

What Do You Mean by Faith?

We say that we are justified before God and saved by faith, or through faith. Many people seem to have wrong notions about what faith is, and as a result are in doubt or despair.

The Scriptures tell us that a person is not justified by the works of the Law but by faith (R 3:28). Consequently, the faith through which people are justified and saved is not a work. Admittedly, sometimes the scriptural word for faith (*pistis*) means “trustworthiness (G 5:22). Although this trustworthiness is a good work, it is not the faith that justifies. Justification and salvation are not of ourselves (E 2:8-9).

One of the greatest fallacies today is the teaching that faith is deciding or accepting. However, the scriptural teaching about original sin disallows this. By nature no sinful human being can have faith in God or do or think anything pleasing to God (1 C 2:14). Hereditary sin brings God’s condemnation. Faith is receiving God’s gift. The scriptural word for “receive” should not be understood as “decide” or “accept.” The sad rejection of infant baptism owes a good deal to this fallacy. The Holy Spirit works faith in people who have no natural power to accept anything. A person who accepts thinks about what he does. Faith is entirely the work of God. Beggars are in no position in their need to pick and choose. Jesus said that the kingdom of God belongs to the poor in spirit (Mt 5:3). He said that unless a person became like an infant he could not enter the kingdom of God (L 18:15-17). Infants do not decide to be baptized. They often do not accept the idea. When infants are changed and fed they have earned nothing through their actions or decisions. They are purely receivers. Jesus affirmed that little ones can believe in Him (Mt 18:6). Faith is also not linked to renewal of life as a condition, because the person whom God justifies through faith is ungodly (R 4:5).

Some synonyms for to believe are to trust, or to hope (E 1:12), to have confidence (Ph 1:6), and to know (J 17:3). However, even these can be misunderstood. People who trust, or have confidence in themselves, their own righteousness, their money, their physical strength, or their quick wits, do not have saving faith. All these fail at death and no one can stand with courage before the judgment by relying on such trust. Knowing that is equivalent to faith is not mere knowledge of facts. Even evil spirits know about God.

Jesus sometimes said, “Your faith is great”, and sometimes we hear the expression “true faith.” These are misleading if they encourage people to look within themselves for a characteristic that could qualify as strong faith or true faith. Such internal searches lead to despair. Since God does not snuff out the smoking flax, even the smallest spark of faith justifies before God, because justifying faith is reception of God’s gracious benefits in Christ.

The Scriptures also mention faith among charismatic gifts. This is not saving faith either. Faith that moves mountains is absolute trust in God’s power and provision. Some Christians have such charismatic faith and some do not (1 C 12:9). This faith moves mountains even if it is as small as a mustard seed (Mt 17:20). We see it in a missionary who leaves to work elsewhere without a return ticket, financial resources, or provisions, trusting that God will provide.

Many people mistake faith for trust in the goodness of God, who sends temporal blessings, like good weather or recovery from sickness. That is not saving faith, though it is often related to it. It is similar with many people who say they believe that there is a God, but do not rely on the obedience of His Son for them. Of course God is good, but faith in God’s giving of earthly blessings does not necessarily receive God’s gift of eternal life.

In a series of passages we find the literal expression “the faith of Christ” (R 3:22). This does not mean Jesus Christ’s personal faith. It is true that Jesus Christ’s dependence is the supreme example of trust in the Father, as the First Commandment requires. He is the greatest pattern of confidence that glory will come after suffering. His trust in God is included in His active obedience, which God reckons to us through faith. When Jesus says, literally, “Have faith of God” (Mk 11:23), He does not mean “Have God’s faith”, but “Have faith in God.”

This last passage tells us that faith must have the right object. We must not look inside ourselves for faith, but at Jesus Christ, in whom we believe. Saving faith is trust in Jesus Christ, in His blood (R 3:25), and in the righteousness of God, which God reckons to sinners for His sake. Saving faith justifies because of its object. To be justified and saved people look away from themselves, their sin and death, to God’s salvation, which comes from outside themselves. They look in faith away from themselves at God’s Son, as the Israelites who had been bitten by fiery snakes and knew death was close at hand looked at the strange remedy, the brass snake on a pole, which God told Moses to set up (J 3:14-15).

Genesis 15:6 says: “Abram believed the LORD, and He credited it to him as righteousness.” Is it satisfactory to say, by way of comment on this, that “God graciously responds to a man’s faith by crediting righteousness to him” (*Concordia Study Bible*)? This is loose language. We can say that God responds in wrath to wickedness. However,

there is nothing in man that moves God to be merciful. This is a backdoor way of returning to trust in oneself. It is God's nature to be gracious and merciful (Ex 34:6-7). The Holy Spirit works faith in man through the message about God's grace in Jesus Christ.

Is it appropriate to say that God justifies "on the basis of faith" instead of "by faith" or "through faith"? For example, the *Good News Bible* has, at Ph 3:9: "the righteousness that comes from God and is based on faith." Yes, the Greek has *epi*, which often means "on". However, since faith is purely reception, and since a basis is a foundation on which things can be built, this can be misunderstood. Paul simply means that righteousness comes by the principle of faith, not by the principle of works. A beggar is not fed and clothed on the basis of his reception of food and clothes. A sinner has no basis in himself to enable him to please God. We must beware of any suggestion that a recipient deserves something because he has contributed something. Paul asked the rhetorical question "Who has first given God something that He should pay him back?" (R 11:35). God's grace has no conditions. You might tell someone, "I will give you a meal if you cut up this pile of wood first." There "if" is a real condition to meet. If the Gospel has any "if", it is an invitation, not a condition: "I will give you a meal, if you will sit down and eat it!"

God does not justify sinners because He finds an admirable quality in them, which has merit before Him. Faith justifies because it receives and clings to the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the sinner's behalf. We say that human beings are purely passive when the Holy Spirit, who works faith where and when it pleases God in those who hear the Gospel, they are even worse than stones or block of wood, because unregenerate human beings resist the working of the Spirit of God. However, faith is active and clinging. A believer clings to Christ. In his Preface to the Epistle of Paul to the Romans (1546, AE 35, 370), Luther wrote:

"Faith is not the human notion and dream that some people call faith. When they see that no improvement of life and no good works follow — although they can hear and say much about faith — they fall into the error of saying, "Faith is not enough; one must do works in order to be righteous and be saved." This is due to the fact that, when they hear the Gospel, they get busy and by their own powers create an idea in their heart that says, "I believe", they take this then to be a true faith. But, as it is a human figment and idea that never reaches the depths of the heart, nothing comes of it either, and no improvement follows.

"Faith, however, is a divine work in us, which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God (J 1:12-13). It kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different men, in heart, spirit, mind, and powers; and it brings with it the Holy Spirit. O it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith! It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but, before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them. Whoever does not do such works, however, is an unbeliever. He gropes and looks around for faith and good works, but knows neither what faith is nor what good works are. Yet he talks and talks, with many words, about faith and good works.

"Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times. This knowledge of God's grace and confidence in it makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and with all creatures."