

Faith: Its Biblical Meaning*

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Introduction

Faith is the context of all that Christians do when they gather for study and discussion, for prayer and other forms of fellowship. Indeed, all that is done in the name of Christ flows out of what Christians believe. Consequently, one tends to take faith for granted in much the same way as one takes for granted the air one breathes: while one obviously can't live without it, one is, nevertheless, not consciously aware of it. Faith, then, is analogous to air: what breathing is to physical life, faith, or believing, is to spiritual life; consequently, one tends to look past it, to look beyond it, rather than to look at it in an attempt to understand what it is. What, then, is faith?

Faith as God-Experience

When I was a student at the University of Florida in the early 1970s, I was irresistibly, or so it seemed, drawn into what I have come to call a "God-experience." The social context of my experience was a campus evangelism movement — it has since transformed itself into a worldwide urban evangelism movement called the International Churches of Christ — which drew thousands of college students nationwide into its fold during the 1970s. Though it seemed so at the time, what I experienced was not unique to me, nor even to the movement I joined. It is, rather, the experience of innumerable Christians who want their faith to be a matter not just of

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knowing information about God but of knowing God in a personal way. Faith, in the context of popular Christianity, has become virtually synonymous with the God-experience.

As such, faith has taken the form of intuition. Intuition is defined as “the immediate knowing or learning of something without the conscious use of reasoning.” One does not know how one knows — one simply knows. In the case of the God-experience, while the Christian can claim to know about God from the testimony of the Bible, the claim to know God personally is attributed to the Spirit. Which is to say that knowing God, being a spiritual experience, goes beyond language, beyond rationality. Faith connects one to God in an ineffable way.

In regard to this concept of faith, then, one “feels the presence of God,” and one possesses a “personal relationship with God,” in which one relates to God just as one relates to another person. Bible reading and prayer are, of course, analogous to an interpersonal interaction in which one listens and speaks to God. The God-experience, however, can blur the distinction between spiritual truth and sensual reality: the spiritual truths that one may *hear* the word of God when one reads the Bible and that God hears one’s prayers through Christ can be literalized into a sort of sensory perception of having conducted a conversation with God. What used to be the province of mystics — mystical union with the divine — is now assumed to be normative for the daily experience of Christians.

In regard to this concept of faith as God-experience, literary and religious critic Harold Bloom, in his book *The American Religion*, asserts that the faith of Americans — not only American Christians but, in some sense, all Americans — is actually a re-emergence of Gnosticism, a religious movement in the late first and second centuries C.E.:

Mormons and Southern Baptists call themselves Christians, but like most Americans they are closer to ancient Gnostics than to early Christians. . . . most American Methodists, Roman Catholics and even Jews and Muslims are also more Gnostic than normative in their deepest and unwariest beliefs. The American Religion is pervasive and overwhelming, however it is masked, and even our secularists, indeed even our professed atheists are more Gnostic than humanist in their ultimate presuppositions

. . . the American Christ of the 20th century . . . has become a *personal experience* for the American Christian, quite clearly for

the Evangelicals. Less obviously, this is the Christ for all who wish to call themselves Christians in the United States. . . .

*Awareness, centered on the self, is faith for an American . . .*¹

Bloom's point is that religious faith in America is a revival of ancient Gnosticism insofar as Americans want to know (Greek: *gnosis*) God experientially, that is, in such a way as to have an experience of God-in-relation-to-self: God as self-awareness. A professed Jewish Gnostic, Bloom rejoices in the increasingly Gnostic orientation of American Christians. While I think that his analysis of religious faith in America is essentially correct, I don't share his enthusiasm for what he calls "the American Religion."

The notion of faith as God-experience that has become such a commonplace in popular Christianity is shared by the increasingly popular new-age religious faiths. American Christianity adds the traditional beliefs of Christian orthodoxy, or varieties thereof, to its Gnosticism, but the notion of faith as an experience of direct and unmediated access to God permeates both new-age and Christian faith. The Gnosticism of new-age faith is, of course, much more pronounced: the self is proclaimed to be God; the problem as generally conceived is that the self does not know it and, therefore, must be enlightened.

By comparison, in Christianity, the self is essentially evil (though some traditions place more emphasis on the reprobation of the self than others; my experience in the afore-mentioned campus-evangelism movement involved the virtual demonization of the self, which had to be liquidated in the waters of baptism for one to be saved). Accordingly, the wicked self, which is separated from God, must be replaced by the righteous self, which is reconciled to and, thus, united with God. This "new self," as does the enlightened self of new-age faith, enters into the God-experience. In either case, then, whether as the result of enlightenment or replacement, the self is presumed to enjoy direct and unmediated access to God.

This orientation to faith has roots, but its roots, as far as Western thought is concerned, can be traced back not to ancient Israel but to ancient Greece. Those roots go back to a figure even earlier than Plato. Plato tends to play a villain of sorts for those who have rejected as unbiblical the doctrine of the immortality of the soul because he clearly popularized that belief in the centuries leading up to the coming of Christ. But even before Plato there lived the pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides, whose imprint continues to shape popular Christianity.

¹Harold Bloom, *The American Religion*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992, 22, 25.

Parmenides was the first Greek philosopher to articulate the notion that reality is a matter of being. His philosophy represented a rejection of appearances, specifically the appearance that reality is a matter of becoming. Other pre-Socratics had pointed out that what one perceives wherever one looks is not being at all but becoming: all that one sees is in the process of coming to be and, eventually, ceasing to be. Everything changes: as the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus is famous for saying, one can't step twice into the same river. Human beings themselves are born, grow up, grow old and die. Their existence can only be inferred — spoken and written about, theorized about — from what they actually experience. For Parmenides, however, existence, or being, is, in reality, all there is.

Parmenides built an entire philosophy out of the concept that reality is being: all that *is* is here and now. Appearances and perceptions notwithstanding, there can be no past or future but only present; there can be no absence, in terms of empty space, but only presence. Logically, a thing cannot both be and not be, in the sense of existing while not existing; thus, the appearance of change, of becoming and ceasing to be, must necessarily be an illusion. The testimony of the senses, then, is deceptive, a matter of shifting opinion as opposed to abiding Truth. One can perceive reality only with the mind, as a kind of sixth sense, always in opposition to the five bodily senses. And with the mind, one can perceive the eternal present as the presence of Reality.

While Plato did not go so far as to say, with Parmenides, that the visible world is an illusion, he accepted Parmenides' notion of a transcendent, eternal, immutable Reality and contrasted it with the lesser quasi-reality of the visible world. Plato extrapolated Parmenides' notion of Being into an eternal world of invisible Forms, or Ideas, while also positing that these perfect Forms manifested themselves, albeit imperfectly, in the temporal world of visible things. By the first century, Plato's rhetorical construct of two worlds, one eternal and the other temporal, had become the metaphysical paradigm, or worldview, of the largely Greek civilization through which the Christian gospel spread.

In the subsequent evolution (devolution?) of Christian thought, the term "eternal" naturally became interchangeable with "spiritual," as did "temporal" with "physical," or "material." The Christian God became the resident of the eternal, spiritual world, the world of being that transcends the world of becoming, the world of time and space: God exists in the eternal present of Parmenides and Plato while human beings exist in the temporal present, a mirage that appears only at the fleeting intersection of past and future.

The prophetic and apostolic writings, however, never conceive of God in this way. The God of the prophets and the apostles is a God who is known in regard not to His being but to His doing. The Old and New Testaments are the testimony about what God has done in human history, about God's active intervention in space and time, from creation to the new creation. The knowledge of God as King, as Judge, as Father comes in the light of what God has done, first, in Israel and, second, in Christ. The prophets and the apostles are the inspired interpreters of God's actions in history and, based on those actions, reveal who God is.

Even so, the Bible is not a metaphysical revelation of who God is; that is, the Bible does not reveal the ontological reality, or being, of God: the reality of what God is in and of Godself. Rather, the Bible is a metaphorical revelation, a revelation of what God is like: a king, a judge, a father, love, light, all words that human beings can relate to out of a human frame of reference. God is also holy, or different, which is to say that God is a King, a Judge, and a Father like no other.

Not only is the Christian God known primarily with reference to His doing rather than His being, but He is also known primarily in terms not of His presence but of His promise, primarily in regard not to the present but to the future. Which is to say that the Christian God is revealed not metaphysically, in terms of what is, but eschatologically, in terms of what will be. The term "spiritual," as far as the prophets and apostles are concerned, relates not to an eternal world that exists in the present but to God's promised future, the kingdom of God, the age to come, concerning which the Spirit is "a deposit on our inheritance" (Eph. 1:14; 2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5).

All that can be known about God has been revealed in light of what God has done to fulfill His promises to Abraham (see Gen. 12:1-3; 18:18). What God has done to fulfill His promises in the past — making out of Abraham a great nation, sending the Messiah to Israel and raising him from the dead — has been designed to build the faith — trust, confidence — that God will fulfill His ultimate promise to bless all nations in the kingdom of God. It is God's promised future, then, that graciously grants meaning and power to life in the present, that makes life both worth living and worth waiting for.

A major problem with the Trinitarian interpretation of the Bible is that it presumes to be a metaphysical revelation of God, a revelation of the ontological (ontology being the study of being, of what is) nature of God: God as three Persons in one Being. This philosophical formulation is demonstrably the product of a Christianity that had become permeated with

Parmenidean and Platonic ideas. This was due in large part to Clement and Origen, second-century Christian theologians who were heavily influenced by the theology of the Jewish philosopher Philo, who, in the attempt to fuse Jewish religion with Greek philosophy, had deified the biblical concept of the *logos* (word) of God by eliminating its distinction from the Platonic concept of *logos*. J. Harold Ellens observes,

The mainstream of Plato's heirs found their perpetuation wholly within the Christian tradition after the Council of Chalcedon closed in 451 C.E. Since there is no significant scriptural evidence for a personalistic trinitarian ontology, such as that fashioned by the ecumenical councils of the fourth through sixth centuries, it is clear that the source of such thinking was Philo's *Logos* theology and this trinitarian thought that was everywhere in the air in the entire Hellenistic world of Pagan and Christian Neo-Platonism. This fact must be seriously considered in our time, for the sake of the integrity of truth and Christian authenticity. It requires us to recognize that Christianity as we have it today is a form of Greco-Roman mythology . . . If the Christian theologians had remembered . . . that they were crafting metaphoric ways of wrestling with questions about God, their quest would have been warrantable and authentic. That they proposed to be writing a definition or description of the ontological nature of God and his function in the universe was the height of arrogance . . . ²

What Ellens calls the "Greco-Roman mythology" of traditional Christianity includes not only the Trinitarian God but also the popular God-experience, the intuitive entrance into a direct, unmediated relationship with the God of Parmenides' eternal present. The faith of this intuitive, mystical orientation, however, stands in sharp contrast to the faith of Jesus as it is revealed in the apostolic writings.

Faith as God-Persuasion

Faith means believing words. While one perceives things — through sight, sound, touch, taste and smell — one believes words. The expression "seeing is believing" means that one consciously or unconsciously attaches

² J. Harold Ellens, *The Ancient Library of Alexandria and Early Christian Theological Development*, Claremont, CA: Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, 1995, 46-47.

words to the images one sees and believes those words because they seem to accurately describe or explain the images. Because one can misinterpret what one sees, that is, attach inaccurate words to the images and believe those words, it is also said that “appearances can be deceiving,” even when one’s visual perception is accurate. The object of faith in God — whether the Judeo-Christian God, the Islamic God, the Gnostic God or some other God — is not God but words about God; it should be noted in this regard that experiences of God, no matter how allegedly mystical and ineffable, always come with words attached.

With reference to Christian faith, “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). “The word of Christ” refers to Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom of God: the good news that God raised Jesus, His Messiah, from the dead to signal the coming of the kingdom of God.³ Christian faith, then, is the product of hearing, which is to say, understanding words, specifically, words that present the gospel of the kingdom. More specifically, Christian faith can be described as the process of understanding and being persuaded by the gospel.

This is not to deny the role of the Spirit of God in the process of faith. It is a Platonic rather than an apostolic Christianity, however, which has equated the spiritual with the experiential — the God-experience — rather than the verbal. According to the apostolic Jesus, “He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure” (John 3:34), and “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (John 6:63). Just as the Spirit inspired the prophets and the apostles to reveal the word of God, so to believe the word of God — the gospel of Jesus and the kingdom — is to receive the Spirit.

The Spirit dwells within, that is, in the mind and heart of, the one whose mind understands and whose heart believes the good news. Faith is progressive in that one can only be persuaded by what one understands, and understanding is a lifelong process. The by-product of the process of Christian faith is a life transformed by the renewing of the mind through the power of the Spirit (see Rom. 12:1-2; 2 Cor. 3:17-18; Eph. 4:21-24).

Whereas the God-experience is ostensibly the direct and unmediated experience of the presence of God in the context of a personal relationship, from a Christian standpoint, “there is one mediator between God and

³ The application of 1 Corinthians 15:20-23 regarding the significance of Christ’s resurrection for the future resurrection of the faithful was not clarified by our author. Note also the distinction drawn in Acts 1:5-7 regarding Christ’s ascension and the coming of the Spirit versus the coming of the kingdom at a time unknown — Editor.

humanity, the man Jesus Christ” (1 Tim. 2:5). From a Trinitarian standpoint, this may not seem to be an obstacle, because if Jesus is God the Son, the second Person of the Godhead, to acknowledge Jesus as mediator would not seem to impede the unmediated God-experience. However, the question is, whether from a Trinitarian or a unitarian perspective, how does one know Jesus, the mediator between God and humanity?

To know Jesus through the Spirit, from an apostolic standpoint, means no more and no less than to believe the gospel: “For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you submit to it readily enough” (2 Cor. 11:4). The “Jesus . . . proclaimed,” the “spirit . . . received,” and the “gospel . . . accepted” are clearly equivalent terms in this apostolic statement. In short, one knows no other *Jesus* than the one she or he has heard proclaimed in words: the Jesus one knows and the spirit one receives are identical to the gospel — the message — one accepts.

The Jesus of the gospel and the gospel of Jesus, then, are one and the same. We cannot know God without the mediation of words, from a Christian standpoint, the words about Jesus and the kingdom of God. The gospel, then, is the mediator between God and humanity: to believe the gospel is to know God. This is why the apostle Paul is so adamant about which *gospel* — which words about Jesus and the kingdom — Christians believe: “As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!” (Gal. 1:9). As far as Paul is concerned, the gospel one believes determines the God one knows. While Paul had received the gospel from God (whatever one’s understanding of inspiration may be), it seems vital for Christians, rather than assuming they have complete knowledge of the truth of the gospel, to question, discuss, and engage in persuasive discourse — all in the spirit of brotherly and sisterly love — in order to help one another come to a clearer understanding and a deeper persuasion regarding the good news of Jesus and the kingdom of God.

If it is the case that Christians do not experience a direct and unmediated access to the presence of God, what do Christians experience? If the knowledge of the Christian God is mediated through faith in the gospel of Jesus and the kingdom, it would seem that the object of Christian experience is the faith itself. The Christian faith is the source of the hope and the love that Christians experience as they embrace the faith with their minds, hearts and lives.

Christians experience love — the love God “demonstrates” in the sacrifice of His Son (Rom. 5:8) — through their faithful relationships with one another: “the only thing that counts is faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6). Just as God historically mediated His love through Christ — as He now does rhetorically through the gospel — God also mediates His love interpersonally as the faith of Christians expresses itself in love toward one another and the others in the world.

Moreover, Christians experience hope as their view of the future is lit up by their faith in the gospel of the kingdom of God: “For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness” (Gal. 5:5). To believe that God raised Jesus from the dead is, necessarily, to believe two claims: first, that Jesus is the Messiah — literally, the Anointed One, whom God has chosen to rule the kingdom — and, second, that God will raise His people from death to life in the kingdom when Jesus comes again (see 1 Cor. 15:12-28). To experience this hope is to experience “full assurance of faith” (Heb. 10:22), the confidence to enter God’s promised future without fear.

Christian faith is forward-looking; the emotional quality of faith is always anticipation: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). The “things hoped for” — resurrection from death, life in the kingdom — are the same as the “things not seen.” They are unseen not because they exist in some invisible, transcendent realm available only to mystical experience; rather, they are not seen because they are not yet, existing only in the promise of God. To believe the gospel of Jesus and the kingdom is to believe the promise of God, words that reveal God’s promised future for all nations in His kingdom.

The faith of Jesus, then, is not metaphysical, directed toward an eternal present to be experienced through faith, but eschatological, directed toward a promised future to be expected through faith. The New Testament Jesus dies on the cross because he is persuaded that the God who promised through the prophets to raise his Messiah from the dead would be faithful; Jesus knows that his resurrection is indispensable to the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promise to raise His people of all nations from death to life in the coming kingdom.

The apostles do not explain the cross in metaphysical terms but in eschatological terms: the cross points to the day of judgment. The destruction of the world which will occur on that day has already occurred, in a proleptic, or prophetic, sense, at the cross (see John 12:32; 2 Cor. 5:14). The blood of Jesus is, therefore, God’s power to persuade His people that

they can anticipate the day of judgment as, for them, the day of salvation rather than the day of destruction; they need not fear for their judgment has already occurred at the cross: they “have been crucified with Christ” (Gal. 2:20). As a result, Christians experience hope, the assurance of faith.

Conclusion

The experience of God must wait — Parmenides, Plato, and popular Christianity notwithstanding — for the age when God will come to rule His kingdom (see 1 Cor. 15:24-28); for that experience, presumably, no faith will be needed: faith will have become sight. Until then, the faith that is needed is the persuasion that the gospel — the apostolic message of Jesus and the kingdom of God — is true. That is, that the gospel of Jesus and the kingdom provides the help of God for life in the present age and the hope of God for life in the age to come.