

SPIRITUAL DEVIATIONS

Faith in Faith versus Faith in God

Many spiritual teachings that deviate from the truth sound reasonable—initially. But when held to the scrutiny of Scripture, they often are found to be perversions of the gospel camouflaged in alluring religious trappings. They present an innocuous appearance, a plausible façade, yet beneath the layers of maxims there is a distorted core, a mutated biblical teaching upon which many find themselves shipwrecked in regard to the faith.

It is ironic, therefore, that some of the greatest damage to our objective faith is now associated with a perverted understanding of faith currently in vogue in today's Christianity. Many publications proffer a notion of faith that both errs scripturally and defrauds spiritually. The intent of this article is to briefly define and explore these teachings, critiquing the points on which they err and then presenting the Bible's revelation of faith and its glorious goal.

Erroneous Source and Object

In these modern misconceptions, faith is often referred to as a power force which is tangible or conductive. *Freedom from Fear* (hereafter *Freedom*) by Kenneth Copeland says that "faith is God's source of power" (16). In other words, the source of God's power does not reside in Himself, but in the believer's faith. This notion distracts the believers by subtly shifting their focus from faith in God to faith in faith. *The Tongue, A Creative Force* (hereafter *The Tongue*) by Charles Capps states, "YOU CAN SPEAK GOD'S WORDS AFTER HIM AND THEY WILL WORK FOR YOU" (12). Rather than trust in God, there is trust in one's recitation of God's words—"they will work for you" (emphasis added). *Me and My Big Mouth* (hereafter *Big Mouth*) by Joyce Meyer concurs: "Words are containers of power" (78). Faith and, by extension, the declarative act itself become a force whose power is catalyzed by the Christian's speaking. In effect, God becomes a servant who is directed by the speaking of faith-filled words. Given this emphasis, various forms of Christian media abound with popular maxims such as "name it and claim it" or "blab it and grab it," as well as references to "faith muscles" which need only to be flexed in order to obtain whatever is wanted from God. *Big Mouth* states, "Faith has to be activated if it is to work [note the indefinite pronoun it]...Keep saying—and don't give up hope!" (125). *The Tongue* agrees that the power the Christian needs is in his

speaking: "Turn loose of the problem and get hold of your confession. Quit praying the problem. And start saying the answer....There is a creative power within you. Learn to use it wisely" (25-26). This implies that the power of faith within the believer may be used *unwisely*, like a loaded gun that could misfire. *The Tongue* promises, "You CAN HAVE WHAT YOU SAY" (32). The more closely such erroneous teachings are examined, the more obvious it becomes that God has been replaced with "faith-words" as both the source and object of faith, making God subservient to the "creative power" within the believer. *Exceedingly Growing Faith* (hereafter *Exceedingly Growing*) by Kenneth E. Hagin, likewise promises, "You can write your own ticket with God" (77).

This notion of faith also ascribes a metaphysical force to faith that is utterly foreign to Scripture. Consider Hagin's report that Jesus physically appeared to him while he was in a trance: "He stood within three feet of me" and discussed—in King James English—Hagin's ministry and finances (74). Then Jesus outlined for him a four-step plan for writing "your own ticket with God" so that "you can have what you say" (76-77). Describing his vision, Hagin boldly quotes Jesus verbatim. Step one is to simply "say it....According to what the individual says, that shall he receive" (77-78). Step two is to "do it....I'm going to get my healing" (79). Step three is to "receive it....If we can learn how to plug into this supernatural power, we can put it to work for us" (80-81). Step four is to "tell it so others may believe" (84). Jesus purportedly assured Hagin, "If anybody, anywhere, will take these four steps or put these four principles into operation, he will always receive whatever he wants from Me or from God the Father" (76). In this formula, faith has been reduced to a set of metaphysical principles to put into operation for the purpose of obtaining whatever one desires. *Faith and Patience: The Power Twins* (hereafter *Faith and Patience*) by Kenneth Copeland maintains that victorious Christians "have exerted the force of faith" (21), and that they "cannot get faith's results without exerting the force of faith" (24).

Even more striking variations on this notion of faith are evident in its proponents' admission that these "faith" principles work for *unbelievers*. *Big Mouth* recounts

the story of a doctor who was not a believer but who had

discovered the power of the principle I am sharing with you. His prescription to his patients was to go home and repeat several times daily: “I am getting better and better every day.” He had such marvelous results. (67)

Faith as a Work

The result of such teachings, as borne out in the history of the “faith healing” movement, is that faith inevitably becomes a work to the believers. This often can be seen in the application of “faith” principles to healing. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, many Christians discovered that God still, on occasion, chooses to heal His believers from certain sicknesses, that such miracles did not cease with the twelve apostles. As a case in point, Andrew Murray, a bishop of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, was miraculously healed from a serious throat ailment which had robbed him of his voice for two years. Afterward, he wrote a book about God’s healing ability. His publishers strongly urged him to entitle it *Faith Healing*, the catch phrase for the nascent movement. Nevertheless, Murray resolutely refused, maintaining that faith heals no one, that it is the *divine life* that heals the believers. He therefore entitled his book *Divine Healing*. Murray understood that the result or issue of genuine faith is an organic union between the believer and the Healer Himself!

Once the believer shifts his focus and trust from God to his own faith, he confronts every difficulty in life with an attempt to muster, to exert, faith to move “mountains.” This is work, not genuine faith, and this work of proclaiming “words of faith” can easily degrade into more mundane applications. As an illustration, *Big Mouth* recounts experiences of speaking “faith-filled words” in order to “get a good table and excellent service” at a restaurant, as well as to buy a coat for half-price (59). It concedes that such effort does not always work: “I cannot honestly say that it *always* works for me, but I would rather stay positive and get 50 percent good results” (59). *Big Mouth* goes on to charge us “to make it a daily challenge not to complain or find fault with anything....It simply means that we make it our goal in life to be as positive as possible” (97). Of course, to work that out in your life, it adds, “First an attitude adjustment is needed” (97), and then, “Keep at it until you have developed new habits” (98). Thus, “faith-filled” speaking becomes nothing more than positive thinking for the sake of self-improvement and an enhanced, more convenient lifestyle. Ultimately, God’s ability to accomplish miracles is dependent on one’s ability to summon adequate faith. *Big Mouth* tells us, “We will never receive a miracle unless we believe that God can do the impossible and that He will do it for us” (46). Such absolute statements bring to mind cases such as Lazarus: He was dead in the tomb and was unable to believe for his miracle. The Lord even was surrounded by doubters, yet in spite of their unbelief, He chose to raise Lazarus from the dead. He did not have to wait for

anyone’s faith to perform His miracles. *Faith and Patience* reinforces the notion that healing depends on effort: “Confess with your mouth that it is yours, and by your actions show that it is yours. You must talk healing, and you must act healing” (25). Thus, healing is dependent on the believer’s words and actions.

The Biblical Definition of Faith

Faith teachers are inclined to quote the less accurate King James Version’s translation of Hebrews 11:1 in support of the implicit notion that faith is a substance, an inanimate entity that has existence and power independent of God. However, better translations speak of faith as the “substantiation,” or apprehension of things hoped for. Concerning this verse, Vincent’s *Word Studies in the New Testament* says, “It cannot be said that faith is substantial being. It *apprehends* reality” (510). This verse defines faith as the Christian’s believing ability, assurance, or confidence. Faith is not the substance, but the *substantiating* of the substance of the real things of God that are “not seen.” Christ has accomplished much for His believers, and faith is imparted to them as the substantiating ability to make these accomplishments real and experiential to them. This leads us to ask, “Where then does faith come from?”

The Source, Object, and Result of Faith

Our faith derives neither from our will nor from our ability to reject doubts and summon up positive, believing thoughts. Faith is Christ Himself, and our faith is actually *His* faith. It is Christ in us who is our faith. Romans 3:22 says, “Even the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ to all those who believe.”

Faith has an object, and it issues from its object. This object is Jesus, who is God incarnate. When man hears Him, knows Him, appreciates Him, and treasures Him, He causes faith to be generated in man, enabling man to believe in Him. Thus, He becomes the faith in man by which man believes in Him. Hence, this faith becomes the faith in Him, and it is also the faith that belongs to Him. (Recovery Version, Rom. 3:22, note 1)

Christ is not only the source but also the unique object of our faith. We became those blessed ones “who have not seen and have believed” (John 20:29). Through the gospel we were drawn to Christ (12:32) and fell in love with Him; He alone is the object of our believing. Our faith is not in our own capacity to believe, but in His wonderful person, as Paul explicitly proclaims: “I know *whom* I have believed” (2 Tim. 1:12, italics added).

Believing in Christ brings us into an organic union with Him. Faith joins us to His precious person. When speaking of living “in faith,” Paul speaks of “Christ who lives in

me” (Gal. 2:20). He also tells us that “Christ may make His home in your hearts through faith” (Eph. 3:17). John’s words indicate that believing in Christ is actually believing *into* Christ (John 3:16). In sum, the result of faith is that we are brought into an experiential and actual organic union with Christ. By faith we are in Christ and Christ is in us. By faith Christ also is spreading into our entire inner being, making home in our hearts. Faith results in an intimate union with Christ (1 Cor. 6:17).

What leads so many believers to teach or believe such errant notions as “faith in faith”? In part, no doubt, it is due to a fundamental deficit in their apprehension of God’s plan. For example, when a believer understands that faith’s *source* is Christ, he is delivered from working to exert faith. He understands that as Christ grows in him, faith grows. When one understands that Christ is the unique and immediate *object* of faith, he is delivered from any subtle shift in focus away from the precious person of Christ. And when one understands that the *result* of faith is an organic union with God, he is delivered from any temptation to use faith as a “creative force” for personal gain. Faith ushers believers into union with God Himself.

The Goal of Faith

The Scriptures clearly define the goal of faith as the organic salvation of our mind, emotion, and will—our soul. Hebrews 10:39 declares that we “have faith to the gaining of the soul,” and 1 Peter 1:9 reaffirms, “Receiving the end of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” The goal of faith is not the fulfillment of material desires. It is the renewing, sanctification, transformation, and conformation of our soul into the glorious image of Christ. This organic salvation is the end of our faith; it is “the gaining of the soul.”

Andrew Merritt’s book *My Faith Is Taking Me Someplace* (hereafter *My Faith*) attempts to address the goal of faith. It opens with an accurate critique of the faith teachings: “It is both presumptuous and inaccurate to refer to *my* faith or *our* faith when, in reality, the faith we have is *God’s* faith” (3). *My Faith* continues by warning us that faith “is not something magical, mystical, or spooky” (5). The book also offers a scathing description of the results of today’s faith teachings:

God is not “required” to operate a heavenly commissary that dispenses provisions for all the wants and desires of those who call themselves Christians....These folks have been conditioned to expect faith to function for their convenience, on their behalf. For them it is a survival tool in the carnal world of houses, cars, jobs, clothing, comfort, and security. They regard themselves as the center of the universe, living for their own personal welfare. (9)

After such a beginning, Merritt’s book begins to settle into

its theme that faith has a goal, a destination. While *My Faith* discerningly rejects much of the faith teachings, it retains a superficial view concerning the goal of our faith, offering only general examples of where faith may take the believer and revealing an incomplete understanding of God’s eternal purpose:

Is your faith taking you someplace? Or do you feel as if you were on the road to nowhere? Maybe your job is a dead end...or you wish you were married but can’t find the right person....

Are you living in poverty and need, frustrated by unfulfilled ambitions? Are you tormented by worry, fear, and the cares of this life? Is your heart dead and cold toward God?

If so, your faith needs to be reactivated. Don’t forget that faith is the victory that overcomes the world. (115)

Once again, believers are directed to apply faith to common and materialistic goals. But according to God’s plan, as revealed in His Word, the gospel imparts a marvelous believing ability into God’s chosen elect (Rom. 10:17), which substantiates all the divine and mystical riches of the person and work of Christ and brings us into an organic union with Him. Now the indwelling Christ Himself is both the source of our faith as well as its object, making it a “precious” faith (2 Pet. 1:1). It is precious because it proceeds from Christ and ushers us into Christ. As such, it is neither an end in itself nor merely a means to an enhanced human life. Rather, it is our means and access into an organic union with Christ, and it issues in the organic salvation of our soul.

by Gary Evans

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