

# BEWARE OF CONFUSION ABOUT FAITH

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## I. FAITH IS UNFATHOMABLE TODAY

Christianity is called *the Christian faith* for a reason. Christianity is all about doctrines. It is all about what we believe. Our lives cannot be transformed unless our minds are first renewed by the Word of God (Rom 12:1-2).

You might think that one thing pastors and theologians would be absolutely crystal clear about is what faith is.

Sadly, just the opposite is true. Faith is a dense fog, an impenetrable mystery for most pastors and theologians today. People hearing them become totally confused as to what faith is.

Beware of confusion about faith.

## II. BEWARE OF CONFUSION ABOUT THE DEFINITION OF FAITH

Jesus said, “He who believes in Me has everlasting life” (John 6:47).

Recently I spent about an hour on the phone with a man who has struggled with assurance for nearly 20 years. When I pointed him to John 6:47, he said something like this: “Yes, but the Greek word for believe means something more than the English word and hence merely believing the facts of the gospel is not enough.”

That man is far from alone.

Make no mistake. If we don’t know what faith is, then we can’t be sure we are believers.

Many people understand John 6:47 as though it read: “He who whatchamacallits has everlasting life.” Since they don’t know what whatchamacallit is, they don’t know if they have everlasting life or not.

In February 1989 an article was published in the GES newsletter entitled “Doctrinal Déjà Vu: An Old Issue: Faith and Assurance.” Zane Hodges cited an 1890 book by Robert L. Dabney, a Calvinist, in which he said that no one can be sure whether his faith is genuine or spurious:

There is a spurious as well as a genuine faith. *Every man, when he thinks he believes, is conscious of exercising what he thinks is faith.* Such is the correct statement of these facts of consciousness. Now suppose the faith, of which the man is conscious, turns out a spurious faith, must not his be a spurious consciousness? And he, being without the illumination of the Spirit, will be in the dark as to its hollowness.<sup>1</sup>

Hodges concludes: “Obviously, the kind of theology Dabney represents strips believers of their grounds of assurance and dangles them over an abyss of despair.”<sup>2</sup> Over a century later, Evangelicals continue to repeat Dabney’s contention.

Walter Chantry has written a bestselling book called *Today’s Gospel: Authentic or Synthetic?*<sup>3</sup> Though the book came out 35 years ago, it is still in print and continues to sell quite well.

Many are hailing it as a contemporary Christian classic. Chantry too says we cannot be sure we have believed:

Few today seem to understand the Bible’s doctrine of assurance. Few seem to appreciate the doubts of professing Christians who question whether they have been born again. They have no doubt that God will keep His promises *but they wonder whether they have properly fulfilled the conditions* for being heirs to those promises.<sup>4</sup>

Chantry then concludes:

Since we read of self-deceived hypocrites like Judas, it is an imperative question. “What must I do to be saved?” is an altogether different question from, “How do I know I’ve done it?” You can answer the first confidently. *Only the Spirit may answer the last with certainty.*<sup>5</sup>

Remember the old Clairol ad line? *Only your hairdresser knows for sure.* Well, that is popular evangelical theology today.

<sup>1</sup> Robert L. Dabney, *Discussions*, ed. C. R. Vaughan (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1890), I:180-81, emphasis in original.

<sup>2</sup> Zane C. Hodges, “Doctrinal Déjà Vu: An Old Issue: Faith and Assurance” *Grace in Focus* (February 1989): 1, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Walter J. Chantry, *Today’s Gospel: Authentic or Synthetic?* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1970).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 75-76, emphasis added.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 76, emphasis added.

In a 1989 *Tabletalk* article Dr. R. C. Sproul echoed these sentiments. While the entire one-page article is worth considering, I only cite the conclusion here: “In other words, Peter was also uncomfortable, but he realized that *being uncomfortable with Jesus was better than any other option!*” Sproul clearly indicated that he wasn’t sure he had eternal life and that Peter wasn’t either. The best option is to be uncomfortable, that is uncertain, “with Jesus.” Sproul speaks for many Christian leaders today when he says that following Jesus on the path of discipleship is a very uncertain journey.

Dr. James White is a leading Reformed apologist. He regularly conducts debates in which he defends five-point Calvinism. In fact, I personally debated him recently on whether regeneration precedes faith and whether perseverance in good works is an indispensable proof of regeneration.

The Protestant Reformers coined an expression to convey the idea that justification before God is *by faith alone* in Christ alone. The expression is *sola fide*, which is Latin for “by faith alone.”

A few months before my scheduled debate with James White, someone sent me a CD of a series of sermons he had done in October of 2004. The sermon that really caught my attention was entitled “Sola Fide.”

At one point in the sermon White began to tell his audience that his concern was that they would be able to communicate Paul’s *sola fide* message accurately. He then raised the following objection listeners might hear: “That sounds too easy. God must demand more of me.”

I was shocked at White’s suggested reply. This is a direct quote from his October 31, 2004 *Sola Fide* sermon: “Yes, He actually demands all of you. That’s what faith is really all about.”

On his website, under the heading “Lordship Salvation, Faith, & Monergism,” White said the following about me and the Free Grace position on February 28th of 2005:

One of the upcoming debates that is sort of “flying below the radar” is my encounter in April in Oklahoma City with Dr. Robert Wilkin, the Executive Director of the Grace Theological [sic] Society. Though we had a fair amount of difficulty getting the debate set up, I think its focus upon the nature of regeneration and the issues of monergism and synergism will be helpful.

Dr. Wilkin is a leading anti-Lordship advocate. From my perspective, his position is grossly imbalanced because it insists

upon only a single element of the truth to the exclusion of everything else. *“Faith alone” becomes “faith separated from the work of regeneration, the Spirit, the new nature,” etc. Faith without repentance (all repentance passages are consigned to “discipleship”), belief without discipleship, etc.* It is a very imbalanced perspective, one that comes from an over-reaction to a works-salvation mindset.

Today I ministered the Word in both the morning and evening services at PRBC (and the adult Bible Study class, for that matter), and I spoke from John 8:12-59. One of the passages that struck me, in light of the upcoming debate with Dr. Wilkin, was John 8:51: “Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My word He will never see death.” *Keeping Christ’s word is surely more than a naked faith* (faith without regeneration, faith without a new nature), and yet surely we see the parallel to John 5:24: “Truly, truly, I say to you, the one hearing My word and believing in the One who sent ME has eternal life and shall not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.”

There are so many passages that are utterly unintelligible, outside of special pleading, in the anti-Lordship “naked faith” position. Two come to mind immediately [Acts 20:20-21 & Titus 2:11-14]...

Reformed theology cuts the ground out from underneath the position presented by Wilkin, for *the faith that saves is the work of the Spirit in regeneration itself, and hence cannot possibly be separated from the rest of the work of the Spirit. Hence, there is no contradiction between saying that a person who believes has eternal life and saying that a person who keeps Christ’s word has [sic] will never see death.* Only the synergist has to struggle to explain the relationship: the monergist has a consistent understanding.

I will be noting many more problems with the non-Lordship position in future commentaries.<sup>6</sup>

Whatever White means by “faith,” it clearly isn’t simply being convinced that Jesus gives eternal life to all who believe in Him.

As an aside, note how this understanding of faith makes justification by faith alone not really justification by faith alone. If justification is by

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.aomin.org/index.php?itemid=255>, emphasis added.

faith alone, doesn't that mean that justification is by "naked faith," to use White's expression? How can justification be by faith alone, and yet faith alone, that is, faith that isn't dressed up with works, will not result in justification? How can discipleship be part of saving faith and yet at the same time justification be by faith alone?

White's ministry is called Alpha and Omega Ministries. Under "Statement of Faith" on his website we read this startling statement:

As a result of this faith [God's gift of saving faith], based upon the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ, God justifies *or makes righteous* the one who believes.<sup>7</sup>

Justification, according to this Reformed ministry, is not being *declared righteous*, but being *made righteous*. I imagine this must be an error, for that is the Roman Catholic understanding of justification and White regularly debates Roman Catholics. However, that is what the website declares.<sup>8</sup> And it certainly fits with his denouncing of "naked faith," his statement that faith includes discipleship, and his insistence that "true faith" results in righteous living.

Many more examples could be given. The point is, for many if not most Evangelicals, *faith in Jesus* is a mystery which is unknowable prior to death. One goes through life hoping he is born again and fearing that when he dies he may end up in the hot spot.

### III. REALIZE THAT FAITH REALLY IS INTELLECTUAL ASSENT

Faith in the Bible is precisely what faith is in English. *It is the conviction something is true.*

For example, note the exchange that took place concerning faith in John 11:25-27:

Jesus said to her [Martha], "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you

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<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.aomin.org/AOFAITH.html>, emphasis added.

<sup>8</sup> This was verified again on May 6, 2005, two weeks after the April 22 debate in which I showed a PowerPoint slide of this quote. The fact that it remains unchanged makes me think it must not be an error, but White's view.

believe this?" She said to Him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

The Lord Jesus made two simple declarations about Himself and those who believe in Him. When He asked Martha, "Do you believe this?" He was asking if she was persuaded that His two declarations were true. She said she did believe what He said.

There was no fuzziness here. In order to make a passage like this complicated, one must import a foreign meaning into the word *believe* (*pisteuō*).

Consider also the purpose statement of John's Gospel:

These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name (John 20:31).

The one who is convinced that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, has eternal life. There is only one other place in John's Gospel where the expression *the Christ, the Son of God* occurs. That is in John 11:25-27, the passage we just considered. Anyone who believes that Jesus guarantees eternal life to all who believe in Him for it believes that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

John 20:31 does not speak of commitment, discipleship, perseverance, or good works. It speaks merely of believing that Jesus is the Christ. Again, one must read foreign concepts into *believing* in order to find anything other than mental assent in John's purpose statement.

Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus also illustrates the idea of faith as simple persuasion. John 3:12 reads:

"If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?"

No one suggests that Jesus was revealing a mystery when He spoke of Nicodemus not believing the earthly things. Nicodemus didn't understand what Jesus had said. Thus he was not yet persuaded it was true.

The second reference to belief in the same verse is speaking of the same verbal concept. Whatever believing means when speaking of believing earthly things is the same concept as believing heavenly things.

Clearly believing earthly things is simply a matter of mental assent. So, too, is believing heavenly things.

There is not a single use of *pistis* or *pisteuō* which is mysterious or unfathomable.

Believing is the conviction that something is true. Saving faith is the conviction that the justifying message is true: that the one who simply believes in Jesus has everlasting life.

Our works, feelings, will, and desires play absolutely no role in whether we believe something and whether we know we believe or not.

#### IV. AVOID THE TRUST TRAP

It should be noted, however, that even in our own circles there is not unanimity on this point. I have spoken with Free Grace pastors and leaders who say that saving faith is more than being convinced of facts, that believing in Jesus is more than intellectual, that faith in Jesus involves a decision of the will.

The word *trust* overlaps in meaning with *belief*, but is not identical. Often trust has the sense of relying upon something we already believe, that is, something we are already convinced is true.

Free Grace people sometimes introduce confusion about faith when they say something like, “It is not enough to believe the facts about Jesus; you must also trust Him.” Then an illustration is given like the chair illustration.

“Do you believe that chair over there will hold you up if you sit in it?”

“Yes, I believe that chair is fully reliable.”

“Well, until you actually go over and sit down on the chair, you are not trusting it. The same is true with trusting Jesus. Would you like to choose to trust Him for your salvation?”

Questions abound. If believing what Jesus has promised is not enough, then why does Jesus call people to believe Him? If trusting Jesus is more than believing what He says, then how specifically does one trust Jesus? And how does a person know when he has done it?

If we lose our grip on faith, then we lose our grip on the good news. We cannot evangelize clearly if we think faith is more than intellectual assent, that it is more than believing facts, or that it is anything other than being convinced that the saving message is true.

#### V. AVOID THE TEMPORARY FAITH TRAP

Some in Christianity believe that if one’s faith in Christ fails, then he proves he never had “truly” believed in the first place.

People who think this way speak of something they call “temporary faith.” By that expression they do not merely mean that the faith eventually stops. They mean that this is a special kind of faith that believes the right doctrines for a time, but because the faith eventually fails, this proves that the faith itself was substandard.

The idea of temporary faith is based primarily on the second soil in the Parable of the Four Soils:

“Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. But the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away” (Luke 8:12-13).

Many interpret the people represented by the rocky soil as having believed in Jesus, but with a counterfeit sort of faith. This “temporary faith” can continue for some time, maybe even years or decades. The Lord Jesus left vague how long this person believes the saving message.

The fascinating thing about temporary faith being substandard faith is that it is purely a human creation. Faith that ends is not non-faith. Faith is faith.

A basic tenet of philosophy and logic is that “A cannot be non-A.” This is so obvious that I fear giving an illustration would insult the reader’s intelligence, but please bear with me. I think the exercise is helpful.

Let’s say I said that a dog is not a dog, but is a radish. You would think that I was mad.

What if I claimed that a television is not a television, but is a transporter device used by aliens to beam their advance scouts into the homes of the unsuspecting? Again, you’d make reservations for me at the mental institution. A TV is a TV.

To deny that people whom Jesus Himself said believed the saving message really believed that message is craziness. If Jesus said they believed, then they believed. And clearly what they believed was the saving message (compare vv 12 and 13).

When does a person get eternal life? According to texts like John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47; and 11:25-27, a person gains everlasting life the exact moment they first believe the saving message. There is no time requirement as to how long one must believe in Jesus before it “takes.”

The obvious point of this parable is that some believers later stop believing. Only by introducing an alien idea into the text can one make faith in Jesus for eternal life to be less than saving unless it perseveres from new birth to the grave.

We are not born again because we have unfailing faith in the Savior. We are born again because we have come to faith in the unfailing Savior. Here's a way to remember this: Once faith, always saved.

Note well: Most people in Christianity believe that only those who persevere to the death in faith will make it into the kingdom of God. This is even an issue for us in the Free Grace movement. Not all in our movement have thought this through. There are people in our movement who think that apostasy proves one was never born again in the first place. This is a dangerous position for many reasons. It makes assurance impossible, since none of us can be sure we will persevere in faith.

It also is a slippery slope. If we are confused on this point, it logically follows that faith in Jesus must be mysterious, for anyone, ourselves included, can later prove to have never believed in the first place.

## VI. THOSE WHO BELIEVE IN SPECIAL FAITH DON'T BELIEVE THE GOSPEL

Jesus said, "He who believes in Me has everlasting life" (John 6:47). If a person defines "believing in Jesus" as some special kind of faith, then he doesn't believe what Jesus is saying.

Let me illustrate this concept with two ways in which people define this special faith idea.

### A. COMMITMENT

If special faith includes committing oneself to serve Jesus for the rest of one's life, then Jesus was saying, "He who commits to serve Me for the rest of his life has everlasting life." That, of course, is not what Jesus said. That would be justification by works. A person who believes that does not believe the saving message.

### B. PERSEVERANCE IN GOOD WORKS

If special faith includes perseverance in good works till death, then Jesus was saying, "He who perseveres in good works till death has everlasting life." That is not what Jesus said. A person who believes that does not believe the saving message.

My experience has been that many Free Grace people are so gracious that they tend to view people with works-salvation views of saving faith as believers rather than unbelievers. Yet does this really make sense? If someone does not believe that simply by faith in Jesus a person is eternally secure, does he believe the saving message?

Now I will say that since once-faith-always-saved is true, some of those who are proclaiming a false gospel are born again people who have become terribly confused. But they need to be evangelized for two reasons.

First, rarely do we know them well enough to know that in the past they were clear on justification by simple faith alone. Thus in most cases we should be concerned that they are likely unbelievers who need eternal life.

Second, even if they are indeed believers who have fallen away from the truth, they have lost assurance and the only way to get it back is for you to evangelize them. Share the saving message with them.

I could go on and speak on so-called *miracle faith*, *dead faith*, *head faith*, and so on. However, I will resist the temptation for the Bible knows nothing of different types of faith.

Many people are so embarrassed by *sola fide* that they feel the need to dress up faith with good works. By so doing they inadvertently pervert the good news of Jesus Christ.

## VII. CONCLUSION: KEEP THE FAITH

At the end of his life Paul said, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing" (2 Tim 4:7-8).

When Paul said he "kept the faith," he meant that he had remained true to the message the Lord Jesus gave him to proclaim. While that message surely included more than the good news of eternal life, it definitely included the gospel.

Note what Hiebert says about the expression, "I have kept the faith" in his commentary on 2 Timothy:

Here apparently by "the faith" he does not mean merely his own personal faith in Christ but is thinking of the Gospel as the precious deposit that was entrusted to him. Amid the countless dangers encountered from active foes and false

friends he has unflinchingly held to that Gospel and has guarded it against perversion or adulteration. Now he is ready to render account to Him who entrusted it to him.<sup>9</sup>

If we lose our grip on what faith is, then we can't keep the faith. To keep the faith we must remain convinced that all who simply believe in Jesus have everlasting life.

Some say that believing the facts of the gospel is not enough. You must also "trust" Jesus Christ. That is terribly confusing at the least and a departure from the saving message at the worst. Believing the facts is precisely what Jesus preached.

Beware of wrong views of faith. We can't very well keep the faith if we don't know what faith itself is!

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<sup>9</sup> D. Edmond Hiebert, *Second Timothy* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), 111.