

“Faith” and “The Faith” in the Orthodox Church

(1) A String of Pearls Concerning Faith as written in the Scriptures

This collection of scriptural references for “faith” (not faithful) is not exhaustive and not all the biblical references are included, particularly as to those parallel references within the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke.

The classical definition of faith comes at the beginning of Hebrews 11 which then goes on to give examples from sacred history and present experience: -

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

(Hebrews 11:1)

There is also one key reference in the Old Testament which is quoted a number of times in the New Testament: “the just shall live by his faith” - (Habbakuk 2:4; cf. Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38) – **faith brings righteousness in life.**

Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little **faith**? (Matthew 6:30) – **faith is trust in God’s provision for our needs.**

When Jesus heard it, He marvelled, and said to those who followed, “Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel! (Matthew 8:10) – **faith is trust in God’s Word to accomplish that which it sets out to do.**

(cf. Isaiah 55:11)

*So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth;
It shall not return to Me void,
But it shall accomplish what I please,
And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.*

But He said to them, “Why are you fearful, O you of little **faith**?” Then He arose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. (Matthew 8:26) – **faith dispels fear and doubt.**

Then behold, they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their **faith**, He said to the paralytic, “Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you.” (Matthew 9:2) – **faith can exercised on behalf of others.**

But Jesus turned around, and when He saw her, He said, “Be of good cheer, daughter; your **faith** has made you well.” And the woman was made well from that hour. (Matthew 9:22) – **faith opens up the possibility for healing.**

But Jesus, being aware of it, said to them, "O you of little **faith**, why do you reason among yourselves because you have brought no bread?" (Matthew 16:8) – faith – **looks beyond what is humanly possible to what is possible with God.** (cf. Matthew 17:20)

Then He said to the woman, "Your **faith** has saved you. Go in peace." (Luke 7:50) – **faith brings forgiveness and salvation.**

Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to **the faith.** (Acts 6:7)
also... "strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in **the faith.**" (Acts 14:22; cf. Romans 16:26; 2 Corinthians 13:5; Galatians 1:23; Philippians 1:27; Colossians 1:23, 2:7; 1 Timothy 3:13, 4:1, 5:8, 6:10,21; 2 Timothy 3:8, 4:7). – **faith has definite content.**

... and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by **faith.** (Acts 15:9) – **faith purifies the heart.**

... that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by **faith** in Me.' (Acts 26:18) – **faith generates sanctifying holiness.** (cf. Romans 4:5)

... to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has **faith** in Jesus. (Romans 3:26 – also v.28 and cf. Galatians 2:16, 3:8,24) – **faith through grace justifies the sinner.**

and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of **the faith** which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised. (Romans 4:12, also v.16) – **faith is a progression – a walk with and in God.**

For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of **faith.** (Romans 4:13; cf. Galatians 3:14, 22) – **faith comes with the promise of God who is faithful.**

He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in **faith**, giving glory to God ... (Romans 4:20) – **faith strengthens.**

... through whom also we have access by **faith** into this grace in which we stand and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. (Romans 5:2; cf. Ephesians 3:12) – **faith grants access to the grace of God.**

So then **faith** comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. (Romans 10:17; cf. Galatians 3:2,5) – **faith stimulated by hearing the Word of God.**

... that your **faith** should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. (1 Corinthians 2:5) – **faith about trust and dependence on God.**

For we walk by **faith**, not by sight. (2 Corinthians 5:7; cf. "Blessed are those who have not seen yet believe" John 20:29) – **faith is radical trust.**

... not boasting of things beyond measure, that is, in other men's labours, but having hope, that as your **faith** is increased, we shall be greatly enlarged by you in our sphere ... (2 Corinthians 10:15) – **faith needs to grow; it is dynamic and deepens as it is exercised.**

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by **faith** in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. (Galatians 2:20) – **faith is something you live by, not something you "have" by intellectual assent. This faith transforms inwardly such that Christ lives within.**

For you are all sons of God through **faith** in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:26) – **faith in Christ makes us children of God by the grace of God.**

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but **faith** working through love. (Galatians 5:6) – **authentic faith works through love.**

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of **faith**. (Galatians 6:10) – **faith manifests itself as a "household," – that is the Church.**

For by grace you have been saved through **faith**, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God. (Ephesians 2:8) – **faith is where faith meets grace; it is a gift of God to be received.**

... that Christ may dwell in your hearts through **faith**; that you, being rooted and grounded in love ... (Ephesians 3:17) – **faith brings Christ into the human heart.**

Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. (1 John 4:15) – **the faith must be confessed if God is to abide in us.**

... one Lord, one **faith**, one baptism; (Ephesians 4:5) – **THE Faith is single and shared through baptism. It unifies.** (Ephesians 4:13; cf. Titus 1:4,13).

... above all, taking the shield of **faith** with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. (Ephesians 6:16; cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:8) – **faith is a sure defence against temptations of Satan.**

And being confident of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy of **faith**, (Philippians 1:25; cf. 2 Thessalonians 1:3) – **faith brings joy.**

... remembering without ceasing your work of **faith**, labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father. (1 Thessalonians 1:3; 2 Thessalonians 1:11) – **faith is a work, not a state of passivity (the heresy of Quietism).**

Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere **faith**. (1 Timothy 1:5) – **faith must be sincere.**

... holding the mystery of the **faith** with a pure conscience. (1 Timothy 3:9) – **faith is a disclosure of God’s purpose working out in history, a mystery revealed – it is not a mere intellectual pursuit.**

... that the sharing of your **faith** may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. (Philemon 1:6) – **faith is to be shared.**

... without **faith** it is impossible to please Him [God], for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. (Hebrews 11:6) – **faith pleases God because it is the beginning of a rewarding relationship between Creator and creature.**

... looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our **faith**, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:2) – **faith without revelation (having a beginning and an end) is meaningless. It is also meaningless without the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ at its core.**

... knowing that the testing of your **faith** produces patience. (James 1:3) – **faith can be tested producing patience.**

What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has **faith** but does not have works? Can **faith** save him? (James 2:14-26) – **faith without works is dead** (verse 14 and following).

Resist him, steadfast in **the faith**, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. (1 Peter 5:9) – **we need to bring steadfastness to faith in the face of temptation.**

For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our **faith**. (1 John 5:4) – **faith is the victory that overcomes the world.**

Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for **the faith** which was once for all delivered to the saints. (Jude 1:3) – **THE Faith must be contended for, defended and in every way promoted as the saving truth that it is.**

(2) How are “Faith” and “THE Faith interrelated?

From all these examples from the Scriptures it is clear that there are two components to a saving faith. The first is faith as an attitude of trust in God and obedience to His will. We could call this existential faith. The second is THE faith, the one holy Orthodox Catholic Apostolic Faith, as expounded in the Scriptures, interpreted by the Fathers, defined by the Ecumenical Councils and lived out by the saints. We could call this the dogmatic faith. For many heterodox Christians, particularly in the so-called liberal Protestant traditions and among the pietists generally, personal existential faith is often emphasised at the expense of the dogmatic Faith. On the other hand we also observe in the realm of academic theology in the late Latin heterodox tradition (both Roman

Catholic and Protestant) an intellectually based scholasticism which supposes that dogmatic or critical faith is to be preferred to personal faith as the only proper object of study for theologians.

Orthodoxy strongly refutes both these approaches because they separate the heart (personal, existential, subjective) and the mind (rational, critical, dogmatic) in the articulation and living out of Christian faith. One might even say that this corresponds to a left/right brain hemisphere split. Over centuries this division has created in the heterodox west a type of high and dry rationalist scholasticism at loggerheads with an anti-intellectual atomised subjectivism. In Orthodoxy, heart and mind, faith and THE Faith are never separated. For example, merely reciting the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed as a set of propositional statements is not enough. That confession has to represent a conviction in the heart of the believer that the Creed attests to what God has done to save us all. Likewise, merely confessing that you love Jesus is not enough. Muslims do the same. Their affection for Jesus arises because for them because Jesus (or Isa) is the second most important prophet after Muhammad. What marks Christians out as different from Islam in terms of salvation is that we love the Christ who is the Incarnate Word or Logos; and it is this confession that saves us.

So, Orthodox Christians can never separate existential faith - born out of God's grace, personal experience and ascetical struggle - and dogmatic faith - which is received as handed down from the Apostles and mediated to the world through the ongoing Spirit infused Tradition of the Church, the Ark of salvation. This means that all Orthodox Christians need to continue their catechesis in the Faith throughout their lives. Everything learned must, in due time and according to God's leading, bring forth fruit in a saving faith which, through witness and good works, grows the Church in mission. There can be absolutely no anti-intellectualism or empty rationalism in the Church. In the summary of the Law, our Lord taught this and its sets the standard with nothing left out:

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,' and 'your neighbour as yourself.' (Luke 10:27)

(3) How does Faith and THE Faith relate to Reason and Experience?

In the heterodox west, as explained above, mind and heart have become separated from each other in both scholasticism and pietism. The scholastics have taught that reason alone can deduce certain truths about God and they have gone on to apply reason even to revealed faith as if rationality was a pure and uncontaminated faculty of human enquiry. The pietists have contrarily supposed that whereas reason has been compromised by the Fall, the heart as the arena for the exercise of a personal faith, much less so. This assumption, strengthened at the Protestant Reformation and then once again radicalised in the Enlightenment prioritised and endorsed the authenticity of an individual's beliefs and conscience, even if that meant accepting beliefs that were formerly and generally considered to be heresies. The rationalists were and are also relatively untroubled by heresy, simply because they also could not help bring their own subjective presuppositions to the table of academic enquiry. The long-term outworking of these trends has been to destroy within Protestant traditions any coherence or unity across their confessions; which of course has driven their ongoing fragmentation, notwithstanding the attempts of the ecumenical movement to put a break on this shattering of communions.

When Orthodoxy addresses the relationship between personal faith experience, communal faith experience (loosely, piety), rationality and dogmatic faith, its confidence is based on a strong unitive cohesion in the Holy Spirit. We do not believe that God changes His mind or that the Faith or the life of faith can abruptly change direction, such that the canon of St Vincent of Lerins (5th century): *quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est* (what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all) is overturned. This cohesion and coherence is so deeply embedded in the Orthodox *phronema* (mindset) among the believers that nobody seriously considers that how Christians live and believe now is substantially different from how they have always lived and believed, all the way back to Pentecost. Incidentals may have changed, and theological insights have certainly been refined and deepened, but how we pray, what we believe and how that is personalised in asceticism and discipleship has never suffered any rupture.

The Orthodox go on to say that ALL human faculties have, in each person and in differing degrees been compromised by the Fall. This operational dysfunction, occasioned by sin, affects the heart no less than the mind and the mind no less than the heart. However, progressive sanctification purges both so that each can exercise its own corrected function in a Godly manner; that is, more transparently and simply in love toward and in God as repentance deepens. In prayer, we recall, the mind remains active and focussed on God as it descends into the heart to commune with Him.

(4) How does Faith relate to Truth?

Faith we have defined; truth we have not. Simply put, Truth is a Person, Christ. Pilate beheld Him face to face but still exclaimed: "What is truth?!" (John 18:38) Here is "the Way, the Truth and the Life" (John 14:6) but he still does not see it. Therefore faith, THE Faith is necessary to grasp the Truth about all things in their fullness in Christ, who *is* their fullness, (Ephesians 1:23, 3:19; Colossians 2:9).

It is impossible then to say that there is *any* truth whatsoever in any field of human art, science, or endeavour that falls outside Christ. Truth for a Christian is unitive and universal. When there is error, no matter how far back one must trace this error back to its ultimate cause, there is always a falling away from Christ. These errors are not always moral failings; they can be simple mistakes, easily corrected. The evolution of human knowledge and skills works quite normally in this manner.

Those heretics or misinformed believers who suppose that Christianity can or does contradict any established truth outside their own selective and narrow definition of what is true, should recognise the harm these beliefs inflict on the Church's mission. They present faith as living in a completely different world to God's Creation, a sort of gnostic pietistic bubble where all other truths other than revealed truths are either irrelevant or suspect and, therefore, to be rejected.

Christians, therefore, are the true humanists, not the new atheists who reject faith-based anthropologies. When God is rejected our humanity perishes. Equally, when anything that is human is rejected, the notion of the one true God perishes. As St Irenaeus taught, faith is predicated on the Incarnation in which everything human is recapitulated. Likewise, as St Gregory the Theologian insisted, were anything human to be left out by the Incarnation it could not be healed. Faith cannot detach itself from any human consideration of truth in any sphere of human endeavour.

(5) How does Faith relate to Evidence?

The relationship between faith and evidence is subtle. It is the constant jibe of the new atheists such as Dennett and Dawkins that faith steps in where there is an absence of any evidence credibly pointing to God. Ironically, they are joined in this by Christian fundamentalists, many of whom are more than happy to dispense with evidence, and of course its handmaids: reason and interpretation. The often-quoted response to St Thomas by the risen Christ: *"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."* (John 20:29a) is used (one might even say overused) to support this agreed position of atheists and fundamentalists alike that evidence is never necessary for faith. In certain instances, "not seeing I believe" does apply, but it is not always useful for each person who comes to faith, and certainly not universally applicable in the realm of Christian apologetics. The attempt to strip faith of any resort to evidence - blind faith, the heresy of fideism - is unscriptural as St Paul's makes abundantly clear in his summation of the Old Testament witness from Creation in Romans 1:20:

"For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse." (Cf. Psalm 19:1)

Such reasoning from Creation to the Creator is not a knock down argument from evidence for the existence of God, simply because it is allusive and does not, nor cannot, satisfy the standards of proof required by the scientific method. Indeed, it is an argument from design that science can neither prove nor disprove. Nonetheless, it is an evidence that is compelling for some, scientists and non-scientists alike. It is often the first step a soul takes on his or her way back to God.

Other evidences for faith (not exclusively the Christian faith) are often put into play: evidence from religious experience, evidence from the moral order and evidence from the endurance of religious belief - even in highly technocratic and advanced societies. For *some* people, these evidences are sufficient to nudge them into acknowledging some sort of divine power and intelligence. The value of these evidences should not therefore be deprecated. They constitute the Church's work in pre-evangelism. Abandoning them would surrender faith to the atheists as an irrational, unwanted and even dangerous superstitious belief in Sky Fairies and Imaginary Friends (not my words of course!)

When we seek to apply standards of evidence to the Person of Our Lord Jesus Christ, with His Father and the Holy Spirit, this resolves to a consideration of the Scriptures and the existence of the Church in the Old and New Testament periods over nearly 4000 years. Putting a Bible into someone's hands and saying: "here, read this" may occasionally bring someone to faith but I suspect that most converts do not have this experience. Atheists read the Bible after all but are unimpressed. What we can be sure about is that all sorts of evidences presented in a variety of different ways can contribute to the genesis of faith in any given soul. Evangelism that has the most impact will always recognise this and be sensitive to what different evidences people need to assist them on their journey into faith. The use of illumined reason in relation to the revelation of dogmatic faith, and tested experience in relation to existential faith, are *both* necessary guides on that journey.

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29th September 2020