

Definition of Faith

Introduction. Before we can determine anything about the merits or source of faith a definition is in order. This is not as easy as it may sound for such a fundamental characteristic of the Christian life. It is suspected that if more of us understood faith, more of us would exercise it and the difference in our lives would be substantial.

Faith is usually regarded as an act or something that is done. “Acts of faith” are commonly referred to by many Christians. R. C. Sproul says, “All Christians agree that faith is something we do.”¹ While the emphasis in his context is on the we, the point is still made that faith is “something we do.” This is a fairly universal popular and academic concept, indeed it is one this author operated under for many years and is still difficult to shake. However, we will notice that in Scripture, faith is regarded as a condition or state of the heart or inner man, stated qualitatively.

Hebrews 11:1. The classic biblical definition is found in Heb 11:1, “Now faith is the assurance of *things* hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (NASB). The definition is composed of three parts, “assurance,” “conviction,” and the objects. But first the term “faith,” πιστις, itself.

There is no classical or secular background to help contextualize πιστις, at least not in the sense we use it with God.² The Greek did not use it for his religion or the gods, preferring νομιζω, to think.³ It was usually used in the sense of fidelity or faithfulness, the sense of loyalty

¹ Sproul, *Willing*, 25.

² H. Phillip Hook, “A Biblical Definition of Saving Faith,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 121 (Ap-Jn 1964): 134; TDNT VI, 110.

³ Ibid.

to promises or people.⁴ This was added to in the Hellenistic period by being used of legal documents of guarantee or security.⁵ The Old Testament has the sense, the passive sense, faithfulness rather than faith, as C. G. Moule says.⁶ God shows Himself to be faithful to His promises and man is expected to show faithfulness to God and the covenants by obedience. All of a sudden, the word ΠΙΣΤΙΣ, or its verbal counterpart, so uncommon in Greek culture, explodes in the New Testament, being used almost five hundred times. There are three main senses listed in BAGD for the word, only one of which concerns us here. “Trust, confidence, faith” give the definition of this condition, sometimes qualified but normally used by itself as a human trait.

“Assurance,” ὑΠΟΣΤΑΣΙΣ, is the first word used in the NASB to define faith. This is a complicated word for us, looking back through the centuries. Originally meaning the reality concealed behind appearance, it was used philosophically, medically/scientifically, and in generally more practical ways. Philosophically, it referred to what became actual of invisible reality, medically/scientifically it referred to “what settles,” as in sediment in a liquid, and, generally, to a plan or purpose. Hellenistic usage in the papyri took a broader general sense, being used of legal deeds and collections of the proofs of ownership, evolving to refer to the land and property itself, much later than New Testament times. During the Hellenistic/New Testament period the word retained its philosophical meaning in Philo and Josephus. The original sense can be traced through this history, though, being the background reality or basis for whatever the application might have been. This gives the probable sense in Heb 11:1 to be “substance” or the more contemporary, “reality” or “basis.”

⁴ TDNT vol VI, 113.

⁵ TDNT vol VI, 111.

⁶ Handley C. G. Moule, *Faith: Its Nature and Its Work* (London: Cassell and Co., 1909), 26.

“Conviction” (NASB), ἐλεγχος, is the next word in Heb 11:1 used to define faith. Ἐλεγχος was a legal term that underwent little change in usage since the classical period. It was used of an examination to disprove or refute something or of the evidence collected from such a scrutiny or cross-examination. more so the latter, the evidence itself, possibly the outcome of an examination, into the Hellenistic period. “Evidence” is the sense in defining faith, “evidence of things not being seen.” Faith, then, is the “reality being hoped for, the evidence of things not being seen.”

Our two terms are parallel to one another and so provide some commentary on each other and are predicate nominatives to faith, equated to it more as synonyms than a true definition. Also to be noted is that they do not describe an action but, without the article, are qualitative, indicating the essence or state of faith.

Equally as important are the objects, things “hoped for” and “not seen” (NASB). These are things as yet unrealized or future, which is the emphasis of Hebrews chapter eleven. Faith is not about things “which are seen but things which are not seen” (2 Cor 4:18 NASB). Merit is about what is actualized or, “in the hand.” But faith is the human sense that perceives and grounds or gives connection to things that are only potential, enabling a human being to utilize these things or encircle them into his or her experience. So while faith exists, its objects do not but can be treated as though they do, enabling the human to function in a world with all kinds of invisible and potential realities he must cope with. In this way faith has many every day applications, such as giving us the capacity to deal with gravity, wind and cars that we count on to function a certain way. When something fails, as an automobile may, we are all familiar with the ensuing uncertainty and havoc that can play into schedules that have been set based on what we believed in, or counted on. Another aspect here is that when something is seen or actualized,

it no longer falls into the realm of faith (Rom 8:24). Again, merit has to do with an actual achievement. Faith does not operate in that realm.

General/Common. Some more general definitions of faith are helpful and equally as accurate as the above. Avery Dulles commends a translation of “trust” to be as accurate as “faith” for ΠΙΣΤΙΣ,⁷ agreeing with Grudem.⁸ William Angell, in a Baptist journal, refers to faith as “the grounding of the self in the ground which constituted it, the receiving of the . . . favor of God.”⁹ Finally, J. I. Packer says, “it should be thought of as a receiving, as a trusting, as a means of taking.”¹⁰ To illustrate the dependent, suppliant nature of faith, he gives a few lines of a popular hymn, one of which is, “In my hand no price I bring, Simply to Thy cross I cling.” This writer agrees with this spirit adding a one word synonym, rest.

It can be seen that there are a number of good ways to refer to faith. It is certainly rest and trust and receiving and has aspects that can be looked at in categories that help to apply it. It is the human characteristic that deals with unseen realities, which are not verifiable with the other senses, by which they, though unactualized, are given reality and proof (evidence).

Meritorious nature. Whether faith comes from God through regeneration by the Holy Spirit, as the Reformed tradition believes, or whether it is within the capacity of man, an obvious factor in the equation we are looking at is the fact that salvation/justification is based on faith. If faith is meritorious, then the salvation of man is based on merit, a clear contradiction of Scripture. It, again, doesn’t matter where the faith comes from, if it is from God, it would amount

⁷ Avery Dulles, *The Assurance of Things Hoped For* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 13.

⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 711.

⁹ William Angell, “The Baptist Understanding of How Grace is Received,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 28 no. 2 (Sp 1986): 23.

¹⁰ J. I. Packer, “The Way of Salvation” pt 2 “What is Faith,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 129 (O-D 1972): 297.

to infused faith, given to obtain salvation for man, similar to infused righteousness of the Roman Church, and salvation would be based on something meritorious in man. If faith is from man, then, of course, salvation would again be based on something meritorious in man, if faith is meritorious.

The discussion of a definition of faith, above, has given us the sense that faith is a receiving, a resting, a condition that is the opposite of work. It is accepting the work of another in place of our helplessness and inability. I used to think of faith itself in terms of what resulted from it, in terms of work, obedience and the like. I'm beginning to learn from hard experience that faith itself, the prerequisite to true and effective work, is deciding not to work but to accept the working of God through the Holy Spirit in my place. It says, "to the one who does not work, but believes . . ." (Rom 4:5 NASB). This is consistent with the biblical definition that faith is "the reality," "the evidence" of what exists unseen, not an effort or work to obtain or create it. The Scripture is clear that faith and works are opposed to one another, contrasting them throughout the New Testament, especially in Paul. "Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. ²⁸For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law" (Rom 3:27-28 NASB). So it is not by works but by faith, two opposites, clearly contrasted.

B. B. Warfield attests to the unmeritorious nature of faith when he says, "It is, accordingly, solely from its *object* that faith derives its value (emphasis original)."¹¹ Man, indeed, exercises faith in any number of things to enable him to live everyday life.¹² It is only when faith is placed in the Lord Jesus Christ that it finds its true object and has lasting value. We

¹¹ B. B. Warfield, *Biblical Doctrines* (New York: Oxford, 1929), 502, quoted in Grounds, *Faith*, 124.

¹² Moule has a good section on this with a number of helpful examples, *Faith*, 6ff.

find help, as well, from J. I. Packer on the question of meritorious faith, “. . . theologically, it is not a work. . . . it should not itself be thought of, I repeat, as a work, . . .”¹³ Grudem adds, “In this way, faith is the exact opposite of trusting in ourselves, and therefore it is the attitude that perfectly fits salvation that depends *not at all on our own merit* but entirely on God's free gift of grace (emphasis mine).”¹⁴ Each of these men would go on to say that faith is a gift of God to man in the same way as and along with salvation itself. In the context of election, all of them would refer to faith as meritorious by refusing to allow it as the basis of election, because that would attribute merit to man and make salvation contingent upon something moral or good or meritorious in him. Yet, in the separate context of justification and salvation, faith is clearly defended as non-meritorious. It is not certain how to reconcile this incongruity. Grudem gives these two perspectives clearly in his systematic theology.¹⁵ On the question of merit, we also have Rudolf Bultmann and Artur Weiser, in *Faith*, from Kittel's *Theological Word Book of the New Testament*, saying that faith is “the opposite of every ‘work,’ every achievement, because the act of faith consists simply in the denying of all that a man does to establish his existence.”¹⁶

Much more than the testimony of esteemed commentators, though, is the testimony of the Holy Scriptures to which we must return. Jesus' testimony of “great faith” is in reference to the more humble, those more aware of their unworthiness (the centurion and the Syro-Phoenician woman). Philip Yancey has noticed, as well, that “faith appears where least expected and falters

¹³ Packer, “Faith,” 296.

¹⁴ Grudem, *Theology*, 730.

¹⁵ Grudem, *Theology*, 678 for faith as meritorious and 730, for faith as non-meritorious.

¹⁶ Rudolf Bultmann and Artur Weiser, *Faith: Bible Key Words from Gerhard Kittel's Theologisches Worterbuch Zum Neuen Testament* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1961), 92.

where it should be thriving.”¹⁷ This does not speak well for faith being something that brings merit or worth to an individual. It seems, instead, to recognize lack of worth. Finally, we must notice perhaps the strongest biblical testimony about the question of meritorious faith. In Rom 4:4-5 we read,

“For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³For what does the Scripture say? “ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.” ⁴Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. ⁵But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.”

Not only the testimony that Abraham has nothing to boast about because of his faith (though he might if justified by works), but we, also, see “does not work, but believes” as the contrast that distinguishes faith from works. To close, a look at verse 16 of Romans four declares the reason God has chosen salvation to be based on faith, “in order that *it may be* in accordance with grace.” Grudem uses this verse, as well, as support for non-meritorious faith.¹⁸ Since it is by faith it can be called a free gift, the grace of God, all to His glory and a testimony to His goodness and greatness.

Conclusion. So we must conclude, contrary to both Calvinist and Arminian positions, that faith is non-meritorious and acceptable as a basis for election, the same as God has seen faith to be the basis for justification and the free gift of eternal life. Faith is a resting from effort and work, a receiving of input (such as in the “act” of hearing, see Gal 3:2-7 for hearing and faith), it is not an “act” or a “work” but the opposite of these, it is a retraction and ceasing from these. Faith, like hearing and listening, is passive. The entire chapter of Hebrews eleven presents faith as the means of righteous action, but not action itself. This is not a meaningless distinction. It

¹⁷ Philip Yancey, “What Surprised Jesus,” *Christianity Today* 38 (S 12. 1994): 88.

¹⁸ Grudem, *Theology*, 730.

serves to guard us against pride for righteous action by focusing our attention on the passive means rather than the result. Action and work are subsequent to faith, subsequent to receiving the capability and energy for righteous active initiative. In salvation, faith is passive and motionless to God's input of righteousness (imputed or applied to a passive subject), it does not resist, it does not seek or achieve, it does nothing. There is no merit in nothing. There is no longer the necessity for regeneration or prevenient grace to precede faith, nor is it necessary, though it may still be true, for God to be the source of faith. The non-meritorious nature of faith is not dependent on whether it is from man or God. The Scripture still says, "to him who does not work, but believes." Faith is always set opposite works.