

A Primer on the Meaning of *Faith*

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Introduction

There is hardly a more important subject for mankind to contemplate — and understand — than that of faith. It is a subject (and word) that men widely abuse and misuse. This misunderstanding is especially evident in faith's relationship to obedience, salvation, and knowledge. The subject of faith is so basic that if one goes astray on it, he will do so to his own eternal condemnation.

The Place of Faith in the Christian System

Faith is fundamental and basic to the religion of Christ — the beginning point of man's approach to Deity: "And without faith it is impossible to be well-pleasing unto him; for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that seek after him" (Heb. 11:6). Jesus said: "Except ye believe that I am he, ye shall die in your sins" (John 8:34). Faith is therefore the beginning point of man's response to God's message: "He that believeth [i.e., the Gospel, v. 15] and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned" (Mark 16:16).

Faith and *belief* are so much the basic response God requires that one or the other is often used as a synecdoche (i.e., a part representing the whole) for all that one must do to be reconciled to God. *Repentance* (Acts 17:30), *confession* (of one's faith) (Rom. 10:9-10), and *baptism* (1 Pet. 3:21) are all used in the same way.

Advocates of salvation by "faith only" notoriously misapply John 3:16 in an effort to advance their heresy. If this statement includes **only** intellectual acceptance of the Christ, it excludes all else (e.g., repentance and confession, and a life of faithfulness, as well as baptism — which "faith only" adherents so despise).

Many passages teach salvation by faith, but none by faith **alone**. *Believeth* in John 3:16 simply stands for all that man must do to be saved eternally, for all such conditions are expressions of faith, even as rejection of any of them is a demonstration of unbelief. The report of Paul and Barnabas at the conclusion of their first preaching trip (Acts 14:27) provides an additional illustration of this use of *faith*.

Further, when the jailer in Philippi asked Paul and Silas what he should do to be saved, they first told him, "Believe on the Lord Jesus" (Acts 16:31). A bit more reading reveals that they

(1) taught the jailer and his family the Gospel (v. 32), upon which he (2) manifested his repentance by washing their stripes (v. 33a), and was immediately baptized, though it was past midnight (vv. 25, 33b). Only then does Luke describe them as “having believed in God” (v. 34).

Numerous other passages use *faith* and/or *belief* to refer to what men had done to be saved and added to the church, all of which conditions are subsumed under one or the other of these words (e.g., Acts 10:45; 13:12; 15:5; 17:12; et al.).

After Pentecost inspired men consistently use *believer* and *them that believe* in reference to those who had **obeyed** the Gospel, had been added to the church, and thereby had become disciples, Christians, brethren, saints, children of God (e.g., Acts 5:14; 1 Cor. 14:22; 1 The. 1:7; 2:10, 13; 1 Tim. 4:12; 6:2; et al.). All such usages of *faith* and *belief* are examples of “subjective” faith—that which comes from within men as they react to the Father, to Christ, and, to the Holy Spirit through the Gospel.

The New Testament often refers to the Gospel as “the faith” in an objective sense. When so used, *the faith* refers to that whole body of doctrine in which men must invest their faith. Note the following illustrations of this meaning (emph. DM):

- “And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem exceedingly; and a great company of the priests were **obedient to the faith**” (Acts 6:7).
- “Confirming the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in **the faith**, and that through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom” of God (14:22).
- “Watch ye, stand fast in **the faith**, quit you like men, be strong” (1 Cor. 16:13).
- “Till we all attain unto the **unity of the faith**, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a full-grown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13).
- “I was constrained to write unto you exhorting you to contend earnestly for **the faith** which was once for all delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3).

One’s personal faith in **the faith** is the basis of a life that pleases God after Gospel obedience: “For we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7). The following principle is age-lasting: “But the righteous shall live by faith” (Hab. 2:4; Rom. 1:17). The foundation of the “Christian graces” is faith (2 Pet. 1:15).

Faith is so basic that Paul wrote that Moses’ law was a “law of works,” and the Gospel is a “law of faith” (Rom. 3:27). (Note that Paul depicts the Gospel as “law,” doubtless much to the chagrin of the “all grace-no law” voices among those who have departed from us.)

What Faith Is Not

Faith, like many other good words, has been misdefined.

1. Some equate faith with wishful thinking – “pie in the sky by and by.” In this misconception, “faith” has no reality upon which to rest. The existence of God, Christ, the Bible, and Heaven are all things one **wishes** to be real and **wants** to believe in so badly that one convinces himself that they exist.
2. Some completely sunder faith from knowledge. To them “faith” goes beyond knowledge, taking up where knowledge ceases. To these misdefiners, “faith” is the proverbial “leap in the dark.”
3. Many conceive of saving “faith” as merely intellectual acceptance of certain Biblical facts (e.g., the existence of God, the Deity of Christ). Although such acknowledgement of Bible teaching is the **beginning** point of saving faith, it is far from its **end** (as earlier noted).
4. Some view faith as believing in things that may **possibly** exist. Accordingly, some allege that, while we cannot prove God’s existence empirically, yet His existence is more probable than improbable. This misapprehension of faith constitutes agnosticism.
5. Others conceive of believers as those who ignore evidence with which they disagree. Skeptics often thus view Biblical faith. However, the better demonstration of this aberration of faith is the evolutionist, who defies, denies, and denigrates the huge body of evidence that validates the Bible and combats his irrational hypotheses.

While not exhaustive, the foregoing list is representative of the major misunderstandings of faith.

What Faith Is

Biblical faith has to do with the elements of belief, trust, confidence, assurance, and conviction. Hebrews 11:1 helps us see the true nature and meaning of faith: “Now faith is assurance [the substance, KJV] of things hoped for, a conviction [the evidence, KJV] of things not seen.” *Assurance, substance, conviction, and evidence* are strong terms of certainty. An assurance or certainty undergirds the reality of the things for which we hope, although we cannot now physically see them. This certainty and assurance imply evidence sufficient to convict one that the things for which we hope are fact rather than fantasy.

The source of adequate evidence of the reasonableness of our spiritual hopes is the Bible: “So belief cometh of hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). How did the message of the apostles and other New Testament prophets engender faith in first-century unbelievers? They presented compelling, undeniable evidence that confirmed their message. The “great salvation” they preached,

...which having at the first been spoken through the Lord, was confirmed unto us by them that heard; God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders, and by manifold powers, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to his own will (Heb. 2:3-4).

This principle is evident in the statement of Nicodemus: “We know that thou art a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that thou doest, except God be with him” (John 3:2).

Since the age of such signs, wonders, and miracles has ceased, how do men develop faith now? The **written** record of the Biblical miracles provides the very same evidence of the authenticity of the message that the **actual** miracles did. The message has not changed, so the miracles that confirmed it until its completion will effectively confirm it from now on. The words of John are instructive just here:

Many other signs therefore did Jesus in the presence of the disciples, which are not **written** in this book: but these are **written**, that ye may **believe** that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that **believing** ye may have life in his name (John 20:30-31, *emph. DM*).

Apparently, John was writing for the benefit of those who had not seen any of Jesus’ signs. He therefore **wrote** a record of some of those signs so that they might **believe** in the Christ and be saved. If the written record had confirmatory power before the end of the first century, it has the same power indefinitely.

Faith is not **beyond** knowledge or **antagonistic** to it but is actually another **form** of knowledge or means of attaining it. The account of the people in Samaria demonstrates this fact. At first the Samaritans “believed on him [Jesus] because of the word of the woman” (John 4:39). Later, Jesus entered Samaria and taught the people, upon which they said, “Now we believe, not because of thy speaking: for we have heard for ourselves and know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world” (John 4:42). Evidence created faith and knowledge.

On Pentecost Peter reminded the crowd of Jesus’ “mighty works and wonders and signs” (Acts 2:22), proclaimed His resurrection (v. 32), and then caused them to reflect on the powerful signs that accompanied the apostles’ baptism in the Holy Spirit (v. 33). Peter also appropriately applied various prophecies (vv. 17-21; 25-28; 34-35). He then challenged them to believe, based on solid evidence: “Let all the house of Israel therefore **know assuredly**, that God hath made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom ye crucified” (v. 36, *emph. DM*). Some had witnessed some of Jesus’ signs, but those from far-flung nations (vv. 9-11) could not have done so. Perhaps most of these had seen some of the miracles on Pentecost. However, **none** of

them had witnessed the resurrection, ascension, of coronation of Christ, but Peter said that they could **know** all of these things **assuredly**. The murderous infidels became penitent believers.

Verse 37 is an implied confession of their **faith**: “Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and the rest of the apostles, Brethren, what shall we do?” Peter described their newfound **faith** as something they now “**know** assuredly.” God has never asked men to believe in anything or anyone apart from adequate evidence.

Conclusion

We must never cease to emphasize to a world of confused “believers” that saving faith is always obedient faith (emph. below, DM):

But when they **believed** Philip preaching good tidings concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were **baptized**, both men and women (Acts 8:12).

And Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, **believed** in the Lord with all his house; and many of the Corinthians hearing **believed**, and were **baptized** (Acts 18:8).

The only sort of faith that accomplishes anything is one based on Biblical evidence and is a “faith which worketh by love” (Gal. 5:6).

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