

What is Faith?



Basics of
the Faith

S E R I E S

Guy M. Richard

What Is Faith?

Basics of the Faith

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■ What Is Faith?

What are we to say in response to this? Well, in the first place, although it is true that Jesus does advocate a *childlike* faith, he never advocates a *childish* faith. This is precisely where many Christians get confused. When Jesus states that we must have a childlike faith in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, he means that our faith must be implicitly accepting and trusting—just like a child’s. He does not mean that our faith is to be on the intellectual level of a child. This is clear in the many passages of the Bible that advocate maturity in the Christian life and that command us to grow up in our faith (e.g., Heb. 5:11–6:1; Eph. 4:13–16; 1 Cor. 14:20; and 2 Peter 3:18). Faith is certainly to be child-like, but it is never to be childish.

In the second place, the Bible repeatedly emphasizes the importance of doctrine for Christian faith. We see this in passages such as Matthew 22:37 and Romans 12:2, both of which lay stress on the centrality of the mind. But we especially see it in the overwhelming number of passages that speak of the importance of teaching and of sound teaching in particular—e.g., Deuteronomy 4:1; 6:7; 32:44–47; Psalms 25:4–5, 8–9; 119:12, 26, 33, 68; Jeremiah 32:33; Matthew 28:18–20; Acts 2:42; 1 Timothy 1:3–7; 3:2; 4:11–16; 5:17; 6:2–3; Titus 1:9; 2:1; Hebrews 5:11–14.⁵

Two of the passages mentioned above are worth examining in detail. The first, Matthew 28:18–20, is the so-called Great Commission, in which Jesus commands his disciples to go out into the world and make disciples of all nations. The significant thing about this passage is the emphasis that Jesus places on teaching or doctrine in the process of making disciples. It is not by helping others to feel close to God, or by provoking them to take a blind leap in the dark, that Jesus’ followers are to make disciples, but by *teaching* them. Doctrine is not irrelevant, for Jesus. Rather, it is

the primary means by which men and women will become his followers. To be sure, it can devolve into discussions and arguments about abstruse things. But, in these cases, we need to ensure that we differentiate between doctrine, which is revealed in Scripture either explicitly or by “good and necessary consequence,” and opinion, which is not.⁶ It may be fun to sit around and argue about the number of angels that can dance on the head of a pin, but in the end we need to remember that Scripture is silent on that matter. And if Scripture is silent, we should be too. According to Jesus, doctrine is not speculative; it is wholly practical and relevant, and it is of primary importance for all who follow him.

The second passage, Acts 2:42, is equally well known and equally significant for its emphasis on teaching. In this passage we are presented with the first glimpse of the post-Pentecost Christian church. The first distinguishing characteristic that we see is not its music or its experiential worship or even its commitment to the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit, but its devotion to the apostles’ teaching. This first-order devotion to teaching, however, should not surprise us. We should expect that a church that was established by teaching—à la Matthew 28—would continue to be devoted to that teaching. This is precisely what we do find in Acts 2:42. It would be surprising if it were any other way.

The Bible never advocates a childish faith. Doctrine matters to Jesus and to his followers. We cannot say, “I don’t want doctrine; I just want Jesus,” because we cannot have Jesus without doctrine. For one thing, how do we know which Jesus it is that we want? There have been thousands of people on earth named Jesus. (There still are quite a few—check any of the team rosters in Major League Baseball!) Which

Jesus is it that we want? Answering that question requires doctrine.

For another thing, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Christian Scientists, Unitarians, and liberals all believe in Jesus. But they do not believe in the same Jesus that Christians believe in. They do not believe in the Jesus of the Bible. Christian faith must of necessity contain an intellectual aspect. Without it, there is nothing to distinguish the Christian faith from the faith of Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Christian Scientists, Unitarians, and Liberals, on the one hand, or from a sugar high or an adrenaline rush, on the other. Doctrine is not only relevant to the Christian life, it is indispensable. We cannot have Jesus without it. Faith without doctrine is not faith at all but merely a "blind guessing,"⁷ as Rutherford says, or a "pious ignorance," as Calvin says. Reformed Christianity has always maintained that genuine faith must, in the first place, involve the knowledge of certain necessary doctrines or facts.⁸

FAITH IS RELATIONAL

Reformed Christianity, however, has also maintained that genuine faith must involve more than just the knowledge of certain doctrines or facts. Faith cannot merely be intellectual. Simply knowing things *about* God is inadequate. Even the demons have this kind of faith (James 2:18–19). Christian faith involves knowing God in relationship. Listen to what the magisterial Reformer Martin Luther said on this point:

Thus Peter explains it, and correctly so: "Grow in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18). . . . This knowledge is faith itself, not only a his-

torical faith, which the devil also has and with which he confesses God as the heretics do, too. It is rather a knowledge which rests on experience, and faith. This word “knowing” means as much as: “Adam knew his wife” (Gen. 4:1), that is, he “knew” her by the sense of feeling, he found her to be his wife, not in a speculative or historical way but by experience.⁹

Knowledge is faith for Luther, as it was for Calvin and Rutherford, and it involves more than simply comprehending certain important facts. It involves an intimate relationship, similar to that of a husband and wife.

The Bible frequently uses the word “knowledge” in this way to refer to an intimate relationship. Perhaps the best-known example of this is found in Jesus’ words to his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 7:22–23):

On that day many will say to me, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?” And then will I declare to them, “I never knew [*ginōskō* in the original Greek] you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.”¹⁰

Now, obviously, Jesus did know certain *facts* about these people. He knew enough, for instance, to know that they were “workers of lawlessness.” What is more, by way of his omniscience, he knew them better than they knew themselves. Why, then, would Jesus say that he never knew them? Jesus is using the word “know” to mean more than “knowing about”; he is using it to refer to a relationship. Jesus knows them, but he does not have a relationship with them.

“We live in a day when feelings have been pushed onto center stage while doctrine has been either demonized or, at best, relegated to some dusty corner. Guy Richard is out to change that and has done us a great service in lifting up one of the premier Bible words of all time—*faith*. In this short work he drills down into not only what faith really means, but also what it looks like in a life well lived. This booklet will strengthen the substance and foundation of your faith.”

■ **Brad Bigney**, Grace Fellowship Church

The Bible teaches us that Christians are those who believe in Christ. But what does true saving faith look like? Is it a blind leap in the dark? Is it knowing about God? Does it translate into something that those around us can see? How much faith is enough?

Here Christian faith is examined from biblical, theological, and historical perspectives. Its aspects of intellect, relationship, trust, works, and maturity are explored to answer these questions and to show us what faith truly is.

Basics of the Faith booklets introduce readers to basic Reformed doctrine and practice. On issues of church government and practice they reflect that framework—otherwise they are suitable for all church situations.

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