that they have been to a greater or lesser extent misguided, and in certain respects have acted inconsistently, we can hardly fail to be deeply impressed by their spiritual calibre. For the most part, they are comparable with Abraham and the other heroes of faith enumerated in Hebrews 11, even though, like them, they were not devoid of faults and failings. I write from experience, for I have known hundreds of them, and they include my own parents.

(a) *Biblical Warrant*

There is not enough space here to indulge in detailed exegesis of the biblical data. Summary comments must suffice, pinpointing the major issues.

First, the appeal to the 'hard sayings' recorded in the Sermon on the Mount, and elsewhere in the gospels. These, as we have seen, constitute the hard core of biblical warrant adduced for the concept. But, a rigid, literal interpretation of the teaching is by no means convincing, being fraught with problems, both exegetical and practical. Western literalism fails to yield the true meaning of oriental idiom. In the context of 'living by faith', literal interpretation – if followed by all Christians – would have the effect of stripping the church of all its resources. It could even be said that *some* Christians are able to live by faith only because *others* do not! Consistent advocates of 'living by faith' do not seem to have thought through the implications of what they were propounding.

Jesus was *preaching*, urging the point that the believer's trust must be placed in God who provides for his or her needs, rather than in the provision that God makes for him or her. He was not laying down a way of life for his followers (a 'new law') but was teaching principles which could be applied in a variety of ways. These might

include going out into the unknown without guaranteed provision for material needs, but need not exclude trust in the God who provides in more normal ways.

The practice of the apostolic community in Jerusalem which pooled its resources has also been misunderstood and misapplied by the advocates of 'living by faith'. For a start, there was nothing mandatory about it: it was both spontaneous and voluntary. The sin of Ananias and Sapphira was not that they failed to put all the proceeds of the sale into the common pool, but that they brought part, pretending that it was the whole. Furthermore, the situation was unique. Pilgrims who had come up to Jerusalem for the short festival season stayed on indefinitely, pending the expected return of the Lord. Clearly, an emergency situation arose, calling for emergency measures. There is overwhelming evidence from the rest of the New Testament that the Jerusalem solution to a temporary crisis situation was not generalised into a universal practice, let alone requirement.

Here we see the danger inherent in an exegetical approach which regards events recorded in Scripture (particularly the New Testament) as precedents to be followed to the letter for all time. Such an approach is necessarily selective, or – to take a very simple example – it would require Christians to meet together for worship in upper rooms! It is far better to make use of 'cultural transposition' – treating the events rather like case studies, taking into account the total context, and looking for the principles involved, with a view to deciding how they can be applied in the contemporary context, which may differ markedly from that of the original event.

In the light of this, the appeal to the instructions given to the Twelve and the Seventy, when sent out on their short missions, need not detain us long. There is nothing to suggest that these are to be taken as normative – as they stand – for every mission throughout all time. Clearly, they relate to Near Eastern culture, and are intimately connected with the historical situation. Moreover, the appeal made to them by advocates of 'living by faith' is selective (e.g. 'do not take a purse', Luke 10:4; but not 'heal the sick', Luke 10:9) and one stipulation, or at least the rationale for it, is specifically ruled out ('the worker deserves his wages', Luke 10:7). As in the case of the Jerusalem church, lessons can be learned from these instructions and applied to current practice, but the claim that *one* of them is to be taken literally and regarded as normative for all time, is surely unwarranted.

Similarly, Elijah's experience of being fed by ravens is surely not intended to be generalised. Of course, God can – and does – provide

miraculously in exceptional circumstances: that is the lesson of the story. But that provides no authority to apply the principle to circumstances which are not exceptional.

Paul's practice must be looked at more closely, for it had received much attention, not only from exponents of the practice of 'living by faith', but also by missiologists in general, as well as New Testament scholars.

That Paul declined to receive material rewards from those to whom he ministered spiritually there can be no doubt (1 Cor. 9:15-18). What is often overlooked, particularly by those who advocate 'living by faith', is that Paul strenuously asserted his right to receive them, *had he chosen* to exercise it (1 Cor. 9:3-14). He piles up evidence to support this right: the examples of other apostles (9:4-6); the analogy from soldiers, farmers, and shepherds (9:7); the law of Moses (9:8-10); and the instructions given by Jesus to those he personally sent out on mission (9:14). The case could hardly be stronger. Why then did he decline to make use of an undoubted right?

His reasons are not stated as clearly as we might wish. He certainly wished to preserve his freedom of action, though he hastened to add that he laboured under divine compulsion and had voluntarily made himself a slave to all mankind (9:15-22). He was also concerned to do nothing which might undermine his insistence that the gospel is 'free' – it does not call for any kind of payment. And there can be little doubt that he was concerned to differentiate himself from those who made a living out of peddling their beliefs: he is no itinerant philosopher plying his trade for what he can get out of it.²¹ It is also worth noting that the reason he specifically gives in 2 Thessalonians 3:10 for being willing to work for his living rather than accept remuneration from those to whom he ministers spiritual things – even though it meant that he had to work literally day and night – was his desire to teach new Christians by example as well as by precept that they should work for their living.

This brief discussion of Paul's attitude yields several important findings regarding Paul and finance:

(1) It is entirely justifiable for those who provide spiritual services to receive material remuneration from those to whom they minister.

(2) Paul had reasons for foregoing this right. These included the desire to safeguard his independence, but also included a theological one (concern not to compromise the 'free' nature of the gospel), a

²¹ Cf. Paul's anxiety to distinguish himself from purveyors of human wisdom (1 Cor. 1-2).

circumstantial one (the danger of being lumped together with the notorious peripatetic philosophers of his day), and a hortatory one (to teach converts the necessity of providing for their own material needs).

(3) Paul saw nothing incongruous in earning money in secular employment if this proved to be necessary.

In short, Paul does provide some support for 'living by faith' (or, more accurately, for one of the reasons adduced for advocating the practice – protecting freedom of action). But he also provides some for *not* living by faith. Not only does he see nothing inconsistent with the former in engaging in 'secular' work to help meet his needs, but, if the factors listed under (2) above, had not applied, there can be no doubt that he would have been happy to accept remuneration from those he served.

It is worth looking more closely at the ways in which Paul's living expenses may have been met.

Some help did come 'out of the blue', though evidence for this is not as plentiful as might be expected if he habitually practised 'living by faith'. Evidence that the church in Antioch, which sent him out and to which he reported when he returned (in other words, his 'sending church'), sent him gifts in the manner approved of and, indeed, expected by most modern evangelical missionary enthusiasts, is conspicuous by its absence. According to his own account, the one and only church which he had planted and which subsequently sent him financial aid was the Philippian (Phil. 4:15-16).

Paul's main source of support may well have been the hospitality that was so marked a feature of oriental life.²² We can see this at work in the – admittedly exceptional – circumstances of Paul's shipwreck on Malta (Acts 28). Publius, the chief official on the island, not only provided free hospitality for three days for Paul and his party, but also gave them supplies for their journey when they left (28:10). Publius, by the way, was an unbeliever and nothing is said to indicate his conversion to Christianity. Similar things would likely have happened in less dramatic circumstances. Paul's needs were very modest, amounting to little more than food and shelter,²³ and it was undoubtedly so natural for these to be met by hospitable parties

22 Cf. Luke 10:5-8, incidentally another piece of evidence that the appeal to the instructions to the Seventy in support of the concept of 'living by faith' is a double-edged weapon.

23 Cf. 1 Cor. 9:5, where Paul indicates another right he has foregone – the right to take a wife with him on his journeys. One wonders why the exponents of 'living by faith' do not require celibacy!

that note is rarely made of it. Attention, however, is drawn to the hospitality afforded by Lydia at Philippi (Acts 16:15). Paul stayed with Aquila and Priscilla at Corinth (Acts 18:1-3), but they were hardworking refugees, not wealthy merchants like Lydia, and Paul found it necessary, as they did – so much for ‘living by faith’! – to earn his living by tentmaking.

With the development of an expanding network of Christian families and churches, the stage was set for the material support of the Christian mission. What this involved may be discovered from a study of New Testament words such as ‘help’, ‘receive’, and ‘helper’. Commenting on Romans 15:24, C.E.B. Cranfield says of *propempein* (‘to help’) that it ‘was used to denote the fulfilment of various services which might be required by a departing traveller, such as the provision of rations, money, means of transport, letters of introduction, and escort for part of the way. It became a regular technical term of the Christian mission’.²⁴

The term ‘receive’ speaks of the hospitality afforded to visiting missionaries. Shortly after writing of his expectation that the Christians at Rome will ‘help’ him on his way to Spain, Paul solicits their assistance for Phoebe during her intended stay there (Rom. 16:2). His request that they ‘receive’ her goes far beyond mere verbal welcome and ecclesiastical acceptance. It extended to hospitality with all its ramifications.

When Paul describes Phoebe as having been a ‘help’ to many, including himself, he uses the word *prostasis* which can be translated ‘patroness’ or ‘benefactress’ and indicates the extent to which Paul and others (surely including, if not especially, missionaries) were supported in an open and acknowledged way.

In short, the claim that Paul ‘lived by faith’ in the sense defined at the beginning of this essay, is dubious, to say the least. Though he deliberately waived his undoubted *right* to automatic support from those to whom he ministered, he was perfectly prepared to undertake paid employment in order to maintain himself.²⁵ Probably a major part of his support came from hospitality and patronage which was a ‘natural’ phenomenon to be expected by a traveller of note. And, quite out of character if he was ‘living by faith’, he had no qualms about drawing attention to his own needs (as in Rom. 15:24) as well as to the needs of others (as in Rom. 16:2).

²⁴ C.E.B. Cranfield, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979), Vol. II, 769, n. 4.

²⁵ Despite this, the resort of A.N. Groves to money-making schemes has been widely regarded by his warmest admirer as a regrettable lapse. See Lang, *A.N. Groves*, in the chapter entitled ‘Failure and its Lessons’, 311ff.

(b) Theological Perspectives

Müller's distinction between the 'gift of faith' and the 'grace of faith' must be regarded as contrived. It does not seem to have gained acceptance and therefore does not require further discussion. His purpose in making the distinction was clearly to discredit any notion that 'living by faith' is a special gift available to a select few. Instead, he maintained that faith, possessed by all true believers, can grow to greater and greater heights.

He is, of course, right in asserting that all believers, by definition, have faith, and that that faith grows by use and by prayer and meditation. But he seems to overlook the biblical teaching that faith should inform the *whole* of the believer's life, not just one's attitude to material possessions. Paul, for example, makes this clear in Romans 14:23b ('everything that does not come from faith is sin') and in 2 Corinthians 5:7 ('We live by faith, not by sight'). This means that faith does not exclude the use of means. At first sight it might appear that possession of, say, a fixed salary, excludes trust in God. But this is not necessarily so. For one thing, there is no guarantee that such a 'natural' process will continue automatically. Health may fail at any time; employment may be terminated for a variety of reasons; a thousand and one uncertainties may materialise at any time. But, even if they continue without interruption, the Christian who receives them should still regard them as gifts of God, since 'every good and perfect gift is from above' (Jas. 1:17). True, it may be 'easier' to trust God when we are in emergency situations where there appears to be no possibility of pressing needs being met without his direct intervention, but that is not to say that a person who is not in an emergency situation is debarred from trusting God. In other words, the use of means does not *necessarily* exclude faith in God.

Hudson Taylor wrote ambivalently on this. On the one hand, he wrote of his time in England just before founding the China Inland Mission (1865): 'I saw that the Apostolic plan was not to raise ways and means, but *to go and do the work* trusting in His sure word who has said, "Seek ye *first* the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you."²⁶ On the other hand, he commented on an incident during his first sea voyage to China when he threw overboard the 'swimming belt' his mother had insisted he take with him in case of shipwreck: 'I was a very young believer, and had not sufficient faith in God to see Him in and through the use of means.' He concluded his discussion of this

²⁶ Taylor, *Retrospect*, 112, his emphasis.

incident with words which hardly fit the rigid view of 'living by faith' commonly associated with him: 'The use of means ought not to lessen our faith in God; and our faith in God ought not to hinder whatever means He has given us for the accomplishment of His own purposes.'²⁷

It is worth pursuing this point a little further, for it can tend towards an unbiblical distinction between the natural and the supernatural. To trust God when no natural factors are involved is usually deemed by advocates of 'living by faith' to be preferable and indeed, superior to trusting him when he provides natural means. This emphasis on the 'supernatural' comes strangely from those who – for the most part – take the view that in this present dispensation God does not show his hand in supernatural ways: he did in the apostolic, foundational period of the church's history, but not any more.²⁸ For the most part, advocates of the concept seem unaware of the irony.²⁹

Another irony is that a practical result of the concept which, as we have seen, arose in part from a desire to avoid the creation of a salaried elite has been to create an *unsalaried* one! For there can be no doubt that, however loudly it may be denied, those who 'live by faith' in a way that cannot be attained by those who, for example, earn their living, *do* constitute an elite.

This can be demonstrated from a remarkable statement made by a Brethren missionary describing himself as 'a veteran from Africa' in a letter deploring the practice of 'tentmaking'. Having pointed out that the first disciples left everything to follow Jesus (Mark 1:8; Luke 5:27-28) and that Peter's subsequent return to fishing was both temporary and unsuccessful (John 21), the veteran went on to assert that the 'natural' man prefers to have a job with an assured income, whereas the 'spiritual' man desires to give himself wholly to the work of God.³⁰ This is unadulterated elitism which comes as near as

27 Taylor, *Retrospect*, 45. It is fascinating to recall that William Carey, who may be said to have launched the modern Protestant missionary movement, had argued for the use of 'means'.

28 Sir Robert Anderson's little volume, *The Silence of God*, presents this dispensationalist view unequivocally.

29 It is interesting that both Müller (implicitly, in his *Narrative*, I:84) and Hudson Taylor (explicitly, in his *Retrospect*, 112) dissociate themselves from faith-healing.

30 *Believer's Magazine*, April 1936, 98-99. A protracted debate followed, mainly supporting the notion. However, it was firmly repudiated in another Brethren magazine (*The Harvester*, March 1937, 57). Yet another Brethren magazine, *Links of Help*, specifically devoted to promoting foreign mission, had earlier (July 1924, 302) raised the question whether the Brethren, with all their

makes no matter to a distinction comparable with that between clergy and laity which the Brethren had abjured!

A further theological implication of the view that 'living by faith' excludes the use of means is that it amounts to 'tempting God'. Groves himself raised this issue in *Christian Devotedness*. His answer was to list examples of divine commands given in the Old Testament which appear to constitute tempting God. They are: the commands given to Abraham to leave his country for an unknown destination, and to sacrifice Isaac, the child of promise; the requirement that all male Israelites should leave their homes and families unprotected three times a year while they went to worship the Lord; and the institution of the sabbatical year. His conclusion was: 'If trusting against the natural appearance of things was demanded under the comparatively dim light of the Old Testament – a dispensation which, considered nationally, had peculiar respect to temporal prosperity; much more might we expect it to be required under the bright light of the Gospel.'³¹

The question remains, however, whether it is a requirement of the New Testament that believers should abjure the use of means with respect to the supply of their material needs. The direction in which this critique is moving suggests that it is not. Special circumstances may arise in which such means are not available. Or, there may be pressing spiritual reasons why they should not be used (in Müller's case, for instance, a deep conviction of the need to establish a witness to the power of God). But consistently to refuse to use available means as a matter of course does seem to represent a humanly devised putting of God to the test.

Closely related to this is the idealistic stance adopted by the exponents of 'living by faith'. For, in order for it to 'work', it requires not only a highly developed faith on the part of those who live by it (and a prayer-answering God!) but also keen spiritual sensitivity on the part of Christians with the resources to be the channels by which God is to meet their needs.

profession of following the New Testament model as closely as possible, had, by neglecting the concept of 'tentmaking', in fact departed from it. Interestingly, the October 1924 edition of *Links of Help* drew attention to the formation of a Christian Emigration Society (33) which, by December 1934, had considered more than 230 applications, as a result of which c. 30 had gone overseas in secular employment (*The Witness*, December 1934, iv).

31 Cited in Lang, *A.N. Groves*, 90-92.

(c) *Practical Considerations*

Some of these have already been considered, but a few remain. First, we must examine the practical argument adduced in favour of the concept of 'living by faith' that it eliminates from Christian ministry any who are not personally called by God and whose temporal needs are therefore not met by divine intervention. As a theory it may be a persuasive argument, but in practice it seldom seems to happen. In part this may be because the rigorist theory is seldom followed. When combined with 'tentmaking' the supposed sifting function is less likely to operate. (Which is *not* to say that those who resort to it are thereby shown to be without divine calling – if it were, then Paul would have to be placed in that category!) There is also the consideration that if the practitioner of 'living by faith' is an eloquent deputation speaker or author support may be attracted 'automatically'. (Again, we are up against the 'idealistic' nature of the concept.)

This raises another practical consideration which I once heard put in this blunt way: 'As soon as it becomes known that someone is "living by faith", that person ceases to "live by faith".' It is a fact that most missionaries who 'live by faith' spend a considerable proportion of their time (sometimes a third) telling people in their home countries about the work they are doing. At least some of this time is needed for physical renewal, renewing family and friendship relationships, and necessary relaxation. And, of course, 'deputation' is a valuable way of stimulating prayer support. But, strictly speaking, if the rigorist view of the matter is being followed, there should be no need for it. At its best, such reporting (as in the case of the annual report meeting at which Müller gave an annual report, and the published *Narrative* which provides minute details of amazing answers to prayer) is intended to be nothing more than directing attention to the faithfulness of God. But, unintentionally, no doubt, it fulfils a further function – that of drawing attention to the existence of material needs. At its worst, it can degenerate into subtle hints (e.g. a request to 'pray with me for the provision of [this or that]').

A further practical consideration relates to the children and other dependents of those 'living by faith'. Groves addressed this issue. He was perfectly aware of the Scriptural responsibilities involved, but, characteristically, he was convinced that the Scriptural way of meeting those responsibilities was to trust God to make provision as the need arose. The believer, he affirmed, 'knows that the best security for all... temporal mercies, both to himself and to his friends, lies in doing the will, and trusting unreservedly in the promises, of...

God.³² But those who 'live by faith' are usually candid enough to acknowledge that faith is often tested – sometimes to the limit. This is fair enough for those who have chosen it freely, but the question has been raised – sometimes by the children concerned – whether it is right to impose it on offspring who have not chosen it for themselves. Parents have often met this point by helping their children to accept it willingly, and perhaps the question stems from western individualism. But it is not unknown for the children of parents who 'live by faith' to react very negatively.

Other practical considerations cluster round the 'slippery' nature of the concept. Does it apply to appeals for prayer support and additional personnel, as well as to money? If not, why not? It is curious that Hudson Taylor, for example, ruled out personal solicitation for funds, 'collections' of money and even 'collecting books', but had no objection to 'missionary boxes'.³³ One wonders why. And why was he prepared to make fervent appeals for more workers to go out to China, but not for more money to support them?

I have even heard it said by someone 'living by faith' that there is no objection to requesting money for *others*, only for *oneself*.

4. Conclusion

Perhaps the best way of bringing this discussion to a close is to develop this last point a little further.

Larsen has drawn attention to what he describes as the 'fluid understanding' of the concept in the writings of its earliest exponents. He draws attention to Müller's approbation of a poor Christian woman whom he (Müller) describes as living a life of 'simple dependence upon the Lord', even though she was in receipt of a fixed income which met her basic needs.³⁴ Groves paid his faithful Indian disciple, J.C. Aroolappen, a monthly salary for his work as an interpreter (though he was delighted when Aroolappen declined to accept it any longer), and on his deathbed urged his Indian helpers not to lay too much stress on matters such as 'unpaid ministry'.³⁵ Even J.N. Darby, who made characteristically emphatic statements about 'living by faith', offered a loophole when he added,

32 Lang, *A.N. Groves*, 90.

33 Taylor, *Retrospect*, 116.

34 Larsen, ch. 4, pp. 16-18.

35 G.H. Lang, *The History and Diaries of an Indian Christian* (London, 1939), 30.

'if there were not some special direction.'³⁶ As for Hudson Taylor, something has already been said about his virtual ambivalence. Dr. A.J. Broomhall, than whom no one has ever studied more carefully his life and ministry, says, with reference to his early 'experiments' in 'living by faith' conducted before he left England, 'Hudson Taylor seems to have been satisfied by his spiritual experiments, sure now that he could venture even to China and never fail to be fed and supplied with all necessities by the Lord he trusted in. *So from then on he had no need to experiment and no objection to discussing his money matters freely with his father and accepting gifts.*'³⁷

If there is any validity in a rigorous application of the concept of 'living by faith' it is to emergency situations or to individuals who are personally convinced that God has called them to this way of life. But our trust should be in God whether we are thrust (by him) into situations in which we are deprived of human resources, or are placed (by him) in positions where provision is made for our needs by less spectacular means. Therefore, it seems to me, to define 'living by faith' in such a way as to create a distinction between those who are led by God in one direction and those who are led by him in the other is regrettable.

Watering down the concept by allowing the use of pointed information which may fall short of an overt appeal for financial support but is designed to achieve the same end, eventually evacuates it of meaning. Perhaps the time has come to allow the phrase 'living by faith' to fall into disuse.³⁸

³⁶ J.N. Darby, *Letters*, I:43. I owe this reference to Larsen.

³⁷ A.J. Broomhall, *Over the Treaty Wall* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1982), Volume 2 of a 7 volume study of 'Hudson Taylor and China's Open Century' (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1981-89), 73. My emphasis.

³⁸ Since writing this paper I have been able to consult Moira J. McKay, 'Faith and Facts in the History of the China Inland Mission 1832-1905' (unpublished MLitt Thesis, University of Aberdeen, 1989). This provides confirmation of my analysis.