

What Is FAITH?

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The question this article seeks to answer may seem like a question that does not even need to be asked. The general idea of faith has become so common that for many people it does not immediately elicit further consideration. However, many have written extensively on the matter of faith, with varying levels of understanding and, in our view, varying degrees of success.

Some teachers propagate notions of faith that are without scriptural warrant and even stray into absurdity. For example, Joel Osteen, the Houston-based prosperity preacher, teaches that faith is the power to unlock the abundant, mostly material blessings that God is waiting to bestow on us. He writes, “You believed, but you didn’t get the promotion. You believed, but you didn’t qualify for the new home. Keep believing. God has something better coming” (21). Liberal theologians such as Paul Tillich (d. 1965) and Gordon D. Kaufman (d. 2011) offer definitions of faith that may appeal to philosophers of religion but are not grounded in the teaching of the New Testament. Tillich famously writes that “faith is the state of being ultimately concerned” (1). Kaufman contends that “true faith in God” means to go out “like Abraham (as Hebrews 11:8 puts it) not really knowing where we are going, but nevertheless moving forward creatively and with confidence” (106). Osteen, Kaufman, and Tillich’s understandings of faith do not approach the revelation of the New Testament, yet some genuine believers in Christ have been beguiled by such understandings.

Other teachers give orthodox definitions of faith, but those definitions sometimes emphasize mere assent or trust in biblical doctrines as the function of faith and do not probe the deeper, more subjective aspect of faith conveyed in the New Testament. Examples abound, but two will suffice here to make the point. The medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) teaches that “the act of believing is an act of the intellect assenting to the Divine truth at the command of the will moved by the grace of God” (*LETA* 17:36). The Baptist theologian

Wayne Grudem teaches that “saving faith is trust in Jesus Christ as a living person for forgiveness of sins and for eternal life with God” (862). While it is certainly right to believe what God has revealed and to trust in the finished work of Christ for the forgiveness of sins, there remains the possibility that one may believe in a doctrine and trust in a person without receiving the person of whom the doctrine testifies.

Thankfully, some teachers go beyond mere assent or trust to teach that faith is a receiving of Christ and of all spiritual realities in Him. We will see a number of teachers who view faith from this perspective later in this article, but here we wish to offer a quotation from Witness Lee that positions us to explore the biblical teaching of faith in more detail in the section that follows:

According to common understanding, faith means to believe, to depend on, and to trust in, but in the New Testament, faith means to receive. This differs from the common understanding of faith. The Bible says, “As many as received Him, . . . to those who believe into His name” (John 1:12). To believe in Jesus is not merely to believe that He exists and that He is truly the Savior who was crucified to accomplish redemption for us; it is not merely to believe and be convinced of these facts. This type of believing or being convinced is inadequate. This is not the faith referred to in the Bible. The faith referred to in the Bible is to receive, that is, to receive the One in whom we believe into us, to receive the facts that we believe into us. When we believe, we receive Jesus Christ, and we also receive the redemption that He accomplished for us on the cross. Therefore, according to the Bible, faith means to receive. We believe and are convinced because we have received. (*CWVL*, 1985 2:141)

Faith as Substantiation: a Biblical Presentation

“Now faith is the substantiation of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1)