

# What Is Faith in Christ?

By [Wayne Jackson](#)

One of the most elemental aspects of the Christian system is that of faith. The writer of Hebrews classifies faith as one of those first principles that ought to be understood by the most immature student.

And yet, many seem not to grasp the significance of this magnificent quality.

## The Necessity of Faith

It is difficult to fathom how one can read much of the New Testament and not understand that faith is an integral part in becoming a Christian.

Some, however, have denied that it is. John Calvin, the founder of the Presbyterian Church, popularized the notion of “unconditional election,” i.e., that God, before the foundation of the world, arbitrarily determined who would be saved and lost.

Accordingly, it is alleged, nothing—not even faith—is required in order to be saved.

A number of denominationalists have been influenced by Calvin. For example, a Primitive Baptist writer has affirmed:

[W]e believe that there is no warrant for the view that [John] 3:16 lays down faith as a condition to be performed by the lost person in order to attain spiritual or eternal life ... God, without the use of the gospel or any other human means, will save all of his redeemed loved ones in every land and in every age (Sarrels 1978, 443-44).

It would seem almost superfluous to have to establish that faith is necessary for the divine plan of redemption, especially since the Bible explicitly affirms that one **cannot please God** without it (Heb. 11:6).

The Fourth Gospel has been called “the gospel of belief” because of its great emphasis on faith (the verb **pisteuo** being employed some ninety-eight times).

Believing is essential before one has the right to become a child of God (Jn. 1:12), it is a condition for the hope of eternal life (Jn. 3:15-16), and those who refuse to believe are clearly in a state of condemnation (Jn. 3:18; 8:24).

Without question, belief is a central theological concept in the New Testament and one that represents “the correct relationship to God and ultimately the essence of the Christian religion itself” (Balz & Schneider 1993, 92).

## The Nature of Faith

A matter of greater controversy within the religious community is the nature of faith.

Many apparently entertain the illusion that redemptive faith is merely a **willing disposition** to trust in Christ as one’s Savior, independent of any further acts of obedience.

Such a notion is quite alien to the truth. Let’s explore the true, New Testament meaning of faith.

First, faith involves a **conviction grounded in evidence**. Nowhere does the Bible suggest that one make a blind leap into belief without adequate evidence.

When Paul began proclaiming Christ, following his conversion, he set about **proving** that Jesus was the Messiah based upon solid historical evidence (Acts 9:22).

Our own faith is anchored in the credibility of the biblical record, which is substantiated by ample evidence itself.

Second, once one arrives at a conviction that Christ is the Son of God (with the various truths that are attendant to that), he genuinely must be disposed to **trust the Savior** for the salvation that only he can effect.

No person with an inkling of biblical knowledge would affirm that man has an innate ability to produce his own redemption. The verb *pisteuo* occasionally is rendered by the word “trust” (Jn. 2:24) or a form of the same (cf. Rom. 3:2; 1 Cor. 9:17; Gal. 2:7).

Third, the New Testament clearly indicates that faith involves much more than having a conviction concerning the Lord, or even a willingness to trust him. Faith also involves **submitting to the divine will in obedience** to Heaven’s requirements.

Merrill Tenney, a Baptist scholar, has noted:

Never does [faith] mean a mere assent to a proposition. It usually means acknowledgment of some personal claim, or even a complete personal commitment to some ideal of person (1948, 32).

That is very true.

## Faith in Action

Faith is a word of action. Consider the following passages:

### “Seeing their faith”

When Jesus was in Capernaum, the crowds so pressed him that some who sought his presence could not gain access. Four men brought a lame friend. They climbed to the rooftop of the house wherein Christ was teaching and lowered their companion through the ceiling.

Significantly, Mark says: “And Jesus seeing their faith said unto the sick of the palsy, Son, your sins are forgiven” (Mk. 2:5).

What did Christ see? He literally saw the **action** of these men (including the sick one 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” (Jas. 2:18).

## Believing on him

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 “believing” in 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 promised to those who obey him.

It should be clear that the belief that saves is that which obeys.

## Believing versus “obeying not”

Note this declaration.

“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” (Jn. 3:36, ASV).

We have cited the American Standard Version here because it is more accurate in its rendition of the original language than the King James Version.

The term in the latter portion of the verse is **apeitheo**, which literally means “to disobey” (Bauer *et al*, 99). In this passage “believing” is set in vivid contrast to **disobedience**.

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:

[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 (Acts 14:1-2).

Elsewhere we are informed that God was displeased with many rebellious Israelites in the wilderness. They were condemned because they were “disobedient” — they were not allowed to enter the promised land due to their “unbelief” (Heb. 3:18, 19).

Continuing that point, it will be those who have “believed” who will enter the final rest, but those who are “disobedient” will not (Heb. 4:3, 6).

### **Example: Philippian jailer “believed in God”**

When a jailor in Philippi feared for his life during an earthquake, 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” (Acts 16:34).

It is clear that the participle, “having believed,” includes the jailor’s repentance and his baptism.

### **Roman saints’ obedience of faith**

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” (Rom. 1:8).

As he concludes the epistle, he again congratulates them: “For your obedience is come abroad unto all men” (Rom. 16:19). Faith and obedience are parallel here.

In fact, at the beginning and end of the book, the expression “obedience of faith” stands like a guardian sentinel, defining the character of biblical faith (Rom. 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.

### **“The faith”**

That “the faith” system of the New Testament is not merely a mental process is evidenced by Galatians 3:26, 27.

“For ye are all sons of God, through the faith [Greek text], in Christ Jesus. For [a conjunction of explanation] as many of you as were baptized into Christ did put on Christ.”

Immersion was a part of the faith process. Later, the apostle affirmed that the faith which avails is that which is “working through love” (Gal. 5:6).

The fact is, believing itself is a **work** (cf. John 6:27-29; cf. 1 Thes. 1:3).

### **Faith and works**

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 (Jas. 2:21-23).

If obedient faith constitutes one a “friend of God,” how would one be characterized who has a “faith” void of obedience?

Genuine faith cannot be separated from submission to the Lord.

## Faith Alone Insufficient

That faith [mental assent] **alone** is invalid as a means of redemption is revealed by a number of biblical examples.

There were many Jews who “believed on” Christ (Jn. 8:30, 31), but their faith was not operative, hence, the Lord appropriately described them as children of the devil (Jn. 8:44).

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 (Jn. 12:42).

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

## Language Authorities on the Meaning of Faith

It is this sort of biblical evidence that has compelled leading 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 & Scott show that the verb **pisteuo** (believe) can mean “to comply” (1869, 1273).

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; emphasis added).

W. E. Vine noted that the noun **pistis** involves “a personal surrender” to Christ (1992, 286).

Lexicographer J. H. Thayer suggested that **pisieuo** 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).

Michel 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) (Brown 1975, 604).

Bultmann contended that “‘to believe’ is ‘to obey.’” He stressed that this is particularly emphasized in Hebrews 11 (Friedrich 1968, 205). 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 (Gal. 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 (Ibid., 217).

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 (1962, 75-76).

## Conclusion

The doctrine of salvation by an emotional faith alone does not have the support of Scripture. It has resulted from a sincere but misguided reaction to the meritorious works system of Roman Catholicism.

Those who have embraced this philosophy should carefully restudy the issue of salvation.

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Hebrews 11:6; John 1:12; John 3:15-16; John 3:18, 8:24; Acts 9:22; John 2:24; Romans 3:2; 1 Corinthians 9:17; Galatians 2:7; Mark 2:5; James 2:18; John 3:16; Hebrews 5:9; John 3:36; Acts 14:1-2; Hebrews 3:18, 19; Hebrews 4:3, 6; Acts 16:31-33; Acts 16:34; Romans 1:8; Romans 16:19; Romans 1:5, 16:26; Romans 10:16; Galatians 3:26, 27; Galatians 5:6; John 6:27-29; 1 Thessalonians 1:3; James 2:21-23; John 8:30, 31; John 8:44; John 12:42; Matthew 12:32; James 2:22; Hebrews 11; Galatians 3:27-29

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