

THE NATURE OF FAITH

by

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Introduction

Over the centuries much of the discussion within Soteriology¹ has involved the nature of faith. Although no one leaves faith out of the equation, many teachers and denominations add further requirements to obtain eternal life. If faith is essential, just what does *faith* mean? Does it include different elements? Do we discover different types of faith in the New Testament, such as “permanent faith,” “passing faith,” “genuine faith,” and “spurious faith”?

Discussions about Faith

Faith in the Gospels

A good place to begin exploration of faith is in the Gospels. Although the Synoptics (Matthew-Mark-Luke) use the verb *believe* sparingly, John uses it almost 100 times.² Oddly enough, we never find the noun *faith* in John. Since John wrote his book expressly for evangelistic purposes (John 20:31), the prominent role of faith should tell us something about God’s requirement for salvation.

One of Lordship Salvation’s chief attacks against the Free Grace position claims that it defines faith as mental assent. One writer charges that those who so believe “have been deceived by a corrupted gospel. They have been told that faith alone will save

¹ Within systematic theology, Soteriology is the doctrine of salvation. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations are from the *New King James Version (NKJV)*, 1982

² In John πιστευω occurs 98 times in the Majority Text and 99 in the Critical Text. Matthew uses it eleven times, Mark ten times, and Luke nine times.

them, but they neither understand nor possess real faith. The ‘faith’ they are relying on is only intellectual acquiescence to a set of facts. It will not save.”³ J. I. Packer claims, “Simple assent to the gospel, divorced from a transforming commitment to the living Christ, is by biblical standards less than faith, and less than saving, and to elicit only assent of this kind would be to secure only false conversions.”⁴ And, according to James Montgomery Boice, this approach to faith “reduces the gospel to the mere fact of Christ’s having died for sinners, requires of sinners only that they acknowledge this by the barest intellectual assent, and then assures them of their eternal security when they may very well not be born again.”⁵

Faith according to the Reformers

Before evaluating these charges, we should consider what the Reformers have said, since those who advocate Lordship Salvation claim that church history, especially Reformation history, supports their position in the gospel discussion. As we do this, it is good to remember that Calvin claimed that his theology was every bit Augustinian: And, Augustine said, “Faith is nothing else than to think with assent.”⁶

No wonder that Calvin wrote: “For, as regards justification, faith is something merely passive, bringing nothing of ours to the recovering of God’s favor but *receiving* from Christ what we lack [emphasis mine].”⁷ Advocates of Lordship Salvation affirm an active view of faith that walks hand-in-hand with obedience pro-

³ John F. MacArthur, *The Gospel according to Jesus*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 186.

⁴ J. I. Packer, foreword to *The Gospel according to Jesus*, ix.

⁵ James Montgomery Boice, foreword to *The Gospel according to Jesus*, xi.

⁶ Augustine, “On the Predestination of the Saints,” in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Church*, trans. and ed. Philip Schaff, *St. Augustine: Anti-Pelagian Writings* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 5:499.

⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Library of Christian Classics, vols. 20–21, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), III. xiii. 5 (the citation is on page 1:768).

ducing good works. Anything less is false faith, they claim. Rather, Calvin said, “We compare faith to a kind of vessel; for unless we come empty and with the mouth of our soul open to seek Christ’s grace, we are not capable of receiving Christ.”⁸ R.T. Kendall evaluates Calvin this way: “What stands out in these [Calvin’s] descriptions is the given, intellectual, passive and assuring nature of faith.”⁹ M. Charles Bell concurs with Kendall when he writes, “Calvin taught that faith is fundamentally passive in nature, is centered in the mind or understanding, is primarily to be viewed in terms of certain knowledge.”¹⁰

Therefore, Calvin did not view faith as something akin to obedience or all-out commitment to follow Christ wherever He might lead. Rather, as Thomas Lewellen observes, for Calvin obedience flows from faith and is part of the nature of the Christian life, and faith itself is reliance on the divine promises of salvation in Christ and nothing more.¹¹ Philip Melanchthon, who wrote the *Augsburg Confession*, defined faith simply as “receptivity.”¹² Franz A. Pieper, the author of the modern standard theology of confessional Lutheranism wrote:

Saving faith is essentially. . . the reliance of the heart on the promises of God set forth in the gospel. . . .

⁸ *Ibid.*, III., xi. 7.

⁹ R.T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*, 2d ed., Paternoster Biblical and Theological Monographs (Carlisle, England: Paternoster, 1999), 19. See also Calvin, *Institutes*, III. ii. 36 (the section is on pages 1:583–84).

¹⁰ M. Charles Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance* (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1985), 8.

¹¹ Thomas G. Lewellen, “Has Lordship Salvation Been Taught throughout Church History?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147 (January–March 1990): 57.

¹² *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, IV. 56, 112, 257. Also see *The Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration*, III. 8–14. Cf. Robert D. Preus, “Perennial Problems in the Doctrine of Justification,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 45 (July 1981): 163–84, for a good summary of the approaches to faith taken by Melanchthon and Luther.

In the preceding characterization of faith, we have stated . . . that justifying faith must be viewed merely as the instrument or receptive organ for apprehending the forgiveness of sins offered in the gospel.¹³

Even though they had many other points of disagreement, the Reformers and other noted theologians who followed after them agreed on the aforementioned approach to faith defined by Calvin.

Faith according to B.B. Warfield

So much for the Reformers! What about the staunch defenders of Reformed theology? One of the most tenacious, B.B. Warfield, discusses faith extensively in his writings, but never does he link it to obedience. As a matter of fact, he says πιστευω (believe) plus the dative case (normally translated “to believe in” or simply “to believe” someone or something) “pre-vaillingly expresses believing assent.”¹⁴ To quote him more extensively:

The central movement in all faith is no doubt the element of assent; it is that which constitutes the mental movement so called a movement of conviction. But the movement of assent must depend, as it always does depend, on a movement, not specifically of the will, but of the intellect; the *assensus* [assent] issues from the *notitia* [knowledge]. The movement of the sensibilities which we call “trust,” is on the contrary the product of the assent. And it is in this movement of the sensibilities that faith fulfills itself, and it is by that, as specifically “faith,” it is “formed.”¹⁵

¹³ Franz A. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1950–57), 2:426, 437. The opening statement is a key thesis statement (which he develops on pages 426ff.); the concluding statement restates the thesis in preparation for new argumentation.

¹⁴ B.B. Warfield, s.v. “Faith,” in *A Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. James Hastings (New York: Scribner, 1905); reissued as, “Faith,” in *Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. Samuel G. Craig, (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1952), 436.

¹⁵ Warfield, “On Faith in its Psychological Aspects,” *Princeton Theological Review* 9 (1911): reissued in *Biblical and Theological Studies*, 403.

Faith according to English Puritanism

If the Reformers and even early American Reformed theologians understood faith to be passive and simply trust or confidence in the promises of God, from whence did this idea come that faith is active, including obedience and works? The answer is English Puritanism, as R.T. Kendall establishes. Lewellen also emphasizes this contribution when he writes:

In the Puritan era . . . there was a shift in the definition of saving faith. In the generations following the Reformation, some theologians subtly changed the Reformers' definition of faith from a passive receptivity to an active response on the part of the sinner, centered in the will and containing both commitment and obedience.¹⁶

The Westminster Standards¹⁷ embody this dramatic shift in the understanding of faith. Advocates of Lordship Salvation rely heavily on this Standard to prove their position. For example, one author tried to establish Lordship Salvation as the historic position of the church by drawing ten pages (of eighteen on the subject) from the Westminster Standards and from post-Reformation English Calvinists.¹⁸ It is certainly fair to say that Lordship Salvation has its roots in a branch of traditional Christianity. Yet, to make the sweeping statement that, "the view of faith that Zane Hodges decries as a modern heresy is exactly what the

¹⁶ Lewellen, *Lordship?* 58.

¹⁷ *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, III. viii; XIV. ii (Philadelphia: Orthodox Presbyterian Church, n.d.). The Westminster Standards are the documents produced by the Westminster Assembly convened by the English Parliament from 1643 to 1649. These documents are the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, the *Shorter Catechism*, and the *Larger Catechism*. They form the doctrinal foundation of much of modern Presbyterianism. A slightly modified form, the *London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, serves as the doctrinal basis of many modern Baptist churches.

¹⁸ MacArthur, *Gospel*, 255–72.

true church has always believed,”¹⁹ is misleading at best. To quote Lewellen once again:

What is true . . . is that MacArthur’s view *is* embodied in the Westminster Standards and *does* have a long and powerful history in the Christian church. The idea that faith is an active commitment, including obedience, is the view of one strand of church history—English Puritanism—which is of course a powerful strand. One should not confuse that strand, however, with the “true church.” Calvin disagreed with it; Lutheran theology has always opposed it; even today some Reformed theologians do not accept it.²⁰

In more modern church history none other than the radically liberal Rudolf Bultmann, in his long article on faith, includes a small section in which he tries to equate faith and obedience.²¹ He uses verses such as Romans 15:18 and 16:19 for proof, even though these verses do not have the verb for believing or the noun for faith in them. Do Lordship Salvation advocates want to filter their understanding of saving faith through Bultmann’s grid? By contrast, the apostle Paul wrote, *For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law* (Romans 3:28, *NASB*). This verse distinguishes justifying faith from works of obedience as far as the East is from the West. As Joseph Dillow pointedly asks,

If faith is the opposite of works of obedience (law) and is the opposite of work, by what mental alchemy can men seriously argue that, while faith is apart from works of obedience, faith itself includes works of obedience?²²

¹⁹ MacArthur, *Gospel*, 256.

²⁰ Lewellen, “Lordship?” 59. See Gordon H. Clark, *Faith and Saving Faith* (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1983), 110–18; R.T. Kendall, *Once Saved Always Saved* (Chicago: Moody, 1985); and Bell, *Scottish Theology*.

²¹ Rudolf Bultmann, s.v. πιστευω,” in *Theological Dictionary of The New Testament*, vol. 6, Πε–Ρ, Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., Geoffrey W. Bromiley, trans. and ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 6:205–6.

²² Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 2d ed. (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle, 1992), 273.

Misleading Discussions about Faith

The “Straw Man” Factor

Another disturbing element in the discussion of faith is what I call the straw man factor. This refers to erecting an argument that an opponent does not hold only to refute it as if it were his position. Although this kind of argumentation may seem persuasive, what merit is there in destroying a point of view that the other side does not hold?

Those who advocate Lordship Salvation consistently accuse Free Grace advocates of defining faith as mental assent, thereby implying a detached, cold, intellectual process. Just the verbal connotations turn us off. However, is this a fair assessment of faith as espoused by Hodges, Constable, Chafer, Ryrie, and so many other present and former Dallas Theological Seminary faculty members? Hardly so!

After grappling with the artificial segmentation of faith into the compartments of the mind, the emotions, and the will, Zane Hodges notes the obvious: “The one thing we cannot do . . . is to believe something we don’t know about.”²³ He goes on to quote Romans 10:14–17 where Paul writes, *And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? . . . So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.* Until the mind perceives a subject, one cannot believe it. Of course this involves the intellect. But is this simply an intellectual exercise? Far from it! “To describe faith that way is to demean it as a trivial, academic exercise, when in fact it is no such thing. What faith really is . . . is the *inward conviction* that what God says to us in the gospel is true.”²⁴ Hodges further defines faith as “firm conviction,”²⁵

²³ Zane C. Hodges, *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Dallas, TX: Redención Viva, 1989; Grand Rapids: Academie, 1989), 31.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

“childlike trust,”²⁶ an “act of appropriation” of the truth of the gospel,²⁷ and an “act of trust.”²⁸

The Psychologizing of Faith

Many theologians have attempted to compartmentalize faith into intellectual, emotional, and volitional elements. For example, Demarest contends that:

*Faith . . . involves an intellectual element—knowledge of the Gospel, an emotional element—feeling the sufficiency of Christ’s grace, and a voluntary element—trusting Christ as Savior and Lord.*²⁹

In stark contrast to Hodges’ base definition of faith as trust, the above quotation makes faith a volitional act. Another writer understands trust to be part of the emotional element. Though some of this discussion ought to be relegated to semantics, it is important to ask: What role does the will play in faith?

Faith and Volition

Listening to the voice of arch-Reformed theologian B.B. Warfield, volition (human will) has nothing to do with faith:

The conception embodied in the terms “belief,” “faith,” is not that of an arbitrary act of the subject’s; it is that of a mental state or an act which is determined by sufficient reasons. That is to say, with respect to belief, it is a mental recognition of what is before the mind, as objectively true and real, and therefore depends upon the evidence that a thing is true and real and is determined by this evidence; it is the response of the mind to this evidence and cannot arise apart from it. *It is, therefore, impossible that belief*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 38–39.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 40–41.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁹ Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1997), 249.

should be the product of a volition; volitions look to the future and represent our desires; beliefs look to the present and represent our findings [emphasis mine].³⁰

Warfield's position is not unusual among Reformed theologians. Many consider Archibald Alexander to be the leading Reformed thinker of the nineteenth century. Charles Hodge said Alexander was the greatest man he had ever known. Alexander echoes Warfield when he defines faith as "simply a belief of the truth."³¹ In his commentary on Romans, Hodge demonstrates his view of faith is firmly in the Reformed tradition of Warfield and Alexander:

That faith, therefore, which is connected with salvation includes knowledge, that is, a perception of the truth and its qualities, assent or the persuasion of truth of the object and trust or reliance.³²

Nowhere does Hodge suggest or even hint that faith means or includes obedience. The Apostle John put it still another way:

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:12–13).

Someone may explain this by saying that the corrupt will of man cannot effect the new birth. However, if there ever were a time to connect believing and the will of man in some positive sense, John missed a grand opportunity.

³⁰ B.B. Warfield, "Psychological Aspects," 376ff.

³¹ Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience*, 3d ed. (N.p., 1907; reprint ed., London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 64.

³² Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, new ed. (New York: Armstrong, 1886; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 29.

Many New Testament theologians slip the will and commitment to obedience into the essence of faith in the most subtle ways. Consider this statement:

Saving faith . . . must include wholehearted *trust* and *commitment* to Christ, evidenced by obedience and good works. This aspect of faith involves cleaving to Christ and appropriating His benefits.³³

Recall that Hodges included the words “trust” and “appropriation” in his definition of faith, but not “commitment.” How it is that these acts (trust and appropriation) are supposedly confined to the will of man? Demarest works especially hard to establish a volitional aspect of faith, equated to obedience:

Paul also affirmed that saving faith involves trust in and commitment to Christ (Acts 16:31; Col 2:5) or God (Rom 4:24; 1 Thess 1:8). For the apostle, faith involves intellectual understanding and emotional assent to cardinal truths . . . ; but it also means volitional surrender to Christ, evidenced by love (1 Cor 13:2; Gal 5:6), obedience (Rom 1:5; 16:26), and good works (1 Thess 1:3; Tit. 2:14; 3:8).³⁴

However, Demarest’s perspective in the foregoing quotation contains several highly problematic features:

- None of the first four references define *believe* or *faith*, but only identify the object of faith (Christ or God). For instance, in Acts 16:31 Paul tells the Philippian jailer simply to believe. He does not explain that believing means trust *and commitment*. Demarest begs the question by assuming what he needs to prove.
- Another problem is the assertion that “faith involves intellectual understanding and emotional assent to cardinal truths . . . but it also means volitional surrender to Christ, evidenced by love” Where is the scriptural proof that faith

³³ Demarest, *Cross*, 260.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 260–61.

means “emotional assent” or “volitional surrender”? To say that love, obedience, and good works provide an evidence of faith is one thing, but to say that volitional surrender is of the essence of faith without giving any support is mere conjecture.

- A third problem is that none of his final seven scriptural references deals with saving faith, the act of faith that issues in a new birth. Those verses deal with the love, obedience, and good works of people who are already eternally secure believers. They deal with sanctification, not justification. Ironically, Demarest’s reference to Titus 3:8 makes this plain:

*[Christ] gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works (Titus 2:14) and that those **who have believed** in God should be careful to maintain good works (Titus 3:8).*

Neither the verses that Demarest cites nor any other portion of God’s Word support his assertion that regenerating faith **includes** an act of the will, let alone an act tantamount to complete commitment and surrender to a life of good works.

No one argues that devotion to Christ and doing good works in His name cannot *point to* faith. They should. However, the *definition* of faith must carefully exclude any *evidence* of faith, because evidences are inherently *inconclusive*. In Matthew 7 does our Lord not reject the false teachers as unbelievers, despite their many good works performed in His name? Although *faith* may produce *obedience*, never does *obedience* produce *faith*. For these reasons, obedience cannot be made a part of faith. Dillow highlights such a weakness in the argumentation of a writer who

carefully states, “The biblical concept of faith is inseparable from obedience.” **But possible, or even inevitable, consequences of faith are not to be equated with faith itself.** Faith does NOT mean “to obey.” It is NOT “the

determination of the will to obey the truth.” Faith is “reliant trust.” . . . to import notions of obedience into the word “faith” is contrary to the teaching of the apostle Paul.

It seems somewhat evasive to argue that this apparent inconsistency is a “paradox” To say that faith can equal obedience and not equal obedience is not a paradox; ***it is a contradiction.***

.....
When MacArthur speaks of works being worked in us, his doctrine of justification differs not a whit from Catholicism’s idea of justification making us righteous [emphasis mine].³⁵

Making a Decision for Christ

What does it mean to say, “So-and-so made a decision for Christ”? Is not a decision an act of the will? If faith does not have a volitional element, is it bad terminology to speak of a “decision for Christ” when one refers to a regeneration experience? Absolutely!³⁶ R.T. Kendall correctly likens belief to persuasion rather than to a decision.³⁷

Zane Hodges offers a fitting capstone to seeing faith as passive persuasion, not a complex idea requiring compartmentalization into a series of psychological categories:

. . . we should discard words like mental or intellectual altogether. The Bible knows nothing about an intellectual faith as over against some other kind of faith (like emotional or voli-

³⁵ Dillow, *Reign*, 274–76.

³⁶ [Editor’s note: It is unfortunate that modern evangelicals have imposed the non-biblical idea of decisional evangelism onto the Bible. Quite often people think that they are going to heaven because they decided to walk down the aisle, because they decided to raise a hand, because they decided to pray a prayer. What a person decides to do (works) is irrelevant. Becoming persuaded that Jesus Christ has taken away my death-sentence as a sinner is the only issue that determines one’s eternal destiny. Persuasion is not a decision.]

³⁷ Kendall, *Once Saved*, 24.

tional). What the Bible does recognize is the obvious distinction between faith and unbelief!

No one needs to be a psychologist to understand what faith is. . . . It is an unproductive waste of time to employ the popular categories—intellect, emotion, or will—as a way of analyzing the mechanics of faith. . . . But lordship salvation drives its adherents into a psychological shadowland. We are told that true faith has volitional and emotional elements. But we might ask: In what sense? Have we not all at some time been compelled by facts to believe something we did not wish to believe? Did we not, in a sense, believe against our will? . . . And is it not equally true that we often believe things without any discernible emotional response to them, while at other times we are overwhelmed with emotion? Such questions show how precarious and contradictory are the notions about faith which arise out of popular psychology.³⁸

To sum up: The charges of mental assent and intellectual faith are both an unfair and inaccurate assessment of the position Free Grace champions take on the meaning of saving faith. These charges are straw men. Over and over in their writings Free Grace proponents define faith as “trust,” “confidence,” “reliance,” and “appropriation.” These are the same words used by the trailblazers of the Reformation and many of the leading Reformed theologians of the last two centuries. Only the English Puritans (and those following in their footsteps) have added obedience to the meaning of faith.

Types of Faith in the New Testament

Another problem in assessing the nature of faith is the widely held concept that the New Testament refers to different types or qualities of faith. It is supposed that there is genuine faith as opposed to false faith, saving faith as opposed to spurious

³⁸ Hodges, *Absolutely Free*, 30–31.

faith, professing faith as opposed to possessing faith, and lastly, head faith as opposed to heart faith. Does the New Testament know anything of these distinctions?

False Faith in James 2:14–26

Those who claim to find distinctions in faith in the New Testament must rely upon only a few passages. The best known fortress for those advocating false faith is James 2:14–26, where some explain *that faith* as a spurious, false faith. Serious exegetes have already written books that expose such an analysis of the passage as inconsistent with the details of the text, such as the meaning of the word *dead*.³⁹ James does not use *dead* to mean “fake, false, or spurious” in either the English language, or the Greek language. To that end, in the context of James 2:14–26 it means inactive, not vibrant, not on fire.

False Faith in John 2:23–25

Some teachers also claim that John 2:23–25 depicts believers in Christ who do not possess eternal salvation. It is necessary to look at this passage in some detail to demonstrate that it is not speaking of less-than-saving faith.

Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did. But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men, and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man (John 2:23–25).

Many expositors explain the belief of the “many” in John 2:23—a belief motivated by miracles—as an inferior faith, inferior to the point that these people were not regenerated. Stanley

³⁹ Zane Hodges, *The Epistle of James: Proven Character through Testing*, The Grace New Testament Commentary (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1994), 59–75, is the most recent of these. This discussion cites many pre-1994 writers whose exegetical conclusions on various key problems within the passage are in accord with Hodges.

Toussaint does not think a faith based on signs is “trustworthy” faith.⁴⁰ Neither does Edwin Blum⁴¹ nor W. Hall Harris.⁴²

Although these writers suppose that faith based on signs is a shallow, insufficient faith, where is the merit for this thinking? Apparently, it comes from the Lord’s response to these believers, in which He was not willing to commit Himself to them due to His supernatural knowledge of their hearts. Obviously, He must have seen something in their hearts that caused Him not to trust⁴³ them. However, the passage does not say that they failed to believe in Him. Furthermore, nothing inherent in the statement about their faith distinguishes it from the faith of others in John.

Believed In

What does John’s expression, *believed in* (πιστευω ειφ), mean in verse 23? Ironically, far from being spurious as some contend, the evidence supports the idea that the faith of the many in verse 23 was genuine. Perhaps, the strongest support is John’s exact terminology: *many believed in His name* (πολλοι; εφπιστευσαν ειφ το; ο[νομα αυφτου]). The combination of the verb “believe” and the preposition “in” (πιστευω ειφ) is unique to Christianity. Of particular interest is the fact that John uses the combination thirty of the thirty-four

⁴⁰ Stanley Toussaint, “Acts,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983), 373.

⁴¹ Edwin Blum, “John,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 280.

⁴² W. Hall Harris, “A Theology of John’s Writings,” in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, ed. R. B. Zuck and D. L. Bock (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 224–26.

⁴³ Πιστευω is the verb (John 2:24), just as it was when it says these people trusted in Him (John 2:23). John 2:23 uses πιστευω ειφ, as in John 1:12.

times it occurs in the New Testament. Moreover, John's express purpose in writing his Gospel was evangelism (John 20:30–31).⁴⁴

A concordance search shows that the first use of the combination under scrutiny is in John 1:12—*But to as many as received Him, He gave the right to become the children of God, even to those who believe in His name.*” This is one of the most common verses used in evangelism. No one questions the meaning of believing in His name in John 1:12, or even hints that this belief is insufficient for entrance into God's family. The very next use of the phrase is in John 2:23, the passage in question. Interestingly enough, there is nothing at all between John 1:12 and John 2:23 to suggest that John uses this construction to mean something different than he did in his first use.

In John Chapter 3 the fourfold use of *believe in* is especially troubling for anyone contending that believing in the name of Jesus is insufficient for regeneration. Here Jesus explains to Nicodemus what is necessary to be born again, or born from above (John 3:15–16, 18, 36). In 3:18, Jesus specifically says the reason God will condemn a man is *because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God*. And in the thematic statement for the Gospel (John 20:31) John clearly declares that life comes “through His name.” Zane Hodges comments:

It seems truly incredible in the light of such crucial assertions as these that John should declare in 2:23 that ‘many believed in His name’ and at the same time should hold the opinion that those who did so did not have life and still stood under God's condemnation. Absolutely nothing in John's usage of *ἐπιᾠστεύσαν εἰφᾠ τοῦ οἰνοῦ* [believed in His name] prepares his readers for such a conclusion.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ John may well have coined the construction “believe in” (*πιστεύω εἰφᾠ*). It occurs nowhere outside the New Testament, nor even in the LXX (otherwise known as the Greek Septuagint).

⁴⁵ Zane Hodges, “Problem Passages in the Gospel of John. Part II: Untrustworthy Believers—John 2:23–25,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 135 (April–June 1978): 139.

John regularly uses the *believe in* (πιστευω ειφν) construction to indicate regenerate individuals. (In addition to 3:15, 16, 18, 36, see also 4:39; 6:29, 35, 40; 7:38, 39.) If he wanted to delineate the group in John 2:23 as having an inferior faith to the others mentioned, why did he use exactly the same phrase to describe their faith? This is especially relevant since John uses the phrase that he coined to identify those who had received the gift of eternal life through faith in Christ's name. The logic behind this kind of thinking makes no sense.

Nevertheless, commentator after commentator concludes that these people had a shallow, insufficient faith. After all, they based their faith on signs, as though this in itself vitiated their faith to the point that it was insufficient. William Hendriksen writes:

Many trusted in his name; i.e., because of the manner in which his power was displayed they accepted him as a great prophet and perhaps even as the Messiah. This, however is not the same as saying that they surrendered their hearts to him. Not all faith is saving faith (cf. 6:26).⁴⁶

Not only has Hendriksen imported his own understanding of faith into the passage (surrendering the heart), but his cross-reference in John 6:26 says nothing about faith at all, since faith is not even mentioned in the verse.

⁴⁶ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel according to John*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 127.

Two Categories?

W. Hall Harris insists that John's Gospel recognizes different qualities of faith. He comments on John 2:23–25 as a prime example:

If these were genuine believers, Jesus' refusal to entrust Himself to them is extremely difficult to explain, especially since the gospel of John places people in only two categories: those who come to the light, and those who choose to remain in darkness (cf. 3:19–21).⁴⁷

Does Harris suggest that the genuineness of a person's faith is discerned by coming to the light or remaining in darkness? Are these the only two possible categories? What about the categories of belief and unbelief? The apostle uses these two categories much more often than light and darkness. Moreover, concerning belief and unbelief John remarks, *He that believes on him is not condemned: but he that believes not is condemned already* (3:18). As Hodges points out,

For John, those who believe are in one class and those who do not are in another: "But you believe not, because you are not of my sheep, as I said to you" (10:26). The Evangelist never sets before his readers some kind of twilight zone where men have believed yet somehow are not the Savior's sheep.⁴⁸

John 6:60–66

Harris believes that John 6:60–66 supports his position that some believers do not possess eternal life:

Inadequate faith is also the point of John 6:60–66. . . . many of His disciples began to grumble (v. 60). In responding to them Jesus noted, "Yet there are some of you who do not believe" (v. 64). After this John added the comment that Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe

⁴⁷ Harris, "Theology," 225.

⁴⁸ Hodges, "Problem Passages," 144.

(probably an allusion to 2:24–25). . . . Proof that Jesus' evaluation of these false disciples was correct is indicated by their actions. "From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him" (6:66). Perseverance with Jesus is an outward sign of genuine belief.⁴⁹

This is amazing stuff. One searches John 6:60–66 in vain for any statement or indication that those Jesus addressed had any faith in the first place. How can "inadequate faith" be the main point of a passage that does not discuss or even once mention faith? All it says is that these people did not believe. Yes, absolutely, unbelief is one of the categories we find in John. Belief and unbelief! These people fell into the category of unbelief.

John 6 does have something to say about believers, but not in 6:60–66. No believers appear in those verses. However, in 6:40 we read, *And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him* [καὶ πιστευῶν εἰφ᾽ αὐτοῦ;] *may have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day.* Notice the *everyone*. In John's thinking no one who has believed foregoes the gift of eternal life and bodily resurrection at the last day.

Sign Faith

Returning to John 2:23–25, two more questions are requisite to a satisfactory conclusion: (1) Is belief based on miraculous signs saving faith? and (2) why was Jesus reluctant to entrust Himself to certain believers, if they were in fact regenerate?

The first question is easy. Of course faith in Christ based on signs is saving faith. The very reason He performed miracles was to persuade people that He was who He claimed to be. Even Harris observes that John only uses the phrase "believe in" (πιστευῶ εἰφ᾽)

⁴⁹ Harris, "Theology," 225–26.

four times after John 12. The other thirty uses are in the first twelve chapters. Yet, all of the book's miracles, except the resurrection, occur in John 1–12. Harris undermines his own argument against sign faith as being insufficient when he connects *believe in* (πιστευω ειφ) and the miracles in John 1–12. He says,

This is perfectly understandable since chapters 1–12 deal primarily with the sign-miracles and discourses where the issue is who Jesus is and the necessity of believing in Him, whereas chapters 13–21 record Jesus' Farewell Discourse to His disciples (who have already believed in Him) and the events of the passion.⁵⁰

Precisely! God gave the signs to persuade people regarding Jesus (cf. Hebrews 2:3–4). Those who advocate Lordship Salvation cannot have their cake and eat it too. They cannot say one on the one hand, that God gave the signs to help people believe in Jesus, while branding the faith resulting from these God-given signs as inadequate.

Rather than disparaging faith inspired by seeing His works, Jesus holds those responsible who have seen His works and have not believed: *If I do not do the works of my Father, do not believe Me. But if I do, though you do not believe Me, **believe the works, that you may know and believe that the Father is in Me and I in Him*** (John 10:37–38). Jesus performed His miracles to convince the people concerning Himself. If they saw the works He did and did not believe in Him, they were without excuse.

Though there is a special blessing for believing without seeing signs (as Jesus tells Thomas in John 20:29), in the very next verses John says,

And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book, but these are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, and believing, you might have life in His name (John 20:30–31).

⁵⁰ Harris, "Theology," 224.

These refers to the signs John recorded in his Gospel. He specifically reported them *so that you might believe*. Is there something wrong with sign faith? Not according to John!

Christ's Reluctance

This still leaves open the question: Why was Jesus not willing to entrust Himself to born-again believers in John 2:24? To understand this we need to look at a dominant recurring theme in John, the theme of *intimacy*. In both his Gospel and first epistle, John is concerned with intimacy. Another word for intimacy is *fellowship*. Moreover, whereas fellowship is the main theme of his first letter with relationship being a sub-theme, it is just the opposite in his Gospel. Relationship is the main theme, and fellowship is a sub-theme. Nevertheless, his Gospel contains much about fellowship or intimacy.

The outline of John resembles the tabernacle or temple, starting with the outer court (where the Gentiles could enter), the holy place with the candelabra, altar of incense, and table of shewbread, and lastly, the Holy of Holies (where only the high priest could enter).

Similarly, in John 1–12 we have the evangelistic outreach to the nation of Israel, and by implication, the world; followed by John 13–16 in which we have special light and food being shared only with those who were His, the eleven disciples with the one unbeliever sent out into the night. Lastly, in John 17 the High Priest Himself prays for those who are His. The first twelve chapters are primarily evangelistic, and we only get hints as to the truths concerning fellowship and/or intimacy that are to come. However, in John 13–16 the emphasis switches from relationship to fellowship, as we might expect, because now He speaks to believers who already have relationship. They have had a bath (John 13:10); now they need only to have their feet washed. The focus here is not on relationship, but fellowship.

Therefore, it is in these chapters that the truths concerning intimacy with Him become central.

Thus, we find Jesus saying things like,

He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him (John 14:21).

Notice the conversation does not revolve around “knowing” or “believing,” but rather “loving.” This is the truth about obedience. If we want to establish an equation for obedience, this is it: obedience = love;⁵¹ obedience ≠ faith. Moreover, love is the language of intimacy and fellowship. Notice especially the word “manifest” (εμφανισω), which the Greek dictionary⁵² defines as “to reveal” in this context. It is to those who love Jesus that He is willing to reveal Himself. He will open to them in a love relationship. That is why Jesus was not ready to entrust Himself to the new believers in John 2:23. They believed in Him. Yet, knowing their hearts, Jesus knew they did not yet love Him.

Jesus explains the same truth later in the Upper Room when He says, *You are my friends if you do whatever I command you (John 15:14)*. He does not call them His children if they do whatever He commands. They are His friends—connoting intimacy. Moreover, to His friends obtains a special privilege:

No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things I have heard from my Father I have made known to you (John 15:15).

⁵¹ Cf. 1 John 5:3 and John 15:14.

⁵² William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed., rev. and ed. by William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker from Walter Bauer’s fifth edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), s.v. “εμφανισω,” 257.

He reveals more to His friends than to His servants. And His friends are those who obey. His children are those who believe.

To the new believers in John 2:23 He had revealed who He was: the Messiah and the Son of God. They believed and were born again. Nevertheless, He was not ready to reveal more of Himself than that because He knew they were not yet His friends, an intimacy defined by obedience.

Secret Service Christians

John often writes about believers who were not yet the friends of Jesus. Note the contrast between the disciples who openly followed Him and the new believers in John 12:42a.

*Nevertheless even among the rulers many **believed in Him**, but because of the Pharisees **they did not confess Him**, lest they should be put out of the synagogue.*

There is no contextual indication that these rulers were false professors. Here we have the same Greek expression used by John to indicate a personal relationship with Christ: ἐπιᾠστεύσαν εἰπὺν αὐτοῦ [believed in Him]. These rulers were born-again believers, but because of their fear (not of death, but of losing synagogue privileges), they were unwilling to identify openly with Jesus.

In addition, remember Nicodemus who came to Jesus *by night*? He was a ruler (ἀρχῶν) of the Jews, the same term applied to those who believed in Jesus in John 12:42.⁵³ Could it be that Nicodemus was one of these *men* who believed in 2:23 because he saw the signs, but was still unwilling to identify openly with Him because he was a ruler of the Jews and would be expelled from the synagogue? Given the context, it is likely.

⁵³ Other expositors have noted the linkage between John 2 and John 3: ἀνθρώπου (man—see 2:25, the last word).

But even if Nicodemus did not trust Christ until later (in John 12:42 perhaps), he was clearly a believer by the time of the crucifixion and one who was ready to identify openly with or confess Jesus. He shows up with Joseph of Arimathea in John 19:38–39 as one who requested the body of Jesus for burial. Of Joseph, the text says he was a disciple, *but secretly, for fear of the Jews*. In addition, the next verse, when identifying Nicodemus, says he was the one who came to Jesus *at first by night*. Now Nicodemus is ready to cease being a Secret Service Christian.

Apparently these two men had been believers for a long time. Nevertheless, they did not become Jesus' friends until after He died. No wonder not much is written about them between the beginning and the end of Christ's ministry: They were undercover. Credit them for boldness at the end, but Jesus knew the heart of man. Moreover, He was unwilling to disclose, manifest, or entrust Himself to those who were unwilling to openly identify with Him. Perhaps that is why He chose humble fishermen like Peter, James, and John for his first disciples. They did not have as much to lose as the "rulers of the Jews." They were willing to identify with Him. They became His best friends and the great apostles who will rule over the twelve tribes of Israel when the King comes again.

Conclusion

No conclusive New Testament evidence supports different categories of faith. Different levels,⁵⁴ yes; different categories, no. Faith is faith, real faith, genuine faith, through and through. It is true that not all faith in the New Testament is saving faith. Faith as small as a grain of the mustard seed is enough to move a mountain (because it is real faith), but that is not saving faith. The faith that "makes you whole" is also real faith, but not neces-

⁵⁴ That is, faith can be small like a mustard seed. It can be weak or strong (cp. Romans 4:19-20). However, even faith like a mustard seed (= weak or small) is genuine.

sarily faith in an eternally saving object. The faith of the demons in James 2 is real faith (that is why they trembled), but they did not believe a message offering eternal life. Saving faith is *only* that faith tethered to the person and work of Jesus Christ alone for eternal life. Such faith is always saving faith.

We do not take issue with the assertion that some expressions of faith in the New Testament are not saving faith, that is, do not involve believing salvific content. The notion that in the New Testament believing in Jesus as Savior is not saving faith is simply wrong. The New Testament knows of no sub-level or insufficient faith in Christ as Savior that does not save. Even Simon Magus of Acts 8:13 had saving faith. There is nothing in the text to indicate that his belief and baptism are to be distinguished from the other believers in Samaria.

Though saving faith begins as an assessment of certain facts about Jesus Christ, it consummates when a person believes that Christ has died for *his* sins on the cross and has given him the gift of eternal life.

—End—

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