

Rethinking Faith

By Bob Young

A frequent tendency in my “camp” is to believe that everything can be put into words and explained. The result has too often been an understanding of faith that focuses on the external, mental development without the corresponding heart-trust. Traditional thinking about God’s message, God’s influence on human hearts, and God’s ability and desire to reveal himself distorts the nature of faith. Understanding faith as primarily or only a mental reality leads to misunderstandings and a false dichotomy.

What happens when faith becomes mere mental assent to certain facts, even gospel facts? Biblical faith has also an element of trust and personal reliance. When Jesus commended people for their faith, there was often little evidence available but he saw in them supreme confidence and trust. He spoke of some who would believe without seeing firsthand (John 20:24-28). No doubt there is a mental dimension to faith which includes knowledge, but knowledge alone means nothing without a trust connection.

Consider an illustration. Faith is why I “hook up” to a power source to solve a problem. I have confidence in a bulldozer to extract a heavy truck from the mud. But while affirming confidence in the bulldozer’s power, I look around at the heavy muck and wonder if even a powerful bulldozer may be insufficient. The measure of my trust-confidence is whether I hook up and try. Why do I reject other possibilities? What do I believe? How can the job be done? Do I believe in an auto, a pickup, a heavy-duty pickup, a tow truck, a bulldozer—in every case, my trust is measured by whether I “hook up.”

Paul said the gospel does not come in words only, but in the power of the Spirit. A gospel that comes in words only is not the true gospel. Two cautions are necessary. My fellowship has too frequently collapsed the Spirit into the Word—right forms but without power. The opposite extreme too often collapses the Word into the Spirit, seeking power but indifferent to the revealed Word and will of God.

The first century context of faith was quite different than ours. We struggle to read the Bible through first-century eyes. Most people describe faith in God as believing that God exists. Such is a thoroughly modern concept. Atheism was not the primary problem in the first century. The major problem was not whether God existed or not, but rather what kind of God is the God of Scripture.

New Testament writers give the word distinct nuances, but faith is ultimately trusting participation in the life of God and in life with God. Faith is ultimately about relationship. As in the marriage relationship, lack of faith is evident in second-guessing or mistrusting the actions and decisions of the partner. Part of having the “faith of Christ” (Rom 3:21-26) is having the same relationship that Jesus had with the Father, which is by definition what faith is ultimately about. Faith requires mutuality, reciprocity. Is our mutuality with God only mental agreement, only that we agree on certain truths? God is spirit; is there any sense in which we can claim a spiritual identity as well as mental agreement? Having the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5) obviously encompasses attitude as well as truth.

An artificial dichotomy that arises from this limited understanding of faith is that faith can be separated from obedience. This subverts the idea of faith as right (faithful) relationship with another, based on the nature and desires of the other. Faithfulness always includes

obedience, and faith cannot be isolated as one of several steps. (My personal illustration through the years is that our response to God's work of salvation is much more like an escalator than stairs or steps; faith is what gets us on the escalator.) Having made the decision to step on the escalator (which requires faith and trust), one cannot escape what follows (faithful confession, obedience, and changed living).

My faith is not happy and fulfilled because I know, understand, or accept all of the facts, but because I rest in the heart of another. Such is my marriage; such is my God-relationship. Notice what happens when faith begins with God and not with facts. Note the contrast between faith seeking understanding and understanding seeking faith. When I read the Bible, I find a world of thought, action, history that seems irrational. How does one become first by being last? How does one become great through serving? Why is divine royalty born in a manger? How is death the road to glorification? How can service to others and self-sacrifice be the path to exaltation? These concepts are irrational, but when one accepts them on the basis of faith, because of relationship with and trust in God, a certain way of reasoning or understanding develops. Before faith, our rational side says these things are indisputably false. After faith, spiritual or divine reason is developed in us and these things make sense from the spiritual perspective. Thus reason follows faith, faith seeks understanding, and faith is primary.

In summary, there are two ways of looking at faith. The first rests on one's ability to analyze Scripture and understand it as a source of faith and relationship with God. The second accepts the words of Scripture because of faith in who God is and follows them into relationship with God, even when one does not completely understand by human reasoning. This second concept of faith seeks to enter the world of the biblical narrative, to see the world through God's eyes as the apostles saw it, to experience divine presence, to be transformed, and to know Christ's resurrection.