

Bible Concepts: What is Faith? VZ January 1993

What is Faith?

The word *faith* in general usage and also in religious language has many meanings. In the Bible also, the content of the word changes depending on the circumstances. Nevertheless, the word *faith* has a special meaning when the question is of Christian, living faith. It is difficult to briefly define what living faith is. The Bible is not a book of definitions, but a book indeed upon whose basis living faith can be described. Most important, however, would be to be in living faith, even though a verbal explanation would be weak.

Man's Relationship to God Is Dependent upon Faith

Faith is a matter by which man's relationship to God is pictured in the Bible. Our relationship to Him can only be a relationship of faith. When faith ends, our connection to God is severed and in its place comes unbelief. No one has ever seen God, for that reason our relationship with Him cannot be based on sight, but faith. When Thomas saw the wounds of Jesus, he believed. Then, Jesus confirmed that they are blessed who do not see, but nonetheless believe (*John 20:29*).

Faith is the Gift of God

Because faith is not based on sight, many think that it is but naïve imagination. If faith was the product of our reason or our other abilities, it would only be a human idea, or conviction, which we could each adopt in our own way. Living faith does not originate from man. It is a gift of God which man cannot take but which God can give. "I believe that I cannot of my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him; but the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel" (*Luther's Small Catechism*).

The people of God preach the gospel on earth in Christ's behalf. They are God's mouth (2 Cor. 5:20). Then the holy Spirit calls men to repentance and gives birth to faith in the hearts of those who hear the gospel (*Augsburg Confession*). Faith comes by hearing (*Rom. 10:17*) and it comes as the gift of God (*Eph. 2:8*).

One Faith

Because faith is the gift of God, it can be one and it can be the same, although we are many and of various kinds. Peter speaks of like precious faith (2 Pet. 1:1), Paul of one faith (*Eph. 4:5*) and Luther of the only true faith (*Small Catechism*). The one, kindred, only true faith can only be the work of God and a wonder in mankind's midst. Otherwise it would remain an incomprehensible phenomena. The mutual unity between the children of God has not been accomplished by consultation. It is the unity of faith which the Holy Spirit has created.

Content of Faith

The people of scripture expressed the substance of their faith briefly and simply: Christ is the Son of the living God (Peter, Martha, Candace's eunuch), or "My Lord and my God" (Thomas). The creeds have expanded the confession of Christ to a confession of the Triune God. Among the central and moving moments in the divine service baptism, and confirmation are those when the congregation together recites the Apostle's Creed. Our church's main confession, the Augsburg Confession, has simply the clearly crystallized the substance of faith: "Faith believes sins are to be Forgiven for Christ's sake."

The Effect of Faith

Faith is not a matter foreign to life. The central objective of present day confirmation school is to help the young see Christian faith as the carrying power for life. Also, Luther teaches in a down-to-earth manner: "Faith is a living, ardent powerful and energetic entity. It is impossible, that it would not unceasingly desire to effect good" (Christian Doctrine 85). Faith releases man to correct life and action, because it "comforts the conscience and frees from fears" (*Augsburg Confession*). Faith and everyday life belong together.

Temporal life is important to faith, but the most important is eternal life. Faith carries now, but at the same time directs our gaze forward, across the border. Living hope goes hand in hand with living faith. "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen (*Heb. 11:1*). By faith we are not always acceptable to men, but by it we are acceptable to God, become justified before Him. It happens alone by faith, alone by grace, alone for the sake of Christ (This is the substance or essential principal of the Reformation).

The Goal of Faith

Faith and a believing person have a clear objective or goal. We live and act purposefully. We are not travelers of a vain hope, but live dependent upon the promises of God now and from here on. This day is the Lord's, tomorrow also. He has helped us this far and will help onward. Our Lord promised to go and prepare us a place and to come and get us to be with Him (John 14:3). Faith in its time will have a fortunate end, the salvation of souls (1 Pet. 1:9). "Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompense of reward? (*Heb. 10:35*)