

“Living by Faith” January 2, 2022
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In the sermons I have been preaching here from time to time I have been considering some of the most defining teachings of our Christian faith; the pillars of what is nowadays called *Mere Christianity*; that is, the faith that all Bible-believing followers of Christ embrace, whatever their theological tradition. We’ve considered the comprehensive sinfulness of human beings, the sin that corrupts us all, that renders us liable to God’s punishment, and so makes absolutely necessary a salvation that combines God’s infinite mercy and God’s unlimited power. We have considered the incarnation of God the Son, his becoming a man for us and our salvation, the central event of the history of salvation. And we have thought again about the new birth, the work of divine grace and power by which sinful human beings are reborn; made new people with new powers, new understanding, new convictions; indeed, with new hearts and minds.

Tonight, I want to consider another such defining teaching of the Bible but also one I thought would serve the purpose of a New Year’s sermon, a challenge to ourselves as followers of Jesus Christ in the coming year. I am speaking of faith. Faith is fundamental to the very idea of a Christian. He or she is *a believer* in Jesus. We speak quite naturally of believers and unbelievers, that is people with faith and people without faith, by which we mean Christians and non-Christians. How many times does the Bible define what it means to be a Christian by saying, in one way or another, that Christians live by faith in the one who loved them and gave himself for them.

The verb “to believe” such as we find in John 3:16 (“everyone who *believes* in Jesus will have eternal life”) and the noun “faith” such as we find in Rom. 1 and Hebrews 10 (“the righteous shall live by *faith*”), I say both “believe” and “faith” belong to the same word group. “Faith” and “Believe” are from different stems in English, but in Greek *pistis*, the noun, and *pisteuo*, the verb, have the same stem, are versions of the same word. I didn’t take time to count the number of times the noun and the verb appear in the Bible, but I took a quick look at the book every seminary student buys, which lists the words that appear most often in the Greek New Testament. A beginning student doesn’t want to waste his time memorizing words that appear only once or twice. He wants to start with words that he will see again and again. Both the noun, *faith*, and the verb, *to believe*, according to the book I bought when I was a seminary student, occur between 200 and 500 times in the Greek New Testament. That is the second grouping of words by the frequency of their appearance. The first is words that appear more than 500 times. So, the verb and the noun together occur between 400 and 1,000 times in the New Testament. Only a few words occur more than 500 times and most of them are pronouns, conjunctions, and prepositions. But I don’t suppose you need me to prove this to you. You know how often you encounter “faith” or “believe” in your reading of the Bible. Faith is everywhere in Holy Scripture, and many more words than just those two appear as equivalents or synonyms of the verb “believe” or the noun “faith.”

But something as fundamental to biblical teaching as “faith” or “believing” is easy to take for granted. We are so familiar with the terms we hardly think about them. So, from time to time, we must return to basics and go over the ground once again. What, after all, *is* faith? What does the Bible mean when it uses these words, as it does hundreds of times? If “faith is the victory that overcomes the world,” if we are to “live by faith and not by sight” what exactly *is* this faith and

precisely *how* do we live by it? What did Jesus want us *to do* when he commanded his disciples, “Have faith in God”? [Mark 11:22]

If faith is the primary instrument of the Christian life, if, as the Puritan Thomas Watson put it, “Faith is the master-wheel; it sets all the other graces running,” [*Body of Divinity*, 151] then we need to understand this faith, know what it is and how it is practiced. And all the more this must be true because of the difficulty of faith. The fact is, when the Bible reminds us that we must live by faith and not by sight, it is admitting the obvious truth that faith is much more difficult than sight. In the same way a blind mind is in a very important way cut off from the world in which he lives, so we are separated in important ways from a spiritual world we inhabit but cannot see, we are separated from a Savior who is with us, but whom we cannot see, and from a world to come that beckons us but which we cannot see. It is precisely the glory of heaven, its indescribable superiority to earth, that there *we will finally see!* The hard work of believing what we cannot see will finally be over.

So, what is this faith by which we must live our lives however difficult that living may be? In my experience, the most useful definitions of faith are provided, not by the theologians or biblical scholars, but by preachers who themselves had a great faith, who lived by that faith, who practiced it, who thought about it, and struggled over it; who made the life of faith not only a matter of immense personal importance but thought long and hard about how to teach others what they had learned. Here, for example, is Alexander Whyte.

“Faith in its most elementary sense, faith in its first and foundational sense, simply means the reliance placed by one man on the truthfulness and the power of another. You make a statement of fact to me or give me a promise and offer an assurance and faith is that state of mind in me to you, that state of mind in me which accepts your statement and relies on your promise.” *Sermons 1881-1882*, 68.

Whyte is saying, you see, that faith is an ordinary sort of thing; something we are well familiar with in life. We take a great many things on faith, just as you took the pew you are sitting in at this moment on faith when, without a thought you sat down in it. It might have collapsed; you didn’t inspect it; you *believed* it would hold your weight. *Well, the faith of a Christian is just that same thing.* God has spoken and we rely on the truthfulness of what he has said to us; we believe that what he has promised us he will give to us. Faith is the trust, the confidence we place in him and in his Word. Hudson Taylor, the great missionary, was a man of great faith and this is precisely what he understood faith to be. It is, he said, reckoning on the faithfulness of God. [Cited in Dudley-Smith, *John Stott*, vol. 1, 134] Calvin, if I remember correctly, said something similar, if more ponderously: “Presume on the veracity of God!” *Faith* is not a leap in the dark as some have thought. It has nothing to do with wishful thinking. Still less is it superstition, as many in our elite culture are now arguing. Faith in its biblical usage is something very different: it is an entirely reasonable confidence in God himself and in what God says. *It is a confidence based on evidence; entirely satisfying evidence!*

But those definitions of faith, while absolutely true and wonderfully helpful, are still too general. They do not say all that might be said and should be said. Indeed, they hide, unnoticed, within themselves a complex reality that the Bible breaks down into pieces that we might better understand what faith is. So, again, what is Christian faith?

I. First, whatever else faith is *it is knowledge*.

“Believing,” by itself, is hardly a sufficient definition of Christian faith, faith as it is defined in Holy Scripture, and the faith by which we Christians are to live. After all, at bottom *everyone is a believer*. Everyone has faith! The atheist *believes* that there is no God and that nature is all there is. He or she certainly hasn’t proved that in a lab or by a mathematical computation. He or she *believes* that there is no God. Fact is, everyone is believing all the time. People believe things about other people, about themselves, about the world, about the purpose and meaning of their lives, about what they regard as right or wrong, about political positions, and all the rest. They take these things on the word of others, or from their cultural assumptions, without even thinking that this is what they are doing. Every human being is believing, trusting from morning to night, every single day. They believe that their brakes will stop the car when they push the brake pedal, and they believe that there is something about them that makes them important. Faith is universal in human life precisely because so much of our lives and so much that matters is invisible to sight, cannot be proved by some equation. We are required all the time to trust someone or something.

The difference between Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and atheism is not that the first four require faith and the last does not. This whole notion of “faith-based” ministries, as opposed to secular or governmental ministries that have no religious basis or purpose, is a concoction devised to serve a political purpose and, like so much of our public thinking and politics, is founded on a downright lie, or worse, founded on pure unadulterated stupidity. *Care Net* and *Planned Parenthood* differ in fundamental ways, but one way in which they are not different is that they are both absolutely, radically, and undeniably faith based. The people at *Planned Parenthood* think what they think and do what they do precisely because *they believe* certain things to be true. Those things are their *faith*. No one with a straight face could ever say that *Planned Parenthood* is based on science and *Care Net* on faith. In fact, as everyone knows, the science is on *Care Net’s* side, even if science is not the fundamental reason either group does what it does.

So, take the point. Being a believer doesn’t distinguish you from anyone else. Faith is what you have in common with every other human being. What distinguishes you and what makes you a Christian is *what* you believe. It is the things you believe – the events of history, the theology and the ethics taught in the Bible – *the person whom you believe*, the living God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – *the one in whom you believe* – the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ – and, finally, the gospel, the good news of eternal life, secured by Christ in his death and resurrection, and offered to all who will trust their lives to him. Believing *that* and believing *him* is what the Bible means by faith.

Our faith is a very definite body of knowledge or, as we are sure, a set of facts; the facts found in the Bible. This is the reason why the word *faith* is used not only for the act of believing, but as well for the truth itself. Faith is not only confidence in the truthfulness of what is taught in the Bible, *it is what is taught in the Bible*. So, for example, we read in Jude of “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.” The Apostle Paul speaks of “the faith that we proclaim.” [Rom 10:8] And again and again, we are told not simply *that* we must believe, but *what* we must believe.

“We must *believe* that [God] exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” [Heb 11:6]

“If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and *believe* in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” [Rom 10:9]

There are many such definitions of faith in the Bible, each of which requires us to believe certain facts about ourselves, about the world, about God, and about salvation. And so it is that the Bible is emphatic in teaching that no one, however much he or she may claim to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ, I say no one is *in fact* a Christian who does not believe that he or she is a sinner needing salvation (1 Jn 1:10), that Jesus is the Christ (1 Jn 2:22), or does not believe the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh (2 Jn 9). Everyone believes something; Christians believe very specific things, a body of knowledge revealed in Holy Scripture and, supremely, the historical facts of the history of redemption and the authoritative interpretation of those facts found in the Bible.

So here is a New Year’s resolution for us all: to be increasing our *knowledge of the faith*; to be making our faith smarter and deeper and more confident. Read your Bible with the intention of *learning something*, and when you learn that something write it down, perhaps in the margins of your Bible. And read other books and listen to sermons with a view to how they illuminate or confirm the truth revealed in the Word of God, writing down in order to remember every new insight, every new understanding. Take note day by day of the way in which the truth of the Word of God is confirmed in your own experience. Write that down as well. My faith should be much smarter, much more knowledgeable than it is; but it is so, so much smarter than it used to be, precisely because I have preserved the fruit of my study, my reading, my listening to sermons and lectures of others who have taught me so much about the faith once and for all delivered to the saints. I have learned so much from others who have made the teaching of the Bible come alive to me and convinced me that what I read in the Bible is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth! *Christian faith is knowledge!*

II. Second, faith is *agreement*.

It is possible, the Bible teaches us, to know the faith revealed in Holy Scripture, but not to agree with it, not to embrace it for oneself. The most striking example of this phenomenon is that of the devils themselves, who know the truth of the Bible; know its reality better than we do in some ways. They know who God is, his power and his rule, know only too well his conquest of the demonic realm. Satan, remember, was not only a witness to the Lord’s earthly ministry, *he was a participant*. Time after time he intervened to undo the divine plan for the salvation of the world and time after time he was defeated in that intention. No one knows as well as Satan what happened over those fateful years. He saw it all. He saw the miracles; he saw his devils cast out of those they had possessed; he saw the dead raised to life; his kingdom humiliated at every turn; with glee he saw Jesus die, he groaned in dismay as he saw him rise to life again, and ascend to heaven. *He knows that he will return to judge the living and the dead. He knows his time is short*. Indeed, all the demons either witnessed first-hand or learned the truth about God; they know it so well they tremble, as James reminds us (2:19). They *believe*, James says, but without agreement, without acceptance, without embrace, without submission. They hate the truth; they suppress it, ignore it, or gnash their teeth at it every day, and they seek the same suppression of it in every human heart as they roam to and fro throughout the world seeking whom they may devour. What is true of the demons is true of mankind in general. The Jewish leadership responded to the truth as Satan did. And most people do the same. People *know* there is a God of

power and glory, no matter what they say, but they will not give in to that knowledge. They will not accept it, no matter what!

As the Lord reminds us at the end of his Sermon on the Mount, there are many even in the church who will say to him, “Lord, Lord;” they knew he was the Messiah, the Savior, the King of Kings. They knew what he had come into the world to do. They knew he had risen from the dead. They knew the gospel was the announcement of salvation for all who trust in Jesus Christ. But this knowledge *was acquaintance only*. So it was with Judas or Demas, the false teachers in Galatia, the false teachers John writes about in his letters, or those the Lord addresses in his Letters to the Seven Churches in Rev 2 and 3. *They knew, but they did not agree*. They subtracted this, they added that, or they redefined this other part. Something else was more important to them than the truth of God. It is possible, the Bible says, to believe that Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose from the dead, but still not to have living faith in Jesus Christ. How is that possible? Because knowledge of the truth is not combined with agreement and acceptance.

I have all my professional life read scholars who know very well what the Christian faith is. They are usually some form of Christian themselves, by which I mean they call themselves Christians, many of them teach at some divinity school, many hold ordination in some Christian church. They recite the creed in church. But they cavalierly keep some parts of the Bible’s teaching and discard the rest. Before they are Christians, they are people of the modern world, people of a modern mind. They think as the world has taught them to think. They subject Holy Scripture to examination on the basis of the accepted beliefs and prejudices of modern life, and if the Bible fails to measure up to those standards, so much the worse for the Bible. If its teaching, if the Lord’s own teaching, much less that of his Apostles, contradicts the conventional opinions of modern people, well that teaching must be redefined or rejected out of hand. For many the records of the miracles of the Lord must be understood only as myths and legends, fabulous stories concocted to teach us a lesson about life. For many the creation of the world as the direct initiative and work of Almighty God can no longer be believed. For many of them and others, well you know very well which of the Bible’s teachings must go: that faith in Jesus Christ is *the only* name under heaven by which human beings may be saved; that the law of God, as revealed in the Bible, is the standard by which *every* human life will be judged, that law that demands sexual purity, for example; and so on. It is astonishing how easily they to pick and choose what they will or will not believe. *They know, but they do not agree!*

A modern example of this worldwide phenomenon is the Orthodox Jewish biblical scholar Pinchas Lapide. He set himself to studying the biblical accounts of the resurrection of the Lord and the extra-biblical evidence for the event. He came to accept that the resurrection had, in fact, occurred. It happened. But he did not for that reason embrace the truth of the gospel. As a Jew he accepted the implications of the resurrection for Christians, but not for himself. He believed that God had raised Jesus from the dead, but he did not, for that reason, trust his life and future to Jesus Christ. *He knew, but he did not agree!* And, sad to say, there are a great many in and around the church like him. *They know, but they will not give their heartfelt assent.*

A Christian doesn’t simply know *what* the Bible teaches; he or she doesn’t simply know *what* Christians believe; they aren’t simply *acquainted with* the history and doctrines of Holy Scripture; *they agree that this is, in fact, the truth, and they embrace that truth for themselves*. They are convinced beyond doubt that the Bible’s record of the history of redemption is a

faithful record of what *actually happened*. They are also convinced that the Bible's interpretation and application of that history is an accurate account of what the history means, not only for oneself, but for the whole world. This acceptance, this agreement, this assent is for them like the bride and groom's "*I do!*" at the marriage ceremony. It is immediately and profoundly self-involving. They embrace the truth; they confess it; they concur with it; it receives their assent, their "Yes!" Indeed, *they love this truth!* It becomes for them the meaning of their lives, the larger, the defining context of their personal history, and of their hope of eternal life.

The one kind of Christian can say "The Lord is the shepherd;" but true faith says, "the Lord is *my* shepherd, *I* shall not want." True faith says, "he loved *me* and gave himself *for me*." Or, as the Bible teaches us to say, our faith is more precious than gold and the promises of God are precious to us! That's what agreement *is* and that's what agreement *says!*

III. Finally, faith as the Bible understands it, is *action*.

Faith is the victory that overcomes the world. Well, *overcome* is an active verb. It suggests conflict and struggle leading to final victory. Faith, James reminds us, without works is dead. Faith, as Paul reminds us in Ephesians 2 is practicing the good works that God prepared beforehand for us to do. Faith for Paul, he says, was a fight from beginning to end.

Think of all the ways the bible describes the action of faith. It is likened to "receiving" the Lord Jesus, something like welcoming a guest. As we read in John 1, "as many as *received him*, who *believed in his name*, he gave the right to become the children of God." Receiving suggests a personal binding of ourselves to him. Faith is also said to be "looking to" Jesus, walking with Jesus, seeking Jesus, following Jesus, and, supremely, loving Jesus. In all these ways we are told what faith *does*; *how it acts*. And this action the Lord says *is an essential ingredient of true faith*. Only those will be saved, he said, who "do the will of my father in heaven." On the great day, he said, those who have *done good* will rise to live. Those in me, he also said, who do not bear fruit will be cut off and thrown into the fire.

The most dramatic demonstration of the essential nature of faith as action is the number of times in the Bible, in which we find the word "obey" where we would expect to find the word "believe." Speaking of Jesus Christ, the author of Hebrews says, that "being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who...*obey him!*" [5:9] Paul, in a sermon to unbelievers, said "we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who...*obey him*." [Acts 5:32] And Peter speaks of the judgment of God that will befall all "who do not...*obey the gospel of God*." [1 Pet 4:17] There are many other statements like those. Faith not only knows; it not only agrees; it *acts* on the truth! Luther, with his characteristic vigor, put it this way. "Yes, it is a living, creative, active and powerful thing, this faith. Faith cannot help doing good works constantly. It doesn't stop to ask if good works ought to be done, but before anyone asks, it already has done them and continues to do them without ceasing. Anyone who does not do good works in this manner is an unbeliever." *Luther's Vermischte Deutsche Schriften*, 63:124–25.

I recently read Allen Guelzo's new biography of Robert E. Lee. I learned a great deal about Lee that I did not know before. He was better than many southerners on race and slavery, but, alas not so much better. But because Allen Guelzo is himself a serious Christian believer of an Episcopalian background, and Lee himself was Episcopalian, there is in the book significant

attention paid to Lee's Christian commitment, his theology, and his spiritual life. And, frankly, what I read is not encouraging. There is no doubt that Lee *knew* the Christian faith. His wife Mary, the step-great-granddaughter of George Washington, was an ardent evangelical. He even knew what to think of the Oxford Movement, a Romanizing movement in British Anglicanism that had influence in America. The Lees were against it, primarily, it seems, because Mary most definitely was against it.

Lee would make references to God and to divine providence, to his need for God's blessing, that were staples of American discourse at that time. Abraham Lincoln spoke in very similar ways. But, if you look for evidence that Robert E. Lee was a convinced, serious, devout Christian – the kind of Christian too many southern Christians have long supposed he was – you will look in vain. Why? Because there is very little evidence that he ever *did* much because he was a Christian; little evidence that he *obeyed* the Gospel, that he *walked* with the Lord Christ, that he was always *looking* to him, that he fought for the Lord Christ's honor in his own life, that he *loved* the Lord. So far as the evidence suggests, he both knew and agreed with the teaching of Holy Scripture. But that is where it ended. He never *acted on that knowledge and that agreement* as you rightly expect Christians to do. Now, no one can read the heart, but as a Christian who reads a great deal of biography, I'm always looking for that *action* and *always expecting it* in the case of people who profess to be followers of Jesus Christ and I'm *always disappointed* when I don't find it. Real faith, biblical faith, puts the knowledge of the truth and agreement with it *to work*. It changes the way a person thinks, speaks, and acts. Living faith is worn on the sleeve! Allen Guelzo is one of the most celebrated of American scholars of the Civil War. He is also a meticulous researcher. If there were evidence of Lee's active faith, Guelzo would have found it. He was looking for it!

It shouldn't be difficult for you or for me to admit that our entire problem as Christians is the weakness of our faith. Indeed, *weakness* is hardly the right word. *Dormant* in many cases might be a more accurate description. *If we believed as we should believe, how different our lives would be!* Can any serious Christian doubt this? How differently we would live if we were *alive* every moment, sizzilingly alive to facts such as these:

1. that God is with us at every moment, sees what we are thinking and doing, and keeps a record;
2. that he will reward us for every good work;
3. that he loves us more than we can conceive;
4. that he orders our trials only because he loves us so much;
5. that we grieve the Holy Spirit when we sin;
6. that we will soon be in heaven with everlasting joy upon our heads

and on and on. This is what faith *knows*; this is truth with which Christians *agree*; and who can fail to see what *actions* ought constantly to flow from this faith! Here is our prayer for the new year: "Lord I believe, help my unbelief." And here is our calling: to deepen our knowledge of the faith, every day and day after day to make a point of agreeing with it and embracing it once again for ourselves – telling ourselves, "YES! This is what I believe; this is what I know!" – and then to be sure that we are acting in keeping with that truth; reckoning with it every day. Make *Anno Domini* 2022 a year of *intentional faith*: instructing it, exercising it, practicing it, until it bears a greater fruit than it ever has before.