

The Gospel According To Paul: Romans

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Treatise on Faith (4:1-25)

An Excursus on Faith

Thus far we have seen the concept of “faith,” as well as the terms *pistis* (faith and belief), and the verb *pisteuo* (believing) by which this concept is expressed, taking on more frequency in occurrence (over 13 occurrences, with 8 of them in chapter 3). It is critical to a full understanding and appreciation of what Paul is trying to communicate with this concept that we diverge here with an excursus on the meaning of this concept in both Hebrew and Greek through, as would have be the way Paul would have used the terms in his letters. Paul is about to enter into a treatise on faith and its role in the salvation of man. In the previous chapter he has introduced the concept that a righteousness from God has appeared which comes through faith rather than works of law (3:21-22), that belief in the redemptive effects of Jesus’ death and resurrection is the means of receiving this righteousness (3:24-26), and that this concept is rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures themselves (3:27-31). Then, in chapter 4, he introduces Abraham and his faith in God as the precedent for this concept. With the significance given to the role of faith in Paul’s line of reasoning, it become evident that a full and proper understanding of the meaning of the terms used world be essential.

The Biblical Meaning of Faith

In the world where Paul’s terms originated, a world much different

than ours, words such as faith, belief, disbelief, and doubt, meant something different than they mean in our world. In the first century Mediterranean world, religious belief was as common as the air. Everything that happened was believed to be the result of the will and activity of their gods and goddesses.

Our world has secularized everything. Even our religious terms or expressions have been secularized. “Oh God!” means little more than “Uh Oh!” “Damn you!” only means that someone is upset with you. The word “belief,” in the Hellenistic culture of the first century AD was a word which meant knowledge carried to a higher level. In our culture belief has come to mean almost the opposite of knowledge. Knowledge is understood as something of which you are sure and certain, where belief is something about which you are not certain, or something characterized by doubt. This is a 180 degree turn from the meaning of the term as used in the world of Paul the Apostle of Christ.

In biblical literature, believing is a step beyond knowing. It is taking something about which you have knowledge to a level of emotional commitment and consequent action. This is an understanding of belief far different than the meaning assigned to it in our culture and time, whether speaking secularly or religiously. The terms with which we are concerned, the biblical terms, have had such a variety of interpretations attached to them in their journey from the first century to the present that it is almost impossible to understand them in the sense that they were originally used in the text of Scripture.

To one person belief is simply, “mental assent.” “I believe” is the equivalent of “I agree with that,” with nothing more expected, it is a mental agreement one has with someone else. To another person belief is, “something one feels,” an emotional sensation one has about something. We hear the expression, “I believe with all my heart,” with the intent that such emotion makes what is believed true no matter what. To another person belief is something totally devoid of action. “You don’t have to do anything, only believe,” we are told, as though acting on what one believes would nullify the belief. Then there is the concept of faith as, “a mystery.” It is a sensation that overwhelms you and “you believe.” Faith here is considered a gift instilled in the heart of someone, by which that one becomes a believer. The presupposition here is that people are incapable of believing on their own, since they are totally depraved and have no capacity for faith. If God

wishes a person to become believer, he instills the gift of faith within him, which gift he must have in order to receive salvation. This is the concept of faith found in the theologies of many of the church fathers, such as Augustine, which was picked up by Reformed theologians as John Calvin, John Knox, etc., as well as modern day Neo-Orthodox theologians such as Karl Barth.

None of the above concepts of faith can be found in the inspired literature called Scripture. The biblical concepts with which we are concerned are rooted in Hebrew and Greek usage. The most common understanding of these terms is that faith essentially consists of knowledge, which is carried beyond the level of mental ascent to a level of logical persuasion and emotional conviction, which manifests itself in a level of commitment readily observable in the life of the believer.

Working with Paul's Concept of Faith

This concept of faith or belief may be seen in Paul's second letter to Timothy. In 2 Tim 1:12 we find a wonderfully revealing insight into Paul's understanding of faith. "I know (*oida*)" says Paul, "in whom I have believed (*pisteuo*) and have been persuaded (*peitho*) that he is able to keep that which I have committed (*paratheke*) to him into or unto that day." Here we have a beautiful example of the essentials to be found in both the Hebrew and Greek concepts of faith. There is knowledge, persuasion, and commitment, all are necessary to a full appreciation of biblical faith, which is rooted in the idea of knowledge which is carried beyond the level of mental ascent and logical persuasion to a level of conviction and commitment so as to be observable in the life of the believer.

It is significant to note that the Greek concept of belief, as found in *pisteuo*, *pistis*, and *pistos* is essentially the same as the Hebrew concept, *aman* meaning, "to believe, be assured of, to have confidence or trust in, to have certitude of mind; as a Hiphil verb form, to stand firm, to be faithful, to trust, to be certain, to believe in, stand firm, trust, believe." None of these terms, in Greek or in Hebrew, can be understood as simple mental assent or agreement, or an emotional experience, or something devoid of action or behavior, or a mysteriously instilled force that overwhelms the volition of that in which it dwells. Faith causes the believer to have insight into the object of belief, to have certitude of mind, to be persuaded or convinced of the truth of that which is believed, and to be committed to that

which is believed so much so as to reflect in their behavior what they profess to believe. There is no room for doubt in any of these concepts. When Jesus confronts Thomas, who doubted his resurrection, he says to him, “do not be doubting (*apistos* - unbelieving) but believe (*pistos* – be faithful or full of faith).

Biblical Faith Consists of Knowledge

Faith or belief must have content. The expression, “I believe,” is an incomplete sentence. It does not communicate an intelligible concept or idea. There must be a direct object stated or implied by the context in order for it to make sense or communicate a coherent idea or thought. There are numerous ways one comes to knowledge. One may come to know a given thing through sensual experience; i.e., sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. Through these physical senses one acquires the data of his physical world. This, however, is only one way of knowing. One may also come to know through discursive reason; i.e., through deductive and inductive logical processes of thought.

Although I have never physically experienced my grandfather on my father’s side, I can know that he existed. He was Maurice W. Lusk, Sr., he died when my father, Maurice, Jr., was 12 years old. I was not born until my father was 19 years old. My grandfather had been dead 7 years before I was born; I could not have known him experientially. I can say, however, I know that my grandfather existed. This is because one can know of a certainty things that cannot be known experientially. I can know through discursive reasoning (going from one piece of data or information to another in a discursive fashion), that the cause and effect principle leads to the conclusion that my grandfather must, of necessity, have existed. I can also know of my grandfather’s existence through the testimony of my father, who did experience my grandfather’s existence experientially. In fact, it is through the acceptance of testimony that we know most of our assumed “facts” of history.

It is suggested by many of those of the scientific and philosophical community, that knowing and believing are mutually exclusive concepts. One can know by virtue of experience and reasoning, but believing is something altogether different. This distinction exists only in the minds of those wishing such to be the case. In fact, one cannot truly believe anything that he cannot truly know. Knowledge is the first essential in believing.

There must be “content” to faith for faith to even be an intelligible concept. This mutual exclusive distinction is clearly not representative of the anything found in Scripture. In fact, just the opposite is true.

In John 4: 39-42, we are told of a group of people of a village called Samaria, who came to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. A woman had told them of the things he had done that convinced her that he was the Messiah, and they had accepted her testimony. After talking with Jesus themselves, they stated, “We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man is really the savior of the world.” To them, believing and knowing were not mutually exclusive concepts at all. One necessarily involved the other. In John 6:66-68, when Jesus asked his disciples whether they would forsake him, Peter responded, “Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” In this biblical text there is no place for the concept of the mutual exclusiveness of faith and knowledge.

Biblical Faith Consists of Persuasion or Conviction

To Paul, not only did he “know” in whom he had believed, but he was persuaded or convinced that what he believe was believable. The Greek word Paul uses here is *peitho*, which is, curiously, the root word from which the words *pisteuo* (I believe) and *pisits* (faith or belief) derive. The concept of faith or belief and the concept of persuasion or conviction are kindred ideas; i.e., they come from the same root idea, which is *peitho* – to be persuaded of something. The one is intrinsic in the other. *Peitho* is lexically defined as, “to persuade, convince, to be confident, be assured of, assent to, listen to, obey.” *Peitho* is translated as “obey” in ten of its New Testament occurrences. To be persuaded to the point of obedience is the idea intrinsic in *peitho*. Persuasion was the very means used by Paul to lead his hearers to faith in his preaching and teaching. When Paul came into Corinth, Acts 18:1-4 tells us, “Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade (*peitho*) Jews and Greeks.” When he left Corinth and went up to Ephesus, he followed the same course of action. Acts 19:8 tells us that, “Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing and persuading (*peitho*) concerning things of the kingdom of God.” While in Rome, Paul received guests into his quarters and, according the Acts 28:23, “From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince [or persuade (*peitho*)] them about

Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.” Paul was trying to lead others to faith in Christ, and “being persuaded” was an essential part of coming to faith in the thinking of Paul.

Biblical Faith Consists of Commitment

Another essential to faith, as a biblical concept, is the role of commitment. “I know in whom I have believed,” said Paul, and “I am persuaded” he continues, “that he is able to keep that which I have committed (*paratheke*) to him unto that day.” The Greek language is a language of word pictures. Here we have such a word and the picture it gives us is that of a person setting something before someone or giving something to someone for deposit or safekeeping. To “commit” something is to “give it over to,” to entrust it to the care or possession of someone else. What Paul had committed as a result of this faith was, “Paul.” Paul believed what he believed about Jesus of Nazareth, and was so persuaded of his beliefs, that he had given himself to the one who was the object of his faith. Just as Jesus said to God as he died on the cross, “Father, into your hands I commit (*paratithemi*, the verb form of *paratheke*) my spirit” (Luke 23:46), so Paul had committed his body, his soul, and his spirit to God. Such a commitment or “giving of oneself” is essential to this concept of biblical faith.

A story I once heard beautifully illustrates the concept of biblical faith we have labored here to present. The story is told of a family who lived in a two-story house. The house caught fire and a little girl was trapped in an upstairs window. A fireman came below the window and called out to the little girl, “Jump to me, I will catch you!” The fireman could save the little but she would have to have faith in order to receive the deliverance offered by the fireman. All three essentials present in the concept of faith we have presented are here. First, she would have to know what the fireman wanted her to do, “Jump to me.” Secondly, she would have to be persuaded or convinced that he would and could do what he said he would do, “I’ll catch you!” But these two essentials without the third would not save her. Her faith could only save her if and when she jumped to the fireman. She was saved by her faith when her faith took her out of that window into the arms of the fireman. This is the sense in which her faith saved her; and this is the biblical concept of faith Paul uses in his writings. To **know** God is to **know** God. To **be persuaded** that what you know is true is to **be persuaded**. To fully believe, in the biblical sense of the word, comes when

one **commits** (or gives) himself to what he believes and become one with his beliefs.

Conclusion

This is the concept of faith that made Abraham “a man of faith.” He knew God, he is the patriarch best known for his devout monotheism. *El Shaddai* (God Almighty) is called “the God of Abraham.” He was persuaded or convinced that there was only one God and that God had spoken to him. What made him the father of faith to Paul was the fact that his knowledge of God and his persuasion concerning the existence of God, was carried to the level of commitment, i.e., giving himself to God. It was when he acted on his beliefs that he became faithful or “full of faith,” and was consequently reckoned as “righteous” in the eyes of God. It was not when he came to his knowledge and conviction of God’s existence that he became “the man of faith” Paul presents to us. It was when his knowledge of God and his persuasion concerning God’s existence and communication to him led him to leave the security, comfort, and relationships of his family to journey to an unknown destination simply because God told him to. To Abraham faith was truly a “walk” or “journey.”

Now, apply this concept of faith to the following presentation of examples of faith found in Hebrews 11:1-19.

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. ²This is what the ancients were commended for. ³By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

⁸By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. ⁹By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

¹¹By faith Abraham, even though he was past age--and Sarah herself was barren--was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. ¹²And so from this one man,

and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

¹⁷By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, ¹⁸even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." ¹⁹Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.

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