

SHOULD WE RETHINK THE IDEA OF DEGREES OF FAITH?

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I. INTRODUCTION

We often call Christianity *the Christian faith*. We speak of people being *in the faith* and of people departing *from the faith*.

We speak of justification *by faith* apart from works.

Additionally we say that progressive sanctification is *by faith*, that we live *by faith* in the Son of God who loved us and delivered Himself up for us.

But I've found that in Free Grace circles there is some ambiguity about what faith is. That concerns me. This lack of precision about what faith is can be seen in the question of whether or not there are degrees of faith.

I will begin by defining the degrees of faith view which I am convinced needs to be abandoned. Second, I will show why I believe it is wrong. Third, I will show why passages purported to teach degrees of faith in reality do not. Fourth and finally, I will consider practical ramifications.

Before starting, a brief definition of faith itself is in order.

Faith is the persuasion or conviction that something is true. In Acts 17:4 Luke tells us concerning Jews at the synagogue in Thessalonica, "And some of them *were persuaded*." Then in the next verse he reports, "But the Jews who *were not persuaded*...attacked the house of Jason..." A few verses later Luke reports on the response of Jews at the synagogue in Berea: "Therefore many of them *believed*..." (v 12). Clearly *the persuasion* of vv 4-5 is synonymous with *the belief* of v 12. Faith is persuasion of the truth of a fact or proposition, in this case, that Jesus is the Messiah who guarantees everlasting life to all who believe in Him.

We can easily see this as well in John 11:25-27. After Jesus says that He is the resurrection and the life and explains what He means by that, He asked Martha, "Do you believe this?" Clearly He was asking her if

she was convinced or persuaded that what He promised is true. Her answer was “Yes, Lord I believe...” She was convinced that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that as such He guarantees bodily resurrection and eternal security to all who believe in Him.

II. DEGREES OF FAITH DEFINED

Most would say that the Bible teaches that there are degrees of faith. By that they mean that there can be varying degrees of confidence *in a given fact or proposition*. The words *in a given fact or proposition* are crucial to understanding the view with which I find fault.

Another view, one I am comfortable with, is that a person can grow in faith by increasing the number of biblical propositions which he or she believes. It is not that a person can have more or less faith in any single proposition. It is that a person can come to be convinced of additional truths found in Scripture.

To reiterate, the view I oppose is the one which says it is possible to believe a single proposition to greater or lesser degrees. In my view, each individual proposition is either believed or not believed. There is no such thing as growing in one’s belief of a single proposition.

A few illustrations might help. Consider three propositions: Two plus two equals four. Jesus’ tomb was empty the Sunday after His crucifixion. Jesus was born in Bethlehem. One is either convinced or not convinced those things are true. There are no degrees of faith in those propositions, because they are single propositions.

III. WHY THERE CAN’T BE DEGREES OF FAITH

The concept of faith doesn’t allow for degrees. Either one is persuaded or he is not. There can’t be degrees of persuasion.

I realize in English we sometimes use the word *belief* to express our guesses and our desires as in “I believe the Cowboys will win the Super Bowl,” or “I believe we will have 500 people at our conference next year.” But the Bible never uses the word *believe* in that way. In the Bible belief is a conviction that something is true.¹

¹ Note: there is a relatively rare use where *pisteuō* refers to entrusting something to someone (e.g., John 2:23). But in that case it is not translated as believe, because the context makes it clear another nuance is intended.

The only way we can accept the idea of degrees of faith is to abandon the idea that faith is the conviction that something is true. And if we abandon that understanding, we lose the biblical view of faith.

IV. EVALUATION OF BIBLICAL PASSAGES PURPORTEDLY TEACHING DEGREES OF FAITH

Obviously this is the heart of the matter. It is incumbent on me to show that no passage teaches this idea of degrees of faith. Of course, in one sense, this is impossible. Space doesn't permit going through every passage in the Bible to see if any might teach degrees of faith.

However, what can be done is an examination of the handful of passages that are commonly cited to prove that there are degrees of faith. If it can be shown that none of the strongest texts supposed teaching degrees of faith actually teach that, then it is reasonable to conclude that no other text does either. We begin with one that many consider an undeniable proof of degrees of faith.

A. LORD I BELIEVE, HELP MY UNBELIEF (MARK 9:24)

Without going into a detailed discussion of this passage, I believe we can be certain that the man didn't mean this: "Lord I believe; help me because I don't believe." Belief and unbelief do not coexist at the same time.²

Part of the answer as to what the man meant may be found in asking why Jesus said, "*If you can believe...*"? Why didn't He simply say, "If you believe..."?

Jesus' remarks in v 23 are in response to the man's statement in the previous verse. The man preceded his request if a statement of his uncertainty as to whether Jesus could heal his son: "*If You can do anything,*

² I realize, of course, that according to Evangelical Postmodernism faith and doubt always coexist. According to Carl Raschke faith is existential, not rational. Faith is "a total surrender of one's heart" (*The Next Reformation* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004], 168, 210). He continues, "A rational 'faith' is not really faith at all. Faith does not require any kind of unimpeachable demonstration. It is a passion for God amid the contingencies of experience and the messiness of life in general" (168). Concerning doubt Raschke says, "Postmodernity is all our doubts supersized" (174). See also James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 119. However, postmodernity is unbiblical and wrong on this and many other points as well.

have compassion on us and help us.” Jesus then turns the table on the man by telling him, “*If you can believe...*”

The man expresses his conviction that Jesus can indeed heal his son. No degree of faith in that proposition is possible. He was persuaded that Jesus could heal his son.

The word *help* in “help my unbelief” (v 24) is an advance on the man’s request in v 22, “*Help us.*” The same Greek verb is used in both places. Now he realizes that it is he alone who needs help, since it is his faith that is required for the healing of his son to take place.

The father meant something like this: *Lord, I do believe You can heal my son. Help my vulnerability to unbelief.*

The very fact that the man approached Jesus with the words, “If you can do anything” shows that he was tentative. Evidently the fact that Jesus’ disciples had been unable to heal his son had thrown him into doubt about whether even Jesus could.

Then, when Jesus spoke with authority to him, and put the ball back in his court and said, “*If you can believe...*,” the man had sufficient evidence to so that his doubts vanished and he believed that Jesus indeed could heal his son.

The man believed at that moment, but he realized that his belief was fragile and that he might fall into doubt once again.

This seems to be the view of John Grassmick in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*. He writes, “The father’s response was immediate (*euthys*). He declared his faith (“I do believe”), but also acknowledged its weakness: “Help me overcome my unbelief!”³

Haven’t we all experienced this in times of crises? We may vacillate between confidence in what God has promised and lack of confidence.

Peter is the only man other than Jesus ever to walk on water. He believed Jesus would keep him atop the water when Jesus bid him to come join Him (Matt 14:28-29). But moments later he stopped believing that. When he took His eyes off Jesus and became alarmed by the terrible waves and wind, he ceased believing, began to sink, and cried out, “Lord, save me!” (Matt 14:30). Faith can sometimes be like that.

We must take care when we are explaining texts like this one that we don’t confuse our audience. The man’s confession expressed current

³ John D. Grassmick, “Mark” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament Edition*, ed. John F. Walvoord & Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs: Victor, 1983), 145, emphasis his.

faith: “Lord, I believe.” His request, “Help my unbelief,” expressed concern about possible loss of faith. That is far different from saying that a person can simultaneously believe and yet not believe something.⁴

B. INCREASE OUR FAITH (LUKE 17:5⁵)

Again, without getting into a detailed discussion of this difficult context, I believe we can see what is being asked.

“Increase our faith” may be a direct response to Luke 17:1-4, where Jesus told the disciples to repeatedly forgive those who sin against them and repent. If so, the disciples may be asking something like, “Lord, please help us to believe You about this.” It may have been hard for them to believe that acting in this way is a good idea. In that case they would be doubting the wisdom of what He said.

Or possibly they doubted not the wisdom of it, but their ability to do what He says. “Increase our faith” would thus be a cry for Jesus to change their thinking so that they see themselves as capable of doing this.

If “Increase our faith” is taken as an indirect response to Luke 17:1-4, then they are saying something like, “Lord, this is revolutionary teaching. We believe that what You are saying is what God wants us to do. Teach us more so that we can know and believe and do the will of the Father in even more areas of our lives.”

⁴ There is another way of understanding the man’s concern about unbelief here. He might have been confessing *current* doubts *about another proposition*. Possibly he didn’t yet believe that Jesus is the Messiah and he was asking Jesus to help him believe *that* (cf. John 4:10, “you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water” [= the saving proposition]).

I find the view I express in the body of the paper more reasonable in light of the repetition of “If you can.” The man seems to have moved from doubt to belief and it is reasonable that this makes him fear he might slip back into doubt.

⁵ Commentators tend to be quite cryptic as to what the disciples request for increased faith means. But concerning Jesus’ response they see either an indication that what they need is *true faith* (Leon Morris, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Luke, Rev. ed.* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], 280), or an indication that what they need is “the right kind of faith” (John A. Martin, “Luke” in, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament Edition*, ed. John F. Walvoord & Roy B. Zuck [Colorado Springs: Victor, 1983], 248). However, neither of these suggestions makes sense. What would *true faith* be? What is *the right kind of faith*?

In that case, the apostles here weren't asking for a greater degree of faith in some single proposition. They were asking Jesus to expand their belief system so that His teaching in Luke 17:1-4 naturally fit their worldview.

C. O YOU OF LITTLE FAITH (MATTHEW 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; LUKE 12:28)

When many pastors preach on any of the five passages where Jesus rebuked the disciples for having "little faith," they choose not to comment on precisely what that expression *little faith* means. But that isn't the best way to explain the texts!

The word used here, *oligōpistos*, is one not found in classical Greek or in the LXX. It was evidently coined by the Lord Jesus. It is only used these five times in the NT: four times in Matthew and once in Luke.

Morris comments, "Wherever this term occurs in the New Testament, it is always applied to the disciples. More might have been expected of them."⁶

I believe Morris has the right idea. In each of the five occurrences of this Greek word, the issue is not a need for greater faith in some single proposition the apostles already believed, but the need for the apostles to believe things which they have not yet come to believe.

Due to space constraints, I only touch on one of the passage here. However, in Appendix 1 I discuss the other four passages as well.

In Matt 6:30 the issue is that the disciples needed to believe a new proposition: *God will take care of all our basic needs in life as long as we are seeking His kingdom and righteousness* (see 6:33). Their *little faith* was the fact that they did not yet believe that the Father would meet their basic needs as long as they served Him.

Barbieri evidently takes this view as he writes, "Worrying shows that one has 'little faith' in what God can do."⁷ Beare, while not commenting on this exact expression, is a bit clearer as to what it means: "Jesus is not seeking to show that worry is useless, but that it is at bottom a token of

⁶ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 160.

⁷ Louis A. Barbieri, "Matthew" in John F. Walvoord & Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament Edition* (Colorado Springs: Victor, 1983), 33.

lack of faith in God.”⁸ Notice that he doesn’t speak of some lesser *degree of faith*, but of a *lack of faith*.⁹

Thus “little faith” in these passages doesn’t refer to some lesser degree of faith in a single proposition. It means that while the disciples believed many correct things about Jesus and the Father, they still had plenty more to learn and to believe. They needed to believe more truths, not increase their degree of faith in the truths they already believed.

D. GREAT FAITH (MATTHEW 8:10; 15:28; LUKE 7:9)

The reference to “great faith” is somewhat antithetical to “little faith.” Thus we should expect that it has a sense opposite to what we just discussed.

Great faith would mean believing things about Jesus and the Father that most people, even most regenerate people, do not believe.¹⁰ It is not that people who believe such truths are more fervent in their faith, for example, in Jesus’ deity or in His granting of eternal life to believers. It is that they believe advanced things about God. Let’s look at one of the three places in the Gospels where this expression *great faith* occurs. The other two are discussed in Appendix 2.

Matthew 8:10. A centurion was a military leader in charge of a hundred men. This Gentile came to Jesus (first having sent his friends to ask Him¹¹) and asked Him to heal his servant. When Jesus said, “I will come and heal him,” the centurion believed Him. But that is not what draws Jesus’ remark about great faith.

What would most people do at this point? They would go with Jesus to their house and watch Him do the healing. They wouldn’t think of

⁸ Francis W. Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1981), 187.

⁹ So also R. T. France, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 141; J. C. Ryle, *Matthew* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1993), 46.

¹⁰ Yet see Barbieri, “Matthew,” 37. Concerning Jesus’ reference to *great faith* in Matt 8:10, Barbieri writes, “Faith *such as this* made entrance into His kingdom possible, regardless of national, racial, or geographical residence” (italics added). Barbieri’s view here seems to contradict his explanation of Matt 6:30 (see above).

¹¹ See Zane C. Hodges, “The Centurion’s Faith in Matthew and Luke,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (October-December 1964). Hodges harmonizes the Matthean and Lukan accounts.

suggesting anything else, for they wouldn't even conceive of the idea of healing from afar. But that is where this Gentile shows that he believes something great.

The centurion boldly tells Jesus that he knows Jesus can heal the servant from afar. He believes that Jesus doesn't need to see or touch the servant to heal him.¹²

This leads Jesus to respond, "Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel" (Matt 8:10). The *great faith* is the centurion's belief that Jesus can heal long distance, just by commanding it to be done!¹³ That is evidently not something that even the apostles yet believed.¹⁴

Great faith is not some higher level of conviction. It is believing something that is harder to believe, something that is contrary to what most people believe.

France evidently agrees, saying, "[Great] *faith* should not be interpreted here in the light of later theological discussion; it is defined by vv. 8-9 as an absolute practical reliance on Jesus' power."¹⁵ While I believe he introduces a bit of confusion by adding the adjective *absolute*, he clearly doesn't see this great faith as saving faith¹⁶ or as a greater amount of faith in a given proposition.¹⁷

¹² See Beare, *Matthew*, 208, in his discussion of v 9.

¹³ Apparently this is the view held by Zane Hodges, "The Centurions Faith," 326-28, 330, 332.

¹⁴ Contra Barbieri, "Matthew," 37.

¹⁵ France, *Matthew*, 155, italics his.

¹⁶ A number of commentators seem to think that this *great faith* refers to *saving faith*. For example, Ryle (*Matthew*, 58) says:

To believe Christ's power and willingness to help, and to make practical use of our belief, is a rare and precious gift: let us always be thankful if we have it. To be willing to come to Jesus as helpless, lost sinners and commit our souls into his hands is a mighty privilege; let us always bless God if this willingness is ours, for it is a gift. Many a poor converted heathen, who knows nothing but that he is sick of sin, and trusts in Jesus, will sit down in heaven while many learned scholars are rejected for evermore. Blessed indeed are they that believe!

¹⁷ Morris similarly writes, "Faith is one of the great Christian concepts, but it is found only eight times in Matthew. It points to trust in Jesus and, in a con-

Some things are hard to believe. Some things are relatively easy to believe. Things which can be empirically proven or proven by a preponderance of eyewitnesses are easier to believe than things which hinge on a small number of witnesses or things which require careful analysis to understand and believe. Only an extreme conspiracy theorist, for example, doesn't believe we landed men on the moon. Other things, things with less evidence, are harder to believe. Great faith believes great things about our great God.

E. FAITH AS A MUSTARD SEED (MATTHEW 17:20; LUKE 17:6)

On several occasions Jesus indicated that if someone had faith as a mustard seed, the smallest of seeds in that day, then he would be able to move mountains by mere command and nothing would be impossible for him.

This is most naturally understood in light of the "little faith" and "great faith" passages. Faith the size of a mustard seed is certainly *small* or *little*.

Morris is confusing in his discussion of *faith like a mustard seed* in Matt 18:20:

Jesus is saying that even a little faith would enable the disciples to do what they had just proved that they could do. It is not necessary to have great faith; even a small faith is enough, as long as it is faith in the great God.¹⁸

France is even more confusing when he says:

Faith is, for Jesus, not a matter of intellectual assent, but of a practical reliance on a living God. It is important to observe here that it is not the 'amount' of faith which brings the impossible within reach, but the power of God, which is available to even the 'smallest' faith.¹⁹

A much simpler understanding of what Jesus is saying is that He was saying in the right conditions it won't be remarkable to believe the God has given you the ability to move a mountain. What is now an impossible

text like this, in his ability and readiness to give help in unexpected ways," *Matthew*, 194.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 449.

¹⁹ France, *Matthew*, 266.

and unbelievable task need not be either impossible or unbelievable in the right setting.

Let's say that we lived in a day when the miraculous was common. For example, with glorified bodies in the Millennium, there is no telling what we will be able to do. Moving mountains by merely commanding them to move may well be something some of us will do. If Jesus commanded you to move a mountain by commanding it to move, it wouldn't take great faith to accomplish that in the Millennium. Things that are now miraculous things may well then be commonplace for people with glorified bodies.²⁰

In the right context it doesn't take great faith to do mighty things. We are not in that context right now. But we will be one day.²¹

V. AN ADMISSION

I admit that there is one aspect of this discussion that makes me sympathetic to those who believe in degrees of faith. It is the issue of biblical interpretations where there are a multiple views which are consistent with the rest of Scripture and none of which is yet absolutely clear to us as the correct interpretation. In such cases I typically have a view as to which one is *most likely correct*, but my view is less than a settled persuasion, conviction, or certainty.

For example, take my former understanding of Acts 2:38, which reads,

Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

²⁰ Of course, it may be that some miraculous tasks will only be possible for those who were overcoming saints in this life. In that case overcomers will believe they themselves can do these things and non-overcomers will believe they themselves cannot.

²¹ Alfred Plummer, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982; from the 1915 edition) seems to be in agreement. He writes concerning Matt 17:20: "It was not their faith in Jesus as Messiah that failed them, but their faith in the commission to heal which He has given them" (242). However, see his previous sentence in which he says, "It is easy for faith to dwindle, without the loss of it being observed." What he means by that is unclear.

In my dissertation I had a hard time explaining why this verse isn't teaching justification by repentance and baptism. I won't bore you with the details of the explanation I gave in my dissertation. But I will tell you that I was far from convinced that I correctly understood the passage.

Today I have a completely different understanding of the passage, one that fits the context well, fits Acts 22:16, and fits with the rest of the New Testament.²² As a result of the fact that this new view fits and is not forced, now I am convinced that I properly understand it.

So while some might say I've grown in my conviction about what Acts 2:38 means, I'd say I've come to be convinced what it means. In my dissertation I was floating out a possibility, but one I did not yet believe was true.

I'm forced to say, because of my understanding of what belief is, that when I'm not sure, I don't yet believe.

There are many passages of the Bible where I can say, "This text means such and so" or "I believe this text means such and so."

But there are others texts in the Bible where I am not yet sure what it means. In such cases I'm forced to make a lesser confession, like, "There are three views that fit the context and which are consistent with the rest of Scripture, and I lean toward the third view for three reasons..."

VI. PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

A. READ AND MEDITATE

You can't believe what you haven't heard, so make sure to feed regularly on the Word of God in terms of personal reading and meditation, church attendance, and mentoring (Psalm 1; Heb 10:23-25; 2 Tim 2:2). Your faith (the constellation of beliefs) grows the more you understand and believe what God says.

B. EVANGELIZE CLEARLY

Don't confuse people about faith when you evangelize. If you are vague about what it means to believe, or about what it is that we must believe, then you will leave people confused when you evangelize. Remember, a mist in the pulpit is a fog in the pew. Make sure that you are

²² For a discussion of my current view, see Lanny Thomas Tanton, "The Gospel and Water Baptism: A Study of Acts 2:38," *JOTGES* (Spring 1990): 27-52.

clear that all who simply believe in Jesus have eternal life. Personally, I don't think you need to explain what believing is, because people only get confused by obtaining higher education! Most people know what it is to believe. If they have confusion, most will ask you and then you can explain. Unfortunately many illustrations about saving faith do more to confuse than they do to clarify.

C. DISCIPLE CLEARLY

Don't confuse people about faith when you disciple either. I've heard Free Grace people teach on the "Oh You of Little Faith" passages and leave the audience not knowing what the disciples' problem was. The listener is left with the vague notion that the disciples didn't have a big enough degree of faith. The same is often true with the teaching of the passages dealing with "Lord I believe, help my unbelief," "Increase our faith," and "great faith." Whenever you discuss those passages show what it is that the person in question did or didn't believe.

D. FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS DEAD

Once you believe something, put what you believe into practice. James says three times in Jas 2:17-26, "Faith without works is dead." When James speaks of *faith*, he is not talking about faith in Jesus for eternal life. He is talking about putting into practice *whatever we believe* from God's Word.

For example, vv 15-16 show that one belief we ought to put into practice is being convinced that it is more blessed to give than receive (Acts 20:35). James means that anything we believe in the Bible, if it is not wedded to works, is unprofitable. The issue is not *saving faith* without works, it is *faith without works*.²³

VII. CONCLUSION

Faith is a conviction that something is true. There can't be degrees of faith for the simple reason that faith is a conviction that something is true. One is either convinced or he is not yet convinced that something is true.

It's time that we drop the idea of degrees of faith. This will help us when we talk about the vital issue of faith in the Christian life.

²³ John Niemelä, "Faith Without Works: A Definition" *CTSJ* 6:2 (April-June 2002), 13-16.

It may take great faith to believe what I'm suggesting in this article. But it doesn't take a greater degree of faith!

APPENDIXES

APPENDIX 1

OTHER "LITTLE FAITH" PASSAGES EXPLAINED

Matthew 8:26. The disciples should have believed that Jesus would not let them die in a storm, no matter how great the tempest, no matter whether He was awake or asleep (v 24). But they didn't believe that. In a panic, they awoke Him and said, "Lord, save us! We are perishing" (v 25). It is at this point that Jesus says, "Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?" (v 26a). When Jesus then stills the winds and the waves, they are amazed (vv 26-27). The reference to *little faith* here concerns their failure to believe greater things about Him.²⁴ Unlike the Gentile centurion with great faith, they believe He has to be both physically present and awake in order to deliver them from imminent death.

Matthew 14:31. This text shows that *little faith* need not always refer to failing to believe harder things, but to the duration of our faith. Jesus was walking on water. The disciples were frightened, thinking it was a ghost (v 26). But when Jesus identified Himself, Peter asks something that reflected great faith. He said, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water" (v 28).

After Jesus said, "Come," Peter came down out of the boat and "walked on the water to go to Jesus" (v 29). Then something happened to short-circuit Peter's faith. "But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, 'Lord, save me!'"

Jesus said, "O you [singular] of little faith [singular], why did you [singular] doubt?" This is the only use of *oligōpistos* in the NT in the singular. The other references refer to all of the disciples.

²⁴ So Plummer (*Matthew*, 131), "The disciples ought to have known that with Him they were sure of protection."

Peter's faith was little in this case because of its short duration, not because it was something easy to believe.²⁵ Jesus rebukes Peter for the short duration of his faith. This text shows that we can believe something for a time, but then when circumstances hit us, we may cease believing. It also shows that continuing to believe God in the midst of life's tempests is greater faith than believing Him when all is going well.

Matthew 16:8. After Jesus warned the disciples about the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, they thought He was saying something about the fact that they brought no bread with them. When Jesus then refers to their "little faith," He is rebuking them for forgetting the feeding of the 5,000 with five little loaves of bread (v 9).

France comments, "Not only have they failed to grasp Jesus' metaphorical teaching because of their preoccupation with their material problem, but even at the material level they have failed to learn the lesson of the miracles of feeding."²⁶

They had many strong reasons to believe that He would meet their needs. What faith they had in Him did not reach this obvious level; hence *little* here refers to little in extent. Their belief that He miraculously fed the 5,000 wasn't influencing their faith in Him for their daily needs as it should have.

Luke 12:28. This is the only occurrence outside of Matthew. This use is parallel to Matt 6:30: *The disciples should believe that God will take care of all their basic needs in life as long as they seek His kingdom and righteousness* (see v 31). We often doubt God on some practical level and when we do, our faith is little.

Morris is on the mark when he notes:

If God does all this for the flowers that disappear so quickly, *how much more* will he clothe these people? *O men of little faith* shows that some of the disciples had shown anxiety. It is needless.²⁷

²⁵ Morris (*Matthew*, 384) says, "The leading apostle might have been expected to trust more wholeheartedly, more especially since he had already taken some steps in his alien environment. He was learning that problems arise when doubt replaces trust."

²⁶ France, *Matthew*, 251.

²⁷ Morris, *Luke*, 235, italics his.

APPENDIX 2

OTHER “GREAT FAITH” PASSAGES EXPLAINED

Matthew 15:28. When a Gentile woman approached Jesus about healing her demon-possessed daughter, Jesus said, “I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (v 24). Undeterred, the woman said, “Lord, help me.” Then after Jesus said that “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the little dogs” (v 26), she was still undeterred. She showed that she believed Jesus loved Gentiles as well and that she believed Jesus could and would heal her daughter. She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table” (v 27). This now prompts Jesus to say, “O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire” (v 28).

This woman’s *great faith* was clearly her belief that Jesus was merciful and loving to all, not merely to Jews. France’s comments on the woman’s great faith are helpful:

Was it merely her persistence in expecting a response despite apparent refusal...? Or is there also the idea of her spiritual perception in recognizing *both* the primary scope of Jesus’ mission to Israel *and also* the fact that that was not to be its ultimate limit?²⁸

The disciples clearly didn’t believe this yet, as it evident at the start of the incident where they say to Jesus, “Send her away, for she cries out after us” (v 23). They didn’t say, “Lord, please heal her daughter for she is in great distress.”

Luke 7:9. This account is parallel to the one reported in Matthew 8:10. Again, the centurion had *great faith* because he believed that Jesus could and would heal long distance, just by His command, without seeing or touching the servant.²⁹

²⁸ France, *Matthew*, 247-48.

²⁹ Morris (*Luke*, 152) is confusing in his discussion of the centurion’s faith:

The surprising thing was that this Gentile should have such great faith, faith surpassing that among the Israelites, the people of God. *An intriguing question is the nature of the faith the man had.* Clearly he had faith that his servant would be healed. But is that all? In a Christian context to speak of faith without any qualification normally means more than that. *It means trust in Jesus and acceptance of him as Lord* (cf. v. 6).

APPENDIX 3

ADDITIONAL PROOF MAKES ONE LESS LIKELY TO CEASE BELIEVING IN THE FUTURE

Belief is the conviction that a proposition is true. All it takes to be convinced is one piece of compelling evidence. Once you are convinced, you believe. But if you later learn of more compelling evidence concerning what you believe, your faith is stronger in the sense that it is less likely to unravel.

For example, Peter refers to the time when he and James and John saw Jesus transfigured before them. Concerning that event he says, “And so we have the prophetic word confirmed” (2 Pet 1:19). Actually the Greek word is a more intensive form of the word translated *sure* in v 10. Peter, James, and John already believed the prophetic word concerning Jesus’ reign as the King of kings. However, when they “were eyewitnesses of His majesty” (2 Pet 1:16), they had more confirmation of that truth.

It wasn’t that they had come to believe any more strongly in His coming reign. Rather, it was that their hold on this truth was stronger. They were less likely to be dissuaded because of this additional proof.

Of course, in a sense, we are now dealing with multiple beliefs. The disciples initially were convinced that Jesus is the Messiah by hearing His powerful teaching (John 1). Then when they saw His miracles, they believed that they were legitimate works of God and that they validated what they already believed. When they saw His majesty at the Mount of Transfiguration and there actually heard God the Father tell them that Jesus is His Son and command them to listen to Him, their faith was now buttressed by so much overwhelming evidence that it was now easier to continue to believe that He would soon come again and set up His kingdom on earth.

It may be that what this man heard about Jesus had brought home to him more than the certainty that he could cure sickness. It must always remain possible that the centurion had no more than a conviction that Jesus could heal and that to say more is to introduce the developed meaning of faith that became common among Christians. But the suspicion remains that Luke’s emphasis on faith means more (*italics added*).

The prophetic words was “more sure” because of additional verification.

We should note, however, that the disciples did lose their faith in Jesus as the Messiah for a time. When He was on the cross, they no longer believed He was coming again to set up His kingdom. The only one who believed that was one of the two thieves being crucified alongside Him.

The disciples’ concept of the Messiah didn’t include crucifixion and death, so their faith ceased for a time. But three days later, when they saw Him risen from the dead, the faith of all but Thomas returned. And Thomas’ faith that Jesus is the Messiah returned as soon as he personally saw Him.

The more proof we have of a proposition, the easier it is to believe it, and the more likely we are to return to that belief if we ever go through doubts. But the conviction that something is true, for example, that Jesus is the Messiah, is all or nothing.

APPENDIX 4

COMPOUND PROPOSITIONS ARE SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT

Consider Jesus’ promise that “He who believes in Me has everlasting life.” This is a bit more complicated, for there are essentially three separate propositions which are combined into one compound proposition. The three sub-propositions are: 1) Jesus is the source of eternal life; 2) this life is given only to those who meet a certain condition; and 3) that condition is believing in Jesus.

Thus a person could believe some of the propositions but not all. *But if a person doesn’t believe all the sub-propositions in a compound proposition, then he doesn’t believe the entire proposition.* One is either convinced that the entire proposition is true, or he is not. There are no shades of belief in that single proposition, unless by that we mean that a person who believes two of the sub-propositions is closer to faith in the entire proposition than persons who believe one or none of them.

Note well, however, that one does grow in faith when he moves from believing none of the three sub-propositions to believing one of them. He becomes less hostile or more open to the proposition. But belief in the entire proposition doesn’t occur until one is convinced all of it is true.

APPENDIX 5

SOME BELIEFS MAY BE LOGICAL PREREQUISITES TO BELIEVING A PROPOSITION

Let's consider one specific proposition: He who believes in Jesus has everlasting life (John 6:47). While one either is convinced that is true or he is not, there are beliefs that are logical prerequisites to believing this. And the more of those prerequisite beliefs one is convinced are true, the softer his unbelief. That is, some unbelievers are closer to faith in Jesus than others due to what they currently believe.

This relates to evangelism because belief in Jesus for eternal life is logically linked to other beliefs. While a person might be illogical and believe in Jesus without some of these prerequisite beliefs, that is not the norm.

An otherwise unimpressive book called *What's Gone Wrong with the Harvest*³⁰ does nonetheless have a nice chart on this point. It calls faith in Jesus and regeneration point 0. It suggests that to get to this point, one must move from minus 8 (awareness of a supreme being) to minus 7 (initial awareness of the gospel) to minus 6 and so forth all the way past minus 1 to 0 (faith in Christ).³¹

What are some of these logically prerequisite beliefs? Here are some beliefs that typically precede faith in Jesus for eternal life:

- God exists.
- Life after death.
- Eternal condemnation for some and eternal joy for others.
- God is righteous; I'm not.
- God took on bodily form.
- Jesus was miraculously born of a virgin.
- Jesus lived a sinless life.
- Jesus willingly went to the cross.
- Jesus' death on the cross removed the sin barrier so that all people are savable.

³⁰ James F. Engel and H. Wilbert Norton, *What's Gone Wrong with the Harvest?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 45. I disagree some with the order and organization of the chart, but the idea is sound: there are some beliefs that are often *prerequisite* to faith in Christ.

³¹ They actually refer to "repentance and faith in Christ," *ibid.*

- Jesus rose bodily from the dead. He didn't stay in the grave and He didn't just rise *spiritually*.
- People can't be righteous before God by their works.

Now when I evangelize, I don't worry about all that may need to precede faith in Christ. I realize that the Holy Spirit is convicting everyone of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:7-11). So much of the work is already done by the Holy Spirit.

Say I am talking with a Mormon. I know they are theists. That makes it easier. I know they believe in life after death, coming judgment, the righteousness of God, that Jesus died and rose again, and many other biblical truths. I don't worry or focus on their theological errors in general. I focus in particular on their error regarding justification by faith alone.

Recently two Mormon missionaries came to my door. I told them I wasn't interested, but they pressed on. Okay, I decided, I warned you.

I told them they were under the curse of Gal 1:8-9 and that they were proclaiming a false gospel. They were startled.

"Us? Preaching a false gospel? No way!"

I said that Jesus taught, "He who believes in Me has everlasting life" but that they don't believe that.

"Oh, we do believe that."

"Okay," I said. "So what happens if you stopped reading your Bible, stopped going to church, and you became an alcoholic and died away from God."

"Oh, I'm not the Judge, but I'm pretty sure I'd go to hell."

"Then you don't believe Jesus because He said that all who simply believe in Him have eternal life. 'He who believes in Me has eternal life.'"

"But you're saying that a sinful person could get into the kingdom."

"Yes, that is what Jesus says."

We went on for another few minutes and I left them with the fact that they believed God wanted them to go through life not sure where they would spend eternity. I told them that God wants all His children to know that they are His forever, no strings attached.

In my view anyone in Christendom is easier to win to faith in Christ than an atheist, agnostic, or a fundamentalist from one of the other world religions. This is because in most cases unbelievers who have some exposure to Christian truth believe more of the logical prerequisites than unbelievers outside of Christendom.