

A Perversion of Biblical Faith

by Wayne Jackson

One of the great tragedies of ecclesiastical history is the fact that so many have failed to find a balanced view of human redemption as this concept is set forth in the biblical record.

On the one hand there is Roman Catholicism, arrogantly contending that salvation is conferred upon the basis of meritorious acts. The Council of Trent declared that good works, done to the honor of God, have “truly merited the attainment of eternal life in due time” (session vi, chapter xvi.).

On the other hand, Protestant reformers, reacting against this unscriptural ideology, gravitated to an equally indefensible position, alleging that salvation is bestowed by means of “faith alone.” The French reformer Jacobus Faber (1455-1536) argued that salvation is upon the basis of faith without works. And Martin Luther’s obsession with this theme led him to alter the text of Romans 3:28 so that his translation read: “[A] man is justified by faith only.” It is rather well known that he rejected the divine character of the book of James due to the inspired writer’s affirmation that “faith apart from works is dead.”

A sectarian organization promoting the “faith-only” dogma these days is the Research and Education Foundation operating out of Austin, Texas. The executive director of this group is Dr. Robert Morey. Morey is a respected scholar who has produced some very fine works (e.g., *Death and the Afterlife*—a review of the annihilationist position). But Dr. Morey is very militant in his view that salvation is by faith alone. He classifies the church of Christ as a cult simply because the Lord’s people proclaim that Jesus is the author of eternal salvation to all who obey him ([Hebrews 5:9](#)). One of Morey’s consultants is Bob L. Ross, a Baptist clergyman who appears to be incapable of framing a simple sentence without the use of the pejorative appellation “Campbellite.”

The assertions of Dr. Morey and his colleagues are without substance, and the type of “faith” advocated by these gentlemen is not biblical.

It will be the burden of this study to demonstrate that “faith,” as that term is employed in contexts in which the subject is commended, is never a mere intellectual or emotional disposition divorced from devout obedience. Valid faith is never passive. It becomes a redemptive quality only when it responds in implementing the will of Jehovah.

“Faith”—A Word of Action

One of the most absurd statements that we ever read was from a denominationalist who declared: “Faith is the only thing that one can do without doing anything.” The affirmation is a textbook case of contradiction.

The following examples will clearly reveal that genuine faith is not a mere attitude; rather, it is a word of action.

- (1) Jesus was teaching in the city of Capernaum. The crowds so pressed around him that some who sought his presence could not gain access to the Lord. Four enterprising men brought a lame friend, climbed to the rooftop of the house wherein Christ was teaching, and lowered their impotent companion through the ceiling. Significantly, the inspired writer comments: “And Jesus seeing their faith said unto the sick of the palsy, Son, your sins are forgiven” ([Mark 2:5](#)).

What did Christ see? He literally saw the action of these men (including the sick man who obviously endorsed the activity). But the action is called faith. In a similar vein, James challenged: “Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith” ([James 2:18](#)).

- (2) [John 3:16](#) is perhaps the best-known verse in the Bible; but it is one of the most misunderstood: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life.”

Does the “belief” of this passage include obedience, or exclude it? A comparison of this verse with [Hebrews 5:9](#) reveals that the former is the case. In [John 3:16](#), believing results in eternal life. In [Hebrews 5:9](#), eternal salvation is said to issue from obedience to Christ. It thus should be quite clear that the belief that saves is one that manifests itself in obeying the Son of God. True faith is not just a mental process.

- (3) Note this declaration from the Lord: “He that believeth on the Son hath eternal life; but he that obeyeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him” ([John 3:36](#), ASV).

We have cited the American Standard Version here because it is more accurate in its rendition of the original language than is the King James Version. The term in the latter portion of the verse is *apeitheo*, which, according to Balz and Schneider, literally means “to disobey” (1990, 118).¹ In this passage “believing” is set in vivid contrast to disobedience.

¹ Balz, H. and G. Schneider. An Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament. Vol. 1. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Is not Christ suggesting that the one who obeys the Son is promised life, but the person who disobeys will not receive such?

Observe a similar usage in [Acts 14:1, 2](#): “[A] great multitude both of Jews and of Greeks believed. But the Jews that were disobedient stirred up the souls of the Gentiles, and made them evil affected against the brethren.”

In the book of [Hebrews](#) we are informed that God was displeased with many rebellious Israelites who died in the wilderness. They were condemned because they were “disobedient”—yes, they were not allowed to enter the promised land due to their “unbelief” ([3:18, 19](#)). Continuing that analogy, it will be those who have “believed” who will enter the final rest ([4:3](#)), but those who are “disobedient” will not ([4:6](#)).

The Bible knows nothing of true faith that is divorced from obedience.

- (4) When a jailor in the city of Philippi feared for his life during an earthquake that rocked the prison, he pled with Paul and Silas: “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” God’s messengers proclaimed to him the gospel. Evincing repentance (for having beaten his prisoners), the jailor washed their stripes. Subsequently, he and his family were immersed ([Acts 16:31-33](#)).

Significantly, this entire process is summed up in this fashion: “And he . . . rejoiced greatly, with all his house, having believed in God” ([v. 34](#)). It is clear that the participle, “having believed,” includes the jailor’s repentance and his baptism.

- (5) The book of Romans demonstrates that faith is an action term. For example, Paul commends the “faith” of these saints, which, says he, is “proclaimed throughout the whole world” ([1:8](#)). As he concludes the epistle he again congratulates them: “For your obedience is come abroad unto all men” ([16:19](#)). Faith and obedience are parallel in these verses. In fact, at the beginning and end of the book the expression, “obedience of faith,” stands like guardian sentinels, defining the character of biblical faith ([1:5; 16:26](#)). In [Romans 10:16](#), those who refused to “obey the gospel” fulfilled Isaiah’s prediction that some would not “believe” the divine report.
- (6) That the “faith” system of the New Testament is not merely a mental phenomenon is evidenced by [Galatians 3:26, 27](#). There Paul declares: “For ye are all sons of God, through faith, in Christ Jesus. For [a conjunction of explanation] as many of you as were baptized into Christ did put on Christ.”

Immersion was an integral part of the faith process. Later, to the same people, the apostle affirmed that the faith that avails is that which is “working through love” ([Galatians 5:6](#)). The fact of the matter is, believing itself is a work (cf. [John 6:27-29](#); cf. [1 Thessalonians 1:3](#)).

(7) James shows the connection between faith and obedience when he writes: “Was not Abraham our father justified by works [obedience], in that he offered up Isaac his son upon the altar? You see that faith operated with his works [obedience], and by works [his obedience] was [his] faith made complete; and the scripture was fulfilled which says, And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned unto him for righteousness; and he was called the friend of God” ([James 2:21-23](#)).

If faith plus obedience constitutes one as a “friend of God,” how would one be characterized who has faith minus obedience?

(8) Those who possessed genuine intellectual-emotional faith were granted the “right to become” children of God ([John 1:12](#)), but they were not, by that faith, automatically constituted sons of God.

(9) That faith alone is invalid as a means of redemption is revealed by a number of biblical examples.

- a. There were many Jews who “believed on” Christ ([John 8:30, 31](#)), but their faith was not operative, hence, the Lord appropriately described them as children of the devil ([8:44](#)).
- b. There were those among the Hebrew rulers who “believed on him [Christ],” but because of Pharisaic pressure they would not confess their faith; they loved the glory of men more than that of God ([John 12:42](#)).

Will anyone contend that these proud egotists were saved simply because they “believed” (cf. [Matthew 12:32](#))? What was the flaw in their theology?

- c. Luke records that when Christ was preached, “a great number that believed turned to the Lord” ([Acts 11:21](#)). The construction of the original language indicates that the “believing” was prior to the “turning,” hence, turning to the Lord involved something in addition to their faith.

The Language Authorities

It is this type of biblical evidence that has compelled leading New Testament language authorities to acknowledge that faith is more than a mere philosophy of belief. Genuine faith cannot be separated from submission to the Lord.

Liddell and Scott show that the verb *pisteuo* (believe) can mean “to comply” (1869, 1273).²

H. Cremmer stated that the noun *pistis* (faith), both in the Old and New Testaments, “is a bearing towards God and His revelation which recognizes and confides in Him and in it, which not only acknowledges and holds to His word as true, but practically applies and appropriates it” (1962, 482).³

W. E. Vine noted that *pistis* involves “a personal surrender” to Christ (1962, 71).⁴

Lexicographer J. H. Thayer commented that *pisteuo* includes “a conviction, full of joyful trust, that Jesus is the Messiah”—the divinely appointed author of eternal salvation in the kingdom of God, conjoined with obedience to Christ.” (1958, 511).⁵

O. Michael has stated: “Faith understood merely as trust and confession is not able to save. Only through obedience . . . and conduct which fulfills the commandments of God does faith come to completion (Jas. 2:22)” (1975, 604).⁶

Bultmann contended that “‘to believe’ is ‘to obey’” (1968, 205). He stressed that this is particularly emphasized in Hebrews 11:7. He further made this interesting comment: “According to Paul, the event of salvation history is actualized for the individual, not in pious experience, but in his baptism (Gl. 3:27-29). Faith makes it his. Hence faith is not at the end of the way to God, as in Philo. It is at the beginning” (217).⁷

Alan Richardson declared that faith “is confident reliance on God. It is the act by which he lays hold on God’s proffered resources, becomes obedient to what God prescribes, and, abandoning all self-interest and self-reliance, trusts God completely. . . . Obedience, conformity to what God prescribes, is the inevitable concomitant of believing” (1964, 75, 76).⁸

² Liddell, H. G. and Robert Scott. 1869. A Greek-English Lexicon. Oxford, England: Clarendon Press.

³ Cremmer, H. Biblico-Theological Lexicon of New Testament Greek. Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark.

⁴ Vine, W. E. An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words. Vol. 2. Westwood, NJ: Revell.

⁵ Thayer, J. H. Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament. Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark.

⁶ Michael, O. The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology. Vol. 1. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁷ Bultmann, R. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. Vol. 6. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

⁸ Richardson, Alan. A Theological Word Book of the Bible. New York, NY: Macmillan Co.

Conclusion

The doctrine of salvation by “faith alone” does not have the support of Scripture. It has resulted from a sincere but misguided reaction to Roman Catholicism. Those who have embraced this philosophy should carefully restudy the question of salvation.