

Being a Christian - Faith

Words mean different things to different people. The word *faith* is frequently used in different ways?

It can refer to the confidence a person has in a friend or colleague (*John is trustworthy*). It may be used to describe a set of beliefs (*Judaism, Islam etc*). Or an individual may say he is a person who has faith (*I believe in ...*).

Christians recognize that in the Bible the word faith is used in a specific way. The words *content* and *commitment* come to mind. As do the terms *belief* and *behaviour*. And so too do the words *reality* and

relationship. Each pair helps us grasp something important about the specific meaning of the word *faith*. In fact in the Bible the word faith includes both elements of each pair. It does not refer to one element at the expense of the other.

Faith in the Bible is never just a matter of belief. It also entails behaviour. Yes, there is a body of belief to be believed (*the content or facts of the faith*). But there is also a way of behaving to which every believer commits himself. The way believers behave reflects their enjoyment of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Belief, Content, Reality

A distinctive feature of faith is its focus upon God and Jesus Christ. It takes seriously who God is and what God has revealed. It accepts God has given to mankind a definite record of his revelation: the Bible.

The Bible consists of sixty-six separate books. There are thirty-nine in the first part and twenty-seven in the second. The first part is often called the Old Testament. Its books were written over a fifteen hundred year period. The second is

known as the New Testament. Its books were written in a considerably shorter period, just one generation.

The Old Testament contains four types of book: *history* (for example Genesis), *poetry* (Psalms), *prophesy* (for example Isaiah, Jeremiah), and *wisdom* (Proverbs). The New Testament likewise has four types: those which provide a *record of Jesus' life and death* (the four gospels), one which describes the *life of the early church* (Acts), *pastoral letters* (there are 21), and *a call from Christ for his people to be faithful to the end* (Revelation).

Two facts about the Bible should be noted. *First*, it contains the authoritative record we need of God's purposes and promises. And *secondly*, it demonstrates that in Jesus Christ alone we see fulfilled the promises given and the purposes revealed by God.

These two facts lead to two conclusions, both of which a Christian is careful to remind himself of often. First, though God used people to write the books of the Bible, *its origin lies with God*. Secondly, because it is God-given, *it is authoritative*. Of all

the writings there are the Bible alone has the right to control what we believe and do. What it teaches we are to believe. In particular we are to believe all it tell us about God.

It asserts there is one God. However it also informs us that the only God there is exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In other words the Bible reveals to us that God is triune. It never says there are three separate gods. Rather it says God is a triune being. The three are:

- (1) the Father who purposed and planned creation and sent his Son to rescue lost men and women.
- (2) Jesus Christ, the Son, who became a man, lived a perfect life, died, rose for us, who now rules over all, and who will return to take his people to glory. And,
- (3) the Holy Spirit who shows the things of Christ to people, draws them to faith, unites them to Christ, and strengthens them to love and serve the Lord Jesus each day.

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit work together as one for our spiritual and eternal good.

What God has revealed of himself and his plans Christians believe. There is a content to their faith. A content that is specific. It is God-given and Christ-centred. But faith is never just a matter of mere belief. It entails something practical as well as engaging the intellect.

Behaviour, Commitment, Relationship

The practical element of faith has to do with behaviour. The behaviour of a believer is directly related to his personal relationship with and commitment to God.

What happens when a person hears the message of the Bible? Those who listen to the words of Scripture with open minds and hearts find God makes them aware of who he is. It does not matter whether we read the words in private or public, or whether we hear them read or taught.

Those prepared to listen and learn discover God exists. They find he is perfect and pure. They discover what he says about mankind is true. We are made by God for God. However by nature we are in a state of rebellion and disobedience.

Nonetheless, in love and mercy, he calls us back to himself. He invites us to embrace Christ Jesus by faith if we want to be reconciled with God.

Furthermore, as well as calling us to trust Christ he also calls us to turn away from all that displeases him. He commands us no longer to rely upon ourselves. He calls us to be obedient to his perfect way. These twin virtues of repentance (having a change of mind and attitude to God) and obedience (doing his will) lie at the heart of the life of faith.

A believer believes; but he also behaves in a particular way. He believes what God has revealed. By the enabling power of the Holy Spirit, he submits himself to be ruled and controlled by the teaching of the Bible.

A person of faith does what God wants done. He recognises and accepts the moral authority of God's law. To it a he willingly submits. He does so knowing God's way for us is the only and true way of human happiness. Christians discover that in God's service perfect freedom is to be found.

However a word of caution needs to be sounded. Believers grow to understand faith entails knowledge and acceptance of God's Word. They find it involves a radical commitment to being and doing God's will. They also learn that in this life they do not reach perfection. Yes, they strive to be holy like God (*Leviticus 11.44 and 1 Peter 1.15-16*). As they do so they discover living as a Christian involves a lifelong battle with unruly desires.

Such battles keep us humble. They are used by God to impress upon us that we are to live by faith. They remind us that faith in the Bible engages the will as well as the mind. It entails a belief and behaviour commitment to Jesus Christ. Such commitment is never just in a person's strength. It is always in the power of the Holy Spirit. And the life of faith is lived to the praise and glory of the Father.

What does all this impress upon us? That we need to proceed with care. The word faith is used both in the church as well as in the world in different ways. It means a different thing to different people. But Christians hold fast to the biblical definition. Each believer seeks to insure his own faith is genuine. He or she takes care to see belief and behaviour are hand in hand. And when dealing with others, because the word faith is often not used with care, a Christian looks for both the content and the commitment he sees the Bible require. He does so, not with a censorious or critical spirit. Rather he does so with Christ-like love. Christ is the one he loves. And Christ is the one he is keen to see others love as well.