

# **Who Does Not Work But Believes**

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Presented to  
Department of Systematic Theology  
Dallas Theological Seminary

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In partial fulfillment  
of the Requirements for  
404N – Soteriology  
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## **Who Does Not Work But Believes**

### **Introduction**

In considering the doctrine of the election of the believer, the root of disagreement is, not the actuality of but, the basis of God's choice. The Calvinist says the basis is hidden in God, He simply chose us.<sup>1</sup> The Arminian says that it was on the basis of God's foreknowledge of one's faith that the choice is made. The Calvinist would say this can not be so because this would found our salvation on some merit found in man and negate the grace of God. As one sifts through the issues in the area of election, it is difficult to resist the "camp" mentality that exists surrounding the doctrine but this must be done to arrive at an objective view of the truth contained in God's word and not be effected by the pressures of man from either side. "If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ" (Gal 1:10 NASB). There seems to be truth on both sides and proper emphases and concerns on both sides, as well. This paper is not an attempt to reconcile and balance the statement of God's working in this area. It is, however, an attempt to go to the most important issue separating the two sides, or, at least, the most important and determinant issue concerning God's choice of who will share the kingdom and His eternal presence.

We will examine the nature of faith in terms of merit. Is faith meritorious or not? Is the element of salvation that is from our side, faith, or believing, something that makes us deserving of salvation and its other elements that are from God's side?

### **Faith - Meritorious Act of Man**

Calvinists and those of the Reformed tradition are mainly concerned, and rightly so, with the dignity and independence of God. They are concerned with locating any of the credit for

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<sup>1</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 679.

God's work in man. They are concerned to preserve the proper Reformation ideal of *Sola Deo Gloria*, to God alone be the glory.

This camp would see the transaction of salvation to be totally enacted from God's side, including the existence and function of faith. This is true even to the extent that regeneration must occur before any part of salvation can be applied to the human. To be dead in trespasses and sins, means to be devoid of anything that can respond to God, including faith. Robert Pyne reports that, from a Reformed view, "faith is an expression of spiritual life, and that (it) must be imparted to those who are spiritually dead through the Spirit's work of regeneration."<sup>2</sup> For salvation faith to be the basis in man of God's choice would make man to determining factor in salvation and diminish God's glory. If the ultimate difference between those who are saved and those who are not is "*something in man*, then salvation ultimately depends on a combination of grace plus human ability (original emphasis)."<sup>3</sup> The Canons of the Synod of Dordt set forth Reformed doctrine, "The fact that some receive from God the gift of faith within time, and that others do not, stems from his eternal decision. This same election took place, not on the basis of foreseen faith, . . . as though it were based on a prerequisite cause or condition in the person to be chosen . . ." (Articles 6 and 9, First Main Point of Doctrine).

The above concerns are valid. Salvation must never be seen as something merited by man for "there is none righteous, not even one" (Rom 3:10 NASB). "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him *be* the glory forever. Amen" (Rom 11:36 NASB).

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<sup>2</sup> Robert A. Pyne, "The Sinfulness of Humanity" (unpublished class notes in 404 Soteriology, Dallas Theological Seminary, Spring 2001), 74.

<sup>3</sup> Grudem, *Theology*, 678.

## Toward a Definition of Faith

Having said that the concerns in the previous section are valid, the next step would be to examine their object, faith, to see if it really poses the problem it is alleged to. Rather than taking anything for granted or by stipulation, the nature of faith needs to be examined to see if it is something that enhances man's moral character or not. Is it really, in itself, something man can lean on for support before a holy God? Is there merit to faith?

First a biblical definition. There is no classical or secular background to help contextualize πιστις, the word for faith, at least not in the sense we use it with God.<sup>4</sup> The Greek did not use it for his religion or the gods, preferring νομιζω, to think.<sup>5</sup> It was usually used in the sense of fidelity or faithfulness the sense of loyalty to promises or people.<sup>6</sup> This was added to in the Hellenistic period by being used of legal documents of guarantee or security.<sup>7</sup> The sense of fidelity is consistent with the word's history to the Latin *fides*, itself traceable to a similar word in Sanskrit meaning "to bind."<sup>8</sup> This all lends the idea of commitment and consistency to the word but leaves a lot out. Even the Old Testament has the same sense, the passive sense, faithfulness rather than faith, as C. G. Moule says.<sup>9</sup> Other terms communicate some of the basic ideas of faith, such as "hope" and "trust," and many examples are given, as attested to by chapter eleven of Hebrews, but still the thrust of it all is faithfulness or reliability, both on the part of

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<sup>4</sup> H. Phillip Hook, "A Biblical Definition of Saving Faith," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 121 (Ap-Jn 1964): 134; TDNT VI, 110.

<sup>5</sup> Hook, "Definition," 134.

<sup>6</sup> TDNT vol VI, 113.

<sup>7</sup> TDNT vol VI, 111.

<sup>8</sup> Handley C. G. Moule, *Faith: Its Nature and Its Work* (London: Cassell and Co., 1909), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 26.

God and man. 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. Two other Greek words are used, in Heb 11:1, to describe ΠΙΣΤΙΣ, ὑΠΟΣΤΑΣΙΣ and ἑΛΕΓΧΟΣ. Let’s take the second one first. 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.” ὙΠΟΣΤΑΣΙΣ is a more complicated word for us, looking back through the centuries. Originally meaning the reality concealed behind appearance, it was used philosophically, medically/scientifically, and in general 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 was more the 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, as 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.” 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 a condition, a state of being, and point more to the object, what is hoped for and not seen, than to faith itself or the subject, the one who holds this faith. I don’t think we’ve seen anything, yet, that lends merit to the one who has faith. But let us keep looking.

In theological method, the Scripture is always primary but we also need to hear what some commentators say about the definition of faith. In a very real sense, Vernon Grounds is right in saying that a whole system of theology is necessary to explain faith<sup>10</sup> but we can narrow it down some.

Categories are given, such as the Latin *fides qua creditur*, personal faith exercised, *fides historica*, the impersonal agreement with historical facts and propositions, and *fides propria and salvifica*, personal salvation faith. Of the latter, *notitia*, the truths of salvation, *assensus*, the conviction of their truthfulness, and *fiducia*, the personal application of them to oneself, comprise important elements. Reformed men of God have considered *fiducia* the most important and the essence of faith, bringing it home, so to speak.<sup>11</sup> H. Phillip Hook uses three categories, as well, to define biblical faith. *Knowledge and assent* include the object and content of faith, *appropriation and trust* refer to an individual’s personal dependence on God, with *results and*

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<sup>10</sup> Vernon C. Grounds, “The Nature of Faith,” *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 6 no. 4 (1963): 125.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

*confirmation* having to do with a changed life and continuance, the signs of true faith.<sup>12</sup> Lauren King gives three kinds of faith: *faith one* – a single proposition immediately before one, *faith two* – a background system or structure one operates under, and *faith three* – a faith of personal connection and commitment.<sup>13</sup>

From a Roman Catholic perspective, Avery Dulles commends a translation of “trust” to be as accurate as “faith” for ΠΙΣΤΙΣ,<sup>14</sup> agreeing with Grudem.<sup>15</sup> Dulles, quoting Vatican II on the act of faith to be “obedience of faith,” says, “Faith may be defined not only as an act but also as a stable disposition. The disposition is a proximate capacity or readiness to perform acts of faith.”<sup>16</sup> 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.”<sup>17</sup> Finally, J. I. Packer says, “it should be thought of as a receiving, as a trusting, as a means of taking.”<sup>18</sup> To illustrate the dependent, supplicant 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.

In conclusion it can be seen that there are a number of good ways to refer to that by which we apprehend salvation, as well as daily provision. It is certainly rest and trust and

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<sup>12</sup> Hook, “Definition,” 135.

<sup>13</sup> Lauren A. King, *The Way You Believe* (Newburg, Oregon: Barclay Press, 1991), 8.

<sup>14</sup> Avery Dulles, *The Assurance of Things Hoped For* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 13.

<sup>15</sup> Grudem, *Theology*, 711.

<sup>16</sup> Dulles, *Assurance*, 186.

<sup>17</sup> William Angell, “The Baptist Understanding of How Grace is Received,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 28 no. 2 (Sp 1986): 23.

<sup>18</sup> J. I. Packer, “The Way of Salvation” pt 2 “What is Faith,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 129 (O-D 1972): 297.

receiving and has aspects that can be looked at in categories that help to apply it. But condensed, it is still best understood as the “reality being hoped for, the evidence of things not being seen.”

### **Faith – Non-meritorious Act of Man**

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 Arminian contention, 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 to infused faith, given to obtain salvation for man, similar to infused righteousness of the Roman Church, and salvation would again be based on something meritorious in man. If faith is from man, a subject beyond the scope of this paper, 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, 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.”<sup>28</sup> For 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).”<sup>19</sup> Man, indeed, exercises faith in any number of things to enable him to live everyday life.<sup>20</sup> It is only when faith is placed in the Lord Jesus Christ that it finds its true object and has lasting value. We 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, . . .”<sup>21</sup> 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).”<sup>22</sup> 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, none of them would hold to salvation being based in any way on foreseen faith 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. Grudem’s two differing critiques of faith have been documented already in this paper.<sup>23</sup> On the question of merit, we also have Rudolf Bultmann and Artur Weiser, in *Faith*, from Kittel’s *Theological Word Book of the New*

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<sup>19</sup> B. B. Warfield, *Biblical Doctrines* (New York: Oxford, 1929), 502, quoted in Grounds, *Faith*, 124.

<sup>20</sup> Moule has a good section on this with a number of helpful examples, *Faith*, 6ff.

<sup>21</sup> Packer, “Faith,” 296.

<sup>22</sup> Grudem, *Theology*, 730.

<sup>23</sup> Grudem, *Theology*, 678 for faith as meritorious and p. 730, above, for faith as non-meritorious.

*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.”<sup>24</sup>

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 where it should be thriving.”<sup>25</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup>For what does the Scripture say? “ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.” <sup>4</sup>Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. <sup>5</sup>But 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.<sup>26</sup> 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.

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<sup>24</sup> 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.

<sup>25</sup> Philip Yancey, “What Surprised Jesus,” *Christianity Today* 38 (S 12. 1994): 88.

<sup>26</sup> Grudem, *Theology*, 730.

## **Conclusion**

In considering the doctrine of the election of the believer, the root of disagreement is, not the actuality of, but, the basis of God's choice. We have made some effort to investigate the most important and determinant issue concerning God's choice of who will share the kingdom and His eternal presence, the question of meritorious faith. If faith is indeed non-meritorious, as we have concluded, then an obstacle has been removed between the two camps, Calvinist and Arminian, concerning the issue of election and we have taken a step forward toward a synthetic biblical view of our Lord and His ways of working with us. Hopefully, the result will be a more proper, comfortable and fruitful daily relationship with the loving and holy God Who paid such a price for our fellowship.

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