

Excursus: Rethinking Faith and Unbelief

In the realm of biblical concepts, *faith* arguably enjoys a singular place. On the one hand, faith is at the very heart of human existence in relation to God. Whether we speak about salvation by faith or walking by faith, it's clear that one cannot even consider what it means to be a Christian without the subject of faith entering in. But, like other biblical concepts such as love, hope and peace, the concept of faith is readily confused and colored by both non-biblical and non-spiritual counterparts; all non-Christian religions and forms of human spirituality have their own notions of faith, as does every human society culture. This broad ambiguity insures that different people and traditions have differing conceptions of what faith is and how it manifests itself. And, if this weren't enough, Christians and Christian communities add to the confusion by emphasizing the absolute importance of faith, but often with little or no definition. Sadly, many Christians have a notion of faith which is just as vague and self-styled as that embraced by non-Christians.

Nothing is more fundamental and vital to the Christian life (indeed, to human existence) than faith, and yet it is frequently misunderstood. The sorts and nuances of misunderstanding are legion, but some common misconceptions of faith are sufficient to make the point:

- One is associated with the “word of faith” movement and other similar groups. Such Christians regard faith as a spiritual power to be tapped into by means of verbalized statements of affirmation (“positive confession”). One proponent of this view has argued that faith is a force and words are the containers of that force. At bottom, this is nothing more than a Christianized form of pagan spirituality in which the practitioner accesses spiritual forces and powers and makes them amenable by performing sacred rituals.
- A less flagrant form of the same understanding of faith is the notion that faith releases God to do what He desires to do. God is ready and willing to act on behalf of His people, but He cannot do so until they turn to Him in faith and believe Him for those things they need and seek. God will act for those who believe, and only the limitation of their faith limits what He will do for them or enable them to do. Matthew 17:14-20 and 21:17-22 are two passages often cited as scriptural support for this viewpoint.
- Most Christians would reject the notion that faith is a power that moves God and releases His blessings. At the same time, no Christian is immune from the propensity to turn faith into *magic*. All people who believe in a deity instinctively assume that that deity shares their convictions, judgments, interests, desires and goals. Being human involves constantly judging what is right and good, and when a person believes there is a god who is good, his instinct is to conclude that that god sees things the way he does and wants what he wants. This dynamic operates in all forms of religion and Christianity isn't exempt; consciously or unconsciously, for multitudes of professing Christians, faith means trusting God for the outcomes they “know” to be good, right and needful.
- Another misconception arises from the connection between faith and salvation. In modern evangelicalism in particular, faith is often treated as the key ingredient in a salvation formula. Thus a person gets “saved” by agreeing with (believing) a set of propositions regarding his personal sin and Jesus' death for sinners.

1. Faith and Sight

Perhaps the best place to start in examining the biblical concept of faith is the relationship between faith and *sight*. There are two primary justifications for this approach – one general and one specific:

- In general, it is immensely helpful when seeking to discern a thing to understand what it is *not*. This is especially the case when the thing under consideration is somewhat obscure or not subject to concise or simple definition. Occasionally a thing is so abstract or opaque that the only effective way to bound and define it is in terms of what isn't true of it.
- This approach is especially useful here because of the relationship which exists between faith and sight: The Scripture treats them as the two antithetical, mutually-exclusive principles by which human beings can order their lives (cf. Hebrews 1:1 with 2 Corinthians 5:1-9; also 2 Corinthians 4:16-18). Faith and sight speak to the same human dynamic, but in antithetical ways. Moreover, they do so as the only two options available.

And so, to the extent that a person grasps the biblical principle of sight, he has learned something about faith; he discovers much of what faith is by understanding what it is not. The reason, again, is that every human being is constrained to perceive and order his life according to either faith *or* sight; the two are mutually exclusive and there are no other alternatives for living life as a human person.

- a. Most simply, *sight* refers to the self-sourced faculty of perception and judgment that characterizes natural human existence. Sight speaks to the operation of the natural mind, and it therefore characterizes every human being as he comes into this world and exists in his natural state. Most importantly, *sight doesn't preclude belief and conviction*. Sight is antithetical to scriptural faith, but not every form of faith. Quite the contrary, sight *always* expresses itself in faith, even as every human being has beliefs and convictions. (Even the claim to have no beliefs is the admission of belief.) The issue in the antithesis of faith and sight is not whether a person has sincere and principled beliefs. Neither is it how informed those beliefs are or how fervently they are held, but their source, basis and substance.

Given John's emphasis on spurious faith (believing unbelief), it's not at all surprising that this principle of sight permeates his gospel account. In particular, he treated it in terms of its primary Jewish expression, namely belief grounded in signs and wonders (cf. 2:13-3:2, 4:47-48, 6:1-30, 7:31, 9:13-41 (esp. vv. 35-41), 10:40-42, 12:17-18, etc). If sight refers to natural human perception and judgment, the content for this perception and judgment comes from two sources: one's *thoughts* and one's *senses*. The first source is internal and the second external. (Without the five senses, a person would have no contact with or even awareness of anything outside himself.) Paul was indicating these two sources when he spoke of *wisdom* and *signs* in relation to faith (1 Corinthians 1:18-24).

- *Wisdom* as an authenticating principle points to faith which is based on one's *intellectual* experience – what a person believes based on personal sensibilities, conceptions, reasoning and judgment. This category includes *informational* faith which, in the first instance, finds expression in the notion that believing certain information about Jesus' death results in salvation (faith as the catalyst in God's salvation formula). The same sort of faith characterizes many Christians' view of sanctification as involving progress in doctrinal knowledge and the conviction of its truth. Whether with respect to initial salvation or subsequent sanctification, faith conceived in this way is purely an intellectual dynamic.

This same category of faith also includes *outcome-oriented* faith, which is faith that believes God for what one has conceived in his mind, whether a perceived positive good or the alleviation or elimination of something perceived as bad. This is the faith that seeks to script God into one's own narrative – a narrative which exists purely in the person's mind.

- On the other hand, *signs* as an authenticating principle points to faith which derives from one's *sensory* experience – what the senses have detected and attested as true. Tangible, observable signs and miraculous works were the authenticating experiences required by the Jews of Jesus' day; their faith in Him depended upon what they observed in Him and by His hand (cf. again John 2:23-25, 4:46-48, 6:22-30, 20:24-25, etc.).

- b. Sight, then, speaks to *natural faith*: self-derived persuasion and conviction which results from personal, subjective interaction with one's own perspectives, thoughts and experiences. This is the sort of faith evidenced in Jesus' initial interaction with Nicodemus (3:1-12) and the Samaritan woman (4:1-26). So also it characterized the pre-Pentecost faith of Jesus' disciples, who believed He was the promised Messiah, but conceived Him and His messiahship with natural minds (cf. Matthew 16:13-23, 20:20-28; Luke 9:28-56, 22:7-27, 24:13-27; John 6:1-15, 13:1-17, 14:1-11, 18:1-11; Acts 1:1-8; cf. also 2 Corinthians 5:16).

In contrast, *authentic faith* – the faith delineated in the Scriptures – has its source and substance *outside* of the person himself. It neither derives from nor is conditioned by either his intellectual or sensory experiences. This distinction highlights the critical truth that there are only two kinds of faith and they are antithetical to one another: A person's faith must be centered in something inside *or* outside of himself, but not both. This antithesis, however, does not imply that a person's mind or experiences plays no part in authentic faith. Faith is a human dynamic, and so *must* operate in connection with one's mind and experiences. But unlike natural faith which is *self-centric*, authentic faith is *theocentric*. It has its source and substance in God and is one of the defining characteristics of the Spirit-governed mind. As fully realized in Christ, this faith is *trinitarian*: It is bound up in God, but as He is known relationally as *Father* with the mind of *Christ* by the power of the *Spirit* (cf. Galatians 3:23-4:7 with Romans 8:1-27).