

# **FAITH AND KNOWLEDGE**

by

**David L. Lipe, Ph.D.**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The topics of faith and knowledge, and their relationship to each other, often present considerable difficulties to serious Bible students. It is the purpose of this paper to discuss a number of matters relating to both faith and knowledge, in an effort to increase our understanding of these two important, and related, concepts.

### **FAITH AND BELIEF**

The relationship of faith to belief is a very complex study and, admittedly, it is not likely that the exact relationship between the two will be settled, to the reader's satisfaction, in a paper as brief as this one. The word "faith" is used in various ways that make it even more difficult to arrive at a clear understanding of it. We must concede that words can have different meanings, and that each of the different meanings may be legitimate. For example, one might say, "It is better to be red than dead." Here, "red" obviously does not refer to a particular color in a scheme of colors, but is intended to convey notions of communism. It would be improper to say that "red" cannot be used in such a way.

The same kind of thing is true with the word "faith." Often people say of some belief that cannot be established as true, "After all, it is just a matter of faith." Again, someone who is uncertain of taking a particular course of action might be advised, "Just launch out on faith." I do not suggest that "faith" cannot be used this way for, obviously it is so used; however, I do contend that such is not a biblical usage of "faith."

The complexity of the matter is even greater when one considers the ambiguity of the notion of "belief." Consider the difference in the meaning of "believe" in the following propositions: "I believe it will rain tomorrow" and "I believe  $2 + 2 = 4$ ." Most would agree that the word "think" could be substituted for "believe" in the first proposition, but few would say "I think  $2 + 2 = 4$ ."

Faith is a kind of belief. There is no distinction in the Greek between faith and belief. Perhaps faith's relationship to belief can be better ascertained by considering the noun "faith" (*pistis*), and the verb "believe" (*pisteuo*). W.E. Vine has defined faith as "primarily firm persuasion, a conviction based upon hearing...used in the New Testament always of faith in God or Christ, or things spiritual" (1940). He defined the word "believe" as "to believe, also to be persuaded of, and hence, to place confidence in, to trust...reliance upon, not mere credence" (1940). Both include elements of reliance and trust.

The definitions do not help a great deal in getting at the distinction between faith and belief. Perhaps we can understand the true significance of faith by attempting to unfold the nature of belief. "Belief" refers primarily to a judgment that something is true. If I say "I believe that all nuclear weapons one day will be destroyed," I am speaking about myself—not the state of the world. I am giving information about my judgment concerning nuclear weapons. The only way in which my judgment might be false is that I am lying—i.e., I do not believe what I say I believe. If I say "All nuclear weapons one day will be destroyed," then I state a belief. But the truth or falsity of my belief in no way depends upon what I believe or disbelieve. Whether the belief is true or false depends upon the course of history.\*

Our beliefs may be weak or strong. Suppose I am asked, "Will it rain tomorrow?" If I say, "I believe it will rain tomorrow," I am emphasizing that I merely believe it will rain since I do not know with certainty that it will. I could have said just as easily, "I think it will rain tomorrow." If it did not rain the next day, I would not be devastated to find that my belief was a false belief. If someone afterward said they relied on my judgment and subsequently cancelled a picnic, I would say, "Don't blame me, I only said I believe it will rain tomorrow." This sort of belief is one in which I merely hold an opinion about something. I hope that it is true and thus believe it to be true, but I cannot prove it—I merely accept it. Belief in this sense has little to do with biblical faith.

Belief in a strong sense refers to a belief for which we are prepared to give good reasons. Thus, I might say, "I believe it will rain tomorrow" and be prepared to give reasons for my belief. Note that the difference in these two types of belief turns on the **causes** of the beliefs. Walter Kaufmann, in *Critique of*

*Religion and Philosophy* (1958, pp. 132-34), listed what he perceived to be the seven causes of belief. A statement may be believed because:

1. Arguments have been offered in its support.
2. It was encountered (in a book, paper, etc.) and nothing was spoken against it.
3. Numerous factors may be working in its behalf. (It may be a common belief in one's environment and hence accepted by "osmosis.")
4. The new belief fits well by our prior beliefs.
5. There may be penalties for not accepting a belief (ostracism, disappointing our parents, torture).
6. There may be positive rewards for accepting a belief.
7. The belief may be accepted because it gratifies us or answers a psychological need.

The first item in the above list is the kind of thing that makes a belief strong, whereas items 2-7 would be "grounds" for considering a belief weak. The weak and strong sense of belief that I have suggested corresponds generally to Frye and Levi's **irrational** and **rational** belief (1941, p. 216). Rational belief is "reasoned belief based upon adequate evidence" (1941, p. 323). Irrational beliefs are: (a) beliefs not produced by a "reason" per se, but instead by some non-rational cause such as emotion, prejudice, vested interest, authority, habit, and the tendency to accept what one has been told; and (b) beliefs that are produced by inadequate or insufficient reasons.

Biblical faith shares the basic element of strong (rational) belief in that one is prepared to give reasons for his faith. 1 Peter 3:15 makes it clear that biblical faith must be based on good reasoning. Biblical faith, however, includes more than just being prepared to give reasons. Faith includes the notion of **trust**, which evidences itself in **acting upon** that which we believe. Faith requires belief (in the sense of intellectual assent); thus faith could include weak belief (where mere intellectual assent is offered) and strong belief (where one is prepared to give reasons for his intellectual assent). Yet faith is more than this. Samuel Thompson wrote:

The distinctive feature of faith, in contrast with mere belief, is the element in it of will to action. Belief is an act of the intellect, and faith has been described as "an act of the intellect commanded by the will." But faith is more than an act of the intellect, and the will does more than command. Faith is not merely the as-

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\* See Samuel Thompson's, *A Modern Philosophy of Religion*, 1955, p. 44 for this kind of reasoning.

sent that something is true, it is our readiness to act on what we believe true. Faith is will lured by value into action. Faith is decision (1955, p. 74).

Faith, then, includes what might be referred to as a “belief that,” but it also includes action (putting trust in or believing in).

We should not conclude from this that the concept of trust may be substituted in **every** case for the concept of belief. In many cases such a substitution may be made. Thus, when Jesus said in Mark 5:36, “Be not afraid, only believe,” we could say “Be not afraid, only have faith,” or “Be not afraid, only trust.” Again, when Jesus said in Mark 11:22, “Have faith in God,” we could say “Believe in God,” or “Trust in God.” Some occurrences of belief will not allow such a substitution. In John 12:42-43, many of the chief rulers believed on Jesus but because they loved the praise of men and did not want to be put out of the synagogue they did not confess Him. These chief rulers had belief (an act of the intellect), but we would not say they had a biblical faith since they were unwilling to act on what they believed. Thus, we would not say they trusted in Jesus (cf. James 2:18-19).

The clearest example of both elements of faith in the same context is Hebrews 11. Verse 6 says, “he that cometh to God must **believe that** he is...” (emp. added). Beginning with verse 7, the writer observed that a number of notable Old Testament characters trusted in that about which they believed. They acted on their belief. Note the words indicating action—e.g., “prepared” (vs. 7) and “obeyed” (vs. 8).

### **FAITH AND EVIDENCE**

It is false to say that faith means the absence of evidence. God does not want us to accept anything as true for which there is not sufficient evidence. This claim is disputed by Christian and non-Christian alike. Some have suggested that if a claim rests on sufficient evidence, then such a claim is a matter of knowledge, while faith has to do with considerations lacking evidence of their claim. According to this, knowledge begins where evidence begins, and ends where evidence ends. Faith begins after the evidence ends. Thus, if one wishes to hold to doctrine X, and the evidence is such that the doctrine may or may not be true, one may take a “leap of faith” (i.e., a leap beyond the evidence) and espouse doctrine X even though

there is not sufficient evidence for the doctrine. Richard Robinson, an atheistic thinker, charged that the above picture of faith is representative of Christian faith. According to him, such faith is

...believing that there is a god no matter what the evidence on the question may be. "Have faith," in the Christian sense, means "make yourself believe that there is a god without regard to evidence." Christian faith is a habit of flouting reason in forming and maintaining one's answer to the question whether there is a god (1964, p. 121).

This may be the view of faith for some, but it is not biblical faith. Biblical faith is a reasonable faith. Nothing in the Bible teaches that faith is unreasonable. On the contrary, everything concerning faith is reasonable. Thus, if biblical faith is to be reasonable, one must recognize the Law of Rationality, which demands that we draw only such conclusions as are warranted by adequate evidence. Bertrand Russell stated it this way: "Give to any hypothesis that is worth your while to consider just that degree of confidence which the evidence warrants" (1945, p. 816).

By "evidence" I mean a statement (or statements) used in an effort to support the view that a given conclusion is true. Thompson wrote: "By evidence we mean what the term literally suggests, that which 'shows' or 'exhibits' or 'brings into view.' The evidence shows or brings into view the basis upon which the claim of truth rests" (1955, p. 44). On the same page, Thompson further pointed out that evidence includes statements which imply the statement(s) in question: If a conclusion is implied by a statement, and this statement is true, then the implied statement also must be true. Evidence may be said to be "adequate when it is as good or convincing as it can be, when further investigation into the truth of the proposition in question is pointless" (Davis, 1978, p. 19).

The Bible (a body of factual information about God and His will for man) constitutes adequate evidence. Since God cannot lie, the integrity of the Scriptures cannot be disputed successfully. Faith comes after knowledge of the Word of God (Romans 10:17). Thus, faith is based on evidence. Nowhere in the Scriptures is anyone called upon to have faith without evidence. John said that the signs in his Gospel were in order "that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name" (John 20:30-31). Furthermore, John wrote: "These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye

may believe on the name of the Son of God” (1 John 5:13). In the first recorded sermon following the resurrection of Christ (Acts 2:22-40), Peter appealed to four kinds of evidence: (1) miracles (22); (2) prophecy (25-28); (3) the resurrection (27-32); and (4) the events of the day (33). Peter continued by saying, “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36).

Our supreme example, Jesus, documented the necessity of gathering evidence. In every instance, He met the temptations of the devil with an “it is written.” The second temptation is particularly interesting. Satan quoted Psalm 91:11 in challenging Jesus to throw Himself from the pinnacle of the temple. Jesus responded by quoting Deuteronomy 6:16, thus emphasizing that the totality of biblical teaching on a particular subject should be considered.

If biblical faith is to be reasonable, one not only must gather the evidence on a particular question, but must handle that evidence correctly. To be rational is to draw only warranted conclusions, which means that we must use principles of valid reasoning. To do otherwise is to espouse the view that biblical faith may “out run” the evidence, which is to say that faith is a “leap into the dark.” This is a false view of the Christian faith. Examine and study carefully 1 Peter 3:15, 1 Thessalonians 5:21, and 1 John 4:1.

Someone might object that there are occasions when Jesus appealed to people to believe without sufficient evidence. Jesus said to one disciple in John 20:29: “Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.” The claim could be made that Jesus is pronouncing a blessing on those who believe without evidence since “seeing” is a means by which to gather evidence; yet, in the passage Jesus commended those who believe without seeing. Though Jesus commended people for believing without seeing, it does not follow that He commended people for believing without sufficient evidence. Thomas should have had reason enough to believe the resurrection of Jesus from the dead based on Christ’s own statements and the testimony of the rest of the apostles; however, he would not believe without seeing firsthand (John 20:25). The Samaritans believed (without hearing or seeing for themselves) because of the evidence of the Samaritan woman’s testimony (John 4:39).

After hearing Jesus firsthand, they believed, not because of the woman's testimony, but because they heard Him with their own ears.

### FAITH AND DOUBT

It is false to say that doubt is an integral part of the nature of faith. Much evidence in the Bible attests to the false nature of such a claim. Paul noted in Romans 14:23: "And he that doubteth (*diakrinomenos*) is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin." Further, James wrote: "But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering (*diakrinomenos*). For he that wavereth (*diakrinomenos*) is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed" (1:6). The RSV makes the matter even clearer: "But let him ask in faith with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind." Concerning Abraham's faith, Paul stated: "He staggered (*diekrithe*) not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform" (Romans 4:20-21). The word "staggered" is from the same root word as that expressed by the KJV's "wavereth" (James 1:6) or the RSV's "doubting." Further evidence that Abraham's faith was not one of doubt is seen in the expression "being fully persuaded" (from *plerophoretheis*, which describes the reason for his trust in God). Abraham was fully convinced, (i.e., certain) that God would do what He had promised.

Someone might object that Abraham's faith contained an element of doubt (based on Hebrews 11:8 where it is said of Abraham, "By faith, Abraham...went out, **not knowing** [emp. added] whither he went"). That Abraham was not "fully persuaded" as to his destination in no way argues against Abraham's faith. It is consistent to say that Abraham's faith contained no element of doubt insofar as he was **convinced** that God would keep His promise, although he did not know other things—namely, where God intended him to go. Obviously, since Abraham did not know where he was going, he had doubt as to **where** he was going; however, concerning **what** God would do, Abraham's faith was unshakable. He believed God and acted on what God said.

It is important to note that there is nothing wrong with one raising doubts about his faith. Thompson observed that "doubt does not destroy faith; doubt tests faith.... Faith has its own response to doubt, for



doubt is the occasion for faith to examine itself and its cause” (1955, p. 78). Sometimes we find that our faith is unfounded. For example, a child may be taught by his parents that baptism is essential to salvation. The child **believes** what the parents say and perhaps **acts** on the parents’ teaching. Only later does the child (now older) begin to question his belief and the action that followed. There is nothing improper about this, since it is the case that human testimony many times can be called into question. Thus, the young adult begins to raise questions about a certain belief and action. He discovers that what he has been taught is in harmony with the Word of God and thus he still has the right to hold onto his faith. After this doubting process, he can be **certain** of his faith since that faith now is not based merely on the testimony of his parents but on certain propositions from the Word of God. Since God exists and is perfect in integrity, then the Word of God must be true. Thus, any faith based upon the Word of God must be true and reliable and no longer a matter of doubt.

This concept of biblical faith is the antithesis of the teachings of some who hold that faith is just a step removed from certainty—i.e., that faith involves a kind of “leap” into the uncertain. Such a concept can be avoided if we will keep in mind that faith must be preceded by knowledge. Admittedly this is not a popular view in contemporary society. Francis Schaeffer noted: “Knowledge precedes faith, this is crucial in understanding the Bible. To say, as a Christian should, that only faith which believes God on the basis of knowledge is true faith, is to say something which causes an explosion in the Twentieth Century world” (1968, p. 142).

### **FAITH AND TESTIMONY**

Faith may be based on the testimony of others. Although some have failed to recognize this fact, the Bible teaches that one may have faith (and knowledge) based on the testimony of another. It simply is not the case that one cannot be sure of something unless one experiences it firsthand. Thomas Paine, in *The Age of Reason*, wrote that something revealed to one person and “revealed to any other person is a revelation to that person only.” That which is revealed ceases to be a revelation when it is told to other individuals, and thus others are not under obligation to believe it. A careful study of the Bible shows that this is not the case.

After the Lord appeared to Mary Magdalene, she related her experience to the others who had been with the Lord, but they “believed not” (Mark 16:9-11). Later the Lord appeared to two of the disciples and they then told the rest, but “neither believed they them” (Mark 16:12-13). When the Lord appeared later to the eleven He, “upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen him after he was risen” (Mark 16:14).

Thus, Jesus rejected the view that one can know only what one witnesses personally and established as a general principle that knowledge can be attained based on credible testimony. This raises the issue as to when testimony is credible. Obviously, there is such a thing as false testimony. Any belief based on false testimony would necessarily be a false belief, and in no way can such a belief be likened to biblical faith. As surely as God cannot lie (1 Samuel 15:29; Hebrews 6:18), and as surely as God has spoken through holy men of God (2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:20-21), then we can accept the testimony of the Bible as unfaltering. If we can do this, then we can both believe and know the truth.

### **FAITH AND KNOWLEDGE**

Men have long taken sides on the issue of faith and knowledge. This is inevitable as long as they are set in contrast to one another. Tertullian made this bifurcation clear when he asked, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” Philosophy for him was antagonistic to Christianity. Augustine and Anselm followed this tradition in their plea to believe in order to understand. Faith in this sense was regarded as the initial (and perhaps only) way of arriving at truth. Interestingly enough, in the Islamic religion, reason reigned supreme. Avicenna and Averroes, in the Middle Ages, insisted that reason led to absolute truth and that faith was but a shortcut for the mentally inept. Aquinas attempted a kind of harmony between these extremes by arguing that faith and knowledge are both avenues to truth; however, he contended that the same truth could not be both believed and known via natural reason by the same person at the same time. Thus, even in Aquinas’ thinking there was a gap between faith and knowledge. The Thomist does not wish to believe what he can know and does not pretend to know what can only be believed.

Efforts to take sides with faith or knowledge still (and likely will) continue—with unfortunate consequences. Thompson observed:

Those who align themselves with knowledge, in opposition to faith, are inclined to assume that when faith comes in conflict with what they themselves take to be knowledge, the error lies with claims of faith. Those who side with faith, in opposition to knowledge, tend to regard as spurious any claim of knowledge which does not fit their own scheme of faith (1955, pp. 76-77).

The problem with all attempts to set faith and knowledge in contrast stems from a failure to understand proper biblical teaching. The Bible teaches that faith and knowledge are complementary and wherever they appear to be antagonistic, something is wrong either with what is taken to be as faith, or with what is alleged to be knowledge, or with both. This is the case because both are concerned with **truth** (though not in the same way), and truth is absolute in its self-consistency. If knowledge and faith are not to be separated, it must be because they are relevant in some way. The intellect (knowledge) and will (faith) are complementary. Knowledge without faith leads to speculation.\*

The Bible clearly teaches in different ways that faith and knowledge are not to be set in contradistinction. (1) Faith and knowledge never are contrasted in the New Testament. Faith is contrasted with sight—not knowledge or reason. In Hebrews 11:1 we read: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Further, Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:7: “For we walk by faith, not by sight.” These verses make it clear that faith is set in contrast to “walking by sight.” Sight is a type of sense perception, and therefore a means of attaining knowledge. Thus, faith, instead of being contrasted with knowledge, is contrasted with a means of attaining knowledge. This does not mean faith and sight cannot function together. Jesus said: “Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast **believed**” (John 20:29). Thomas’ faith was based on the evidence of his senses—namely, his sense of sight. Again, Jesus said to Thomas: “Blessed are they that have **not seen**, and yet have **believed**” (John 20:29, emp. added). This shows that there can be faith where there is no sight, but note that the verse does not say there can be faith where there is no knowledge.

Some believed in Jesus not because they saw Him but because of other evidence. A case in point is the Samaritans who “believed on him for the saying of the woman, which testified, he told me all that ever I did” (John 4:39). The Samaritan woman believed because she saw Jesus herself and thus she would

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\* see Thompson, 1955, pp. 76-79 for further remarks on this.

fall into the same category as Thomas (who believed based on his sight). However, the Samaritans believed based on the testimony of the woman and thus would fall into the category of those who believed and yet who had not seen. These Samaritans, along with “many more,” after believing based on the woman’s testimony, “believed because of his own word; and said unto the woman, Now we believe, not because of thy saying: for we have heard him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world” (John 4:41-42).

These examples show that walking by faith and walking by sight are two different things. One may believe and know things that cannot be seen, as did the Samaritans who believed at first without seeing. Their belief was based on personal testimony. Walking by sight means accepting only those truths that can be seen or demonstrated (perhaps even by some other sense). It is, in short, to be guided by that which can be seen directly. There are many things that may be known which are not seen directly, e.g. the existence of God (Romans 1:20-21). Further, I may know and believe Noah built an ark, that Jonah was swallowed by a great fish, etc., even though I never have “seen” any of these events. But, since faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God (Romans 10:17), I can walk by faith—i.e., take God at His word and believe what the Scriptures teach.

- (2) Faith and knowledge may have the same object. Consider, for example, the following:
  - (a) God can be both known and believed. “Ye are my witnesses, saith the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen: that ye may know and believe me, and understand that I am he: before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me” (Isaiah 43:10).
  - (b) The truth can be both known and believed. “Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth” (1 Timothy 4:3).
  - (c) The deity of Christ can be both known and believed. “And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living (John 6:69; cf. 4:42).
  - (d) Jesus said one could know and believe the same thing. “But if I do, though ye believe not me, believe the works: that ye may know, and believe that the Father is in me, and I in him” (John 10:38).
  - (e) Paul said, “I know whom I have believed” (2 Timothy 1:12).

(3) Knowledge precedes faith. Faith never precedes knowledge but instead is a commitment to knowledge. According to Romans 10:17, faith comes after men have a knowledge of the Word of God. For biblical faith, where there is no word, there can be no faith. Where there is no evidence, there can be no faith.

The Bereans were more noble than the Thessalonians in that they: (a) received the word with readiness of mind; and (b) searched the Scriptures daily to determine whether what was being taught was, in fact, the case (Acts 17:11). The result of their attitude and action was belief (Acts 17:12). Note that they believed only after they had knowledge of the Word of God. The Jews on Pentecost believed they had killed the very Messiah for whom they looked, and knew they were guilty of such actions based on “knowing assuredly” that Jesus was both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:22-36).

Someone might object that the view of faith and knowledge I have presented is erroneous, since to maintain that if S knows P, S must have justified true belief of P. Thus, if S knows P, S believes P but it does not follow necessarily that if S believes P, S knows P. Most philosophers, including myself, would accept this view of knowledge. Does this not then contradict the view I have outlined—that knowledge precedes faith?

The issue turns on the difference in “belief” and “faith” as discussed earlier. To hold a belief means to give assent to the truthfulness of some proposition that may, in fact, be false; thus, some beliefs do not amount to knowledge. However, to have faith means not only to have a “belief” in the sense of a “belief that” (which must be true), but also in the sense of a “belief in” (which is trust). As far as biblical faith is concerned, this can only be had based upon the testimony of the Word of God. Where there is no testimony, there can be no faith. One can walk by faith only when one knows the Word of God. If one can **know** that God exists, that He is perfect in integrity, that the Bible is the Word of God, and that the Bible teaches a particular truth, then one can know that truth. Knowing this, one can give himself over to that truth—i.e., trust one’s life to that truth. This is to say, he can walk by faith and live a life of taking God at His word.

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