

## Mar Babai the Great (+628) Speaks Concerning Faith

Questions into the nature of God and his dealings with men are beyond our limited capabilities to deal with. Only the Father truly knows the Son, and only the Son truly knows the Father. Full knowledge of the Holy Spirit is far beyond anyone's meager mind. Only the Father and Son know him, and he them. How is it possible, then, to speak about these divine matters if there is no faith in the speaker or in the hearer? *"And this is life eternal, to know you, who are the true God, and him whom you have sent, Jesus Christ."* (Jn. 17:3) What we know of God has come to us from the Scriptures and from the fathers, but even that may not be grasped without faith.

Faith has its complement in obedience: *"He who has my commandments and keeps them is he who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him."* (Jn. 14:21). We begin with faith and make progress with obedience. Obedience produces purity, and purity produces understanding. *"He who believes in me as the Scriptures have said, rivers of living water shall issue from his belly."* (Jn. 7:38).

The wise man understands that his teaching must be accommodated to that of our Lord, his Apostles, and the fathers. Though methods of training may change with time and circumstances, the substance of revelation must be the same. There are no new truths about God. But before this truth is grasped, we must all prepare our hearts with faith, for so important is this ingredient to us who are Christians that we even identify ourselves by this word, calling one another "believers", or, "the faithful". It is not sophisticated inquiry, but faith which opens the darkened mind and sheds the light of truth within. Upon the rock of Simon Peter's faith Christ has laid a sure and steady foundation: *"Upon this rock I will build my Church,"* (Mt. 16:18) and, *"Whoever falls upon this rock shall be broken to pieces, and whomever it falls upon it shall crush,"* (Lk. 20:18) and, *"The gates of Sheol shall not prevail over it."* (Mt. 16:18) All comes through faith, and without it there is no hope of life, no incentive to love, or maturing of virtues. Our Lord himself constantly stressed the importance of faith: *"Believe in God, and believe in me."* (Jn. 14:1) *"Anything is possible for one who believes."* (Mk. 9:23) *"Believe that I am in my Father, and my Father is in me."* (Jn. 14:11) When Jesus performed miracles he often raised the question of faith: *"Let it be to you as you have believed."* (Mt. 8:13) *"Your faith has saved you: go in peace."* (Lk. 7:50) And, *"Anything which you ask in prayer, should you believe, you will receive."* (Mt. 21:22) Then after his resurrection, he gave this great command to his Apostles: *"Go to all the world and proclaim my gospel in all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized is saved, and whoever does not believe is condemned."* (Mk. 16:16).

The Apostle Paul bears witness to the necessity of faith: *"I am crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me, and this [life] which I now live in the flesh I live through the faith of the Son of God."* (Gal. 2:20) Elsewhere he speaks in the person of God, quoting Scripture: *"The just shall live by my faith, but if anyone shrinks back, my soul does not delight in him."* (Heb. 10:38) Then he continues the thought: *"We are not of the hesitancy which leads to destruction, but of the faith which gains for us our souls. Faith is the assurance of those things which exist in hope. . . By faith we understand that the worlds were set in order by the word of God. . . Without faith no one is able to please God, and one who approaches God is obliged to believe that he is."* (Heb. 10:39-11:1,3,6) Paul reminds us that the Christian life begins in faith, progresses in faith, and ends in perfect consolation. He looks back on the struggles of his life with satisfaction because of his commitment to his faith: *"I have finished my race and I have kept my faith."* (2 Tim. 4:7) By faith, according to the Apostle, we become the children of Abraham and of the promises made to him which were based upon his faith: *"So Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him for righteousness."* (Gal. 3:6, quoting Gen. 15:6) Therefore he concludes: *"He [Abraham] shall be the father of all the uncircumcised [the Gentiles] who believe."* (Rom. 4:11) There is a necessary corollary which he draws: *"We shall be justified by the faith of Christ and not by the Law."* (Gal. 2:16).

This teaching of faith was confirmed by all the rest of the Apostles and of the trustworthy fathers who followed after them. The great statement of faith established at Nicea begins, "We believe in one God, the omnipotent Father," and then proceeds to describe certain characteristics of the Godhead and to set forth the faith concerning the dispensation of God the Word in the flesh. This faith distinguishes us from the emptiness of polytheism and brings confident knowledge of the one true God, the singular and solitary nature, the Creator and Cause of all good things, who has been revealed in a Trinity of qnome for our salvation through Jesus Christ our God. May his bright light shine in me through his grace and abundant mercies, to perfect his will and fulfill the task of teaching, to the profit of his faithful worshippers and to the praise of his worshipful greatness, with his Father and the Holy Spirit, yea and amen.

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### **About Mar Babai the Great**

Bawai the Great lived in the late 6th and early 7th centuries. He was a Chorepiscopus, responsible for overseeing the monasteries and schools of his diocese. He also functioned as their most illustrious teacher, being head of the great monastery of Mar Abraham on Mount Izla. He possessed one of the greatest minds in the long history of the Church of the East. The seven treatises (memre) which make up his Book of the Union were composed as lectures to be given to the monks of his monastery at their request. They mainly deal with the subject of Christology, but as corollaries they deal with everything from the Holy Trinity to Sacraments. The above quotation is from this work, excerpted, condensed, and paraphrased for the modern English reader.