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The Meaning of Faith

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FAITH IS ONE of the paramount features and basic elements of Christianity, yet the term is given a slightly different shade of meaning by every Christian who uses it. Interpretations of faith range from the one extreme of a vision of God or a union with God to the other extreme of an objective deposit of truth with no personal aspects whatsoever.

These two extremes may be more precisely described. The one interpretation is primarily distinguished by its interpersonal character. Faith thus understood links the human person with the divine and thereby establishes a relationship. No such interpersonal relationship enters into the other picture of faith. There the willingness on the part of man to lend credence to a codification of statutes is highlighted. In this context, "the faith" is commonly used to denote a body of Christian dogmas. Such faith is best described as noetic. Between these two conceptions of faith, interpersonal and noetic, it is necessary to draw some clear distinctions. In this article I hope to show that there is no basis in biblical usage for the impersonal interpretation of faith I have described as the noetic view. I do not mean that there is no knowledge in faith. I do mean that the content of faith is not simply objective knowledge and nothing more.

I. THE CLASSICAL USE OF THE TERM *Pistis*

Pistis has been adopted from the secular Greek vocabulary and endowed with a unique Christian significance. Why this word was seized to convey a central theme of Christian truth is the concern of the first section of this study.

In classical Greek, *pistis* signifies the trust which a person may entertain or place in another person or thing. Along with the idea of trust there is the parallel idea of conviction. The conviction arising out of *pistis* is held with assurance and commitment. Again, as an extension of the idea of trust there is the notion of fidelity as pledged or entertained.¹

A variety of English equivalents of *pistis* as commonly used by classical authors suggest themselves: pledge of fidelity, security, promise, pledge, oath, and parallel to these, means of conviction, demonstration, or proof. The prime meaning of "trust" is seen in a phrase of Herodotus: "Whom he thought worthiest of trust."² Perhaps the concept of trust is even more clearly indicated in the words of Sophocles: "to bestow confidence on one."³

1. For these various meanings of *pistis*, cf. Herodotus, *Hist.*, III, 7-8; III, 71; III 74; IV, 172; VIII, 105; IX, 91-92; IX, 106; Josephus, *Bell. Iud.*, II, 121; VI, 345; Polybius, *Hist.*, III, 9:4; V, 62:6; XV, 7:1; Plato, *Phaedrus*, 70b; Aristotle, *Topica*, I, 8 (103bl-7).

2. Herodotus, *Hist.*, III, 70.

3. Sophocles, *Oedipus Coloneus*, 950.

Another use of *pistis* is found in Aristotle, but only rarely elsewhere. *Pistis* stands for trust in the passive sense. In Aristotle the trust that is given to, or enjoyed by, the individual is mentioned.⁴ Here *pistis* means the trust or credence which one enjoys but which is essentially an earned but not created attitude. This particular use of *pistis* seems to come very close to defining the peculiar relationship which is denoted by the Christian use of the noun "faith."

The above reference to conviction must be qualified. When *pistis* means conviction, it refers to a conviction which is based upon trust and not upon sure and certain knowledge. To some Greeks the word could mean little more than opinion, but usually it meant an opinion that was cherished with confidence. It was with this connotation that *pistis* entered the sphere of religion in the Greek mind. It was used to denote a belief in, or an acknowledgement of, the gods, that was not grounded in demonstrable fact. Such a belief could only be classified either as belief in spite of ostensible fact, or as belief because of another type of knowledge or apprehension of the truth. Thus one did not have *pistis* in the truth that two plus two always equals four. This was not a fact involving the person. There was no involvement of the core of man's personality in the acknowledgement of such a reality. *Pistis* was reserved to describe a conviction, based upon an interplay of personalities, that can be best described as trust.⁵

It must be noted that although the Greeks used the word *pistis* to convey the idea of trust, or to designate a personal relationship between the subject of the trust and its object, they rarely applied this concept to the human-divine relationship. *Pistis theōn* is seldom used to denote trust in an interpersonal sense between man and God because such a concept was not compatible with the Greek view of deity. It was only the New Testament writers with their Hebraically oriented thought-patterns who applied the term *pistis* to the relationship that man could have with God through Christ.

In the lexicons of classical Greek the verb *pisteuō* is given the following meanings in order of importance: to trust, trust to or in, put faith in, rely on, believe in a person or thing, to comply, to believe that, feel sure or confident that, to entrust.⁶ The first five of these meanings might simply be gathered together in the words "to trust." It is important to note that the numerous examples listed by Liddell and Scott are almost all drawn from pre-Christian or non-Christian Greek authors. Thus the above definitions do not represent an attempt to make *pistis* carry the significance that a Christian scholar might wish it had borne in the Greek mind of the early Christian era.

Our argument so far leads to two conclusions. First, it was the idea of

4. Cf. Aristotle, *Eth. Eudem.*, VII, 2 (1237b12).

5. Cf. the contrast between *pistis* and *eidōs* in 2 Co. 5:7. We should note that *eidōs* comes from a verb meaning "to appear." *Eidōs* means the external form of a thing or an appearance that presents itself. The life of faith is not a life lived within the limits of *eidōs*. On the contrary, it is a life rooted in the inner realities of trust and confidence, and only secondarily determined by external forms.

6. These renderings are taken from Liddell and Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon*.

interdependence based on confidence, or, more simply, the notion of trust, that secular Greek authors mean to express by *pistis*. Secondly, *pistis* was primarily an attitude of person towards person. In profane Greek, *pistis* meant trust or confidence such as one person could have in another person. It could refer to an objective fact, but it was not normally used in this sense. A man usually did not have *pistis* in a thing, but rather in a person. Nevertheless, *pistis* did not play a significant role in defining man's relationship to God, because the notion of personal divine action, eliciting a trustful response from man, was foreign to the Greek mind.

II. *Pistis* IN THE SEPTUAGINT

The Septuagint stands in the forefront of all biblical translations. It is evident, however, that the Septuagint determined many of the thought-patterns which are found in the New Testament. The Old Testament which was read by the Greek writers of the New Testament was undoubtedly the Septuagint translation of the original Hebrew. Consequently, any distortion of the Hebraic thought-forms that occurred in this translation would tend to be perpetuated in the New Testament. Since the Septuagint has had such an obvious influence upon the New Testament it behooves us to ascertain how the Hebrew was rendered into Greek. More particularly, we must ask how the word *pistis* is used in the Septuagint and what Hebrew term (or terms) it is meant to translate.

One further comment ought to be inserted at this point. The Septuagint is not a free translation. It is the work of scholars who approached the original text with a keen awareness that they were approaching the sacred word of God. Consequently, they diligently attempted to retain the literal Hebrew meanings in the new medium of Greek. Nevertheless, as Gerleman indicates, the books vary in this respect.⁷ Some are translated with a literal adherence that is lacking in others.

Pistis appears in a regular form some fifty-seven times in the Septuagint. In Thomson's English translation of the Septuagint the following renderings are found: faith, true, truth, faith in (trust), trusty, faithful, faithfulness, and (surprisingly, at first glance) overseer.⁸

When *pistis* appears in the Septuagint it is used to translate one of these five Hebrew words: *aymun* (trusting, faithfulness), *emunah* (firmness, steadfastness, fidelity), *amahnah* (faith, support), *emeth* (firmness, faithfulness, truth), *ahman* (confirm, support). When the English meanings⁹ of the Hebrew words are compared with Thomson's renderings of *pistis*,

7. Cf. G. Gerleman, *Studies in the Septuagint* (Lund: Gleerup, 1946), p. 5.

8. These renderings are taken from C. A. Muses (ed.), *The Septuagint Bible: The Oldest Version of the Old Testament, in the Translation of Charles Thomson* (Indian Hills, Colo.: Falcon's Wing Press, 1954). (Thomson's translation was first published late in the eighteenth century.) "Overseer" appears in 2 Chron. 31:12; cf. 1 Chron. 9:22, 26, 31. The point is that a certain person is "in faith over" or in charge of such and such. A peculiar fidelity was demanded of an overseer.

9. The English renderings are based on Brown-Driver-Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*.

which themselves seem fully justifiable in the light of common Greek usage, the impressive fact is that the fundamental meaning remains unchanged. It seems that the Septuagint translation is free of any significant distortion of the original Hebrew ideas.

It must, however, be added that Greek influences seem to have restricted the use of *pistis* in the Septuagint. I have already suggested that the Greek mind was always hesitant to refer to God in the terms expressed by *pistis*. The Hellenistic Jews were no exception to this rule. *Pistis* appears only thirty-four times in the Septuagint books that derive from the Hebrew Old Testament, as compared with two hundred and forty-three appearances in the New Testament. A study of the frequency in the Hebrew Bible of the words for which *pistis* is used in the Septuagint reveals that the term could have been used much more frequently. Approximately one hundred and ten cases may be discovered in the Hebrew of the canonical books where *pistis* might legitimately have been used in the Greek translation.¹⁰

From this disparity between the possible use of *pistis* and its actual occurrence in the Septuagint it must be concluded that *pistis* was not a highly regarded religious word in the Greek mind. It lacked the pregnant meaning and religious associations that the devout scribes wished to convey to their Greek readers. C. H. Dodd points out that the words from the root 'MN are rendered by the Greek word *alētheia* (truth) three times as often as by *pistis*. In fact, *alētheia* is rarely used to translate any other Hebrew word in the Septuagint.¹¹ In short, in the Septuagint *pistis* is not a uniquely religious word. It is present and is used to translate a few of the Hebrew words meaning trust, faithfulness, and fidelity. It has no unique monopoly of these concepts and other words can be used with equal fidelity to the Hebrew text.

It is only in the New Testament that *pistis* is given a peculiarly religious significance. To the study of the use of *pistis* by the authors of the New Testament we shall turn shortly. Meanwhile, it is appropriate that some attention be given to the Dead Sea Scrolls.

III. "FAITH" IN THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

Of necessity the Greek word *pistis* is omitted in the title of this section. Indeed, since the Scrolls never utilize Greek, we must adopt a new method if we are to make use of evidence from Qumran in this investigation. The actual method of study has been determined by the author's inability to search the Hebrew text of all the published scrolls and fragments. Instead of the Hebrew, the English translation published by Gaster has been studied.¹² Any translation that could conceivably represent the Hebrew

10. In each case the Hebrew word is one for which *pistis* is at least sometimes used in the Septuagint.

11. Cf. C. H. Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1935), pp. 70f.

12. Cf. T. H. Gaster (ed.), *The Dead Sea Scriptures* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956).

root 'MN (already discussed in the preceding section) has been noted. Very few examples have been found. In all the works published by Gaster¹³ there are only thirteen instances that could possibly stand for Hebrew expressions of the idea of steadfastness, trust, or fidelity.

The word "truth" in the more academic sense is prevalent. Since "God loves knowledge"¹⁴ it is natural that the sons of light should be possessors of the Truth. This use of the word "truth" has little in common with its use in the Manual of Discipline, where initiates are instructed "to act truthfully."¹⁵ The latter expression is a parallel to "to act 'trustfully'" or in a reliable manner.

Of the thirteen occurrences of "faith" or cognate terms, two refer directly to objective truth and are only mentioned here because of the previously noted tendency of the Septuagint to identify faith with truth. In the Dead Sea Scrolls the two ideas are linked in these two cases only. Of the eleven remaining instances, one is concerned with faith on the human level without reference to God, while ten directly link man with God in a fashion not too different from the relationship which the Christian calls faith. It is worthy of note that ten of the thirteen references involve the Godhead. This is quite clearly in the Hebrew tradition, differing from the secular Greek use of *pistis*, which never included the divine in its frame of reference.

Since there are so few relevant references in the Dead Sea Scrolls, it may be advantageous to list them along with enough context to render them intelligible. The only long quotation is the first. It deserves close attention because among all Gaster's texts its concluding words come closest to the genuine flavour of faith in the Hebraic-Christian sense.

When the spirit of light operates in a man (we are told) it is responsible for

the making straight before him all the ways of righteousness and truth, the implanting in his heart of fear for the judgments of God, of a spirit of humility, of patience, of abundant compassion, of perpetual goodness, of insight, of perception, of that sense of the Divine Power that is based at once on an apprehension of God's works and a reliance on His plenteous mercy."¹⁶

Such a reliance on God's mercy certainly bespeaks trust.

The remaining nine references are quite short and merit no individual comment: "Israel broke faith and renounced Him [God]." ". . . these faithful men. . ." (Faithfulness to God's covenant is meant.) ". . . placed their reliance on God. . ." ". . . [set] a sober limit to all defending of faith. . ." ". . . in Thy great goodness I trust." ". . . men that hold firm to Thy covenant." "Ye do not believe when it is told." (A comment by Gaster states that the word rendered "believe" also means "keep faith.") ". . . do

13. The contents include: The Manual of Discipline; The Zadokite Document; Code for Camp Communities; A Supplementary Code; A Formulary of Blessing; The Praise of God (hymns and psalms); The Oration of Moses; A Commentary on the Books of Micah, Nahum and Habakkuk; The Triumph of God (including the treatises on the War, Discipline of the Future Congregation, and the New Covenant).

14. Gaster, *Dead Sea Scriptures*, p. 62.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

not believe in the ordinances of God." ". . . and acknowledge Thee [God] in faithfulness."¹⁷

The emphasis in the Dead Sea Scrolls is upon obedience to a legalistic system. Faith in any interpersonal sense is (to say the least) pushed into the background. Noetic faith appears in the form of an allegiance to the knowledge that the sons of light possess. The world of the Dead Sea Scrolls is a radically split world. The dualism of light and darkness pervades all the writings collected in Gaster's volume. Obedience, not faith, is the requirement for admission to the community. Faith does not accomplish salvation, which comes rather through loyalty to the covenanters and a repection of all else as evil.

In many respects the members of the Qumran group were extremely sectarian. They had the Truth, and everyone else was in untruth. Faith was not an integral part of their theological position. God was the ruler and legislator, not the friend of man. If his commandments were obeyed righteousness was the reward. There is little of an interpersonal relationship between God and Man.

The contribution made by the Scrolls to the understanding of faith is thus infinitesimal. They stand in striking contrast rather than in direct relationship to the teaching of the New Testament.

IV. *Pistis* ACCORDING TO ST. PAUL

The word *pistis* appears 243 times in the New Testament. Approximately half of these occurrences are found in the writings definitely attributed to Paul. Since Paul is the author of the earliest books in the New Testament, it is probable that his influence determined the frequent appearance of *pistis* in such books as Hebrews and 1 and 2 Timothy. If this assumption is accepted, then the most important task in any New Testament study of *pistis* becomes simply a study of faith in Paul's writings.

Yet perhaps the word "simply" is misleading. No concept that has such a basic role in determining the theological perspective of St. Paul can be studied in isolation from the rest of the New Testament. To Paul's concept of faith we shall presently turn. A few general observations on the New Testament as a whole are first in order.

It is surprising to learn that a statistical analysis of the use of *pistis* in the New Testament shows that John's Gospel does not contain the word. *Pistis* appears but once in 1 John, and not at all in 2 and 3 John. Howard suggests that the late date of the Johannine writings may indicate the reason why *pistis* is conspicuous by its absence.¹⁸ It is possible that post-Pauline Christianity tended to think of faith as a fixed deposit of truth. It may have been in an attempt to guard against this misunderstanding of *pistis* that the author of the Fourth Gospel omitted the word. This argu-

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 61, 73, 73, 119, 174, 200, 249, 250, 298.

18. Cf. W. F. Howard, *Christianity according to St. John* (London: Duckworth, 1943), pp. 153f.

ment becomes even more plausible when it is noted that the verb "to believe" (*pisteuein*) occurs almost one hundred times in the Gospel of John, although *pistis* is not found at all. Thus there appears to be a definite attempt to avoid the use of the noun. The conscientious substitution of the verb for the noun may be interpreted as a deliberate attempt to emphasize the dynamic or active quality of faith. Faith is not "the faith"; it is a relationship and therefore resists any attempted codification.

Similarly, the author of the Fourth Gospel avoids the Greek word *gnosis*. This omission is undoubtedly linked with the contemporary threat of gnosticism. If this is so, it is not too preposterous to suggest an analogous motive for the absence of the noun form (*pistis*) of a verb (*pisteuō*) which is used nearly one hundred times.

If the presupposition is accepted that by the early second century John was attempting to combat a misunderstanding of the true meaning of *pistis*, then a further question must be raised. In the attempt to disassociate Christianity from an understanding of faith as purely noetic, was John correcting a mistake made by Paul? Did the earlier writings of St. Paul lead to this distortion, or was it a distortion of Pauline thought itself that was being attacked? These questions lead directly to the central theme of this concluding section. What was the real meaning of *pistis* for Paul?

Unlike John, Paul certainly does not avoid the Greek word *pistis*. As we have already seen he is directly responsible for about one half of its appearances in the New Testament, and perhaps, through his influence on other writers, he is responsible for the meaning given to *pistis* in most of the New Testament.

Paul had a uniquely Christocentric religion. The basis of his own spiritual (and physical) existence was his Christ-mysticism. It may be argued, as Deissman points out, that Paul's mysticism was a mysticism of fellowship and not of oneness with its object.¹⁹ However, Paul's sense of being "in Christ" meant that his life could no longer be at his own disposal. The purposes of Christ and the purposes of Paul were unified and moulded into one.

Without discussing Pauline mysticism, which of course is worthy of extensive study in itself, it is justifiable to state that Paul's theology grew out of, and was determined by, his Christocentric conversion experience. This experience thoroughly convinced Paul that the crucified Jesus was alive and was the Christ. From this beginning grew Paul's entire spiritual life as a Christian. Paul's commission was to serve and worship the reigning Lord. The sovereignty of Christ was always a present reality for Paul.

Beginning with this premise Paul was unable to accept any means of forgiveness or of salvation as valid apart from Christ. Paul preached a new life in Christ that was able to liberate. Man could be freed from slavery to self-justification in all its various forms (e.g., justification through serving the law) by virtue of the acceptance of the greatest slavery man could

19. Cf. A. Deissmann, *Paul* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1926), p. 255.

ever know—in other words, by becoming a servant of Christ. Here is the great Pauline paradox: man can be free if he becomes a slave.

For Paul, in the new life of freedom existing divisions must be swept away. "Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, freeman, but Christ is all, and in all" (Col. 3:11). Or, to paraphrase this verse, we might say that the commands of the law, the human scale of worth, and man's actual position all merit nothing. It is Christ alone who is able to lend value to a human life. Hence it is the degree to which Christ has become "all, and in all" that is the ultimate test of man. The necessity of reorientation of human existence is asserted throughout the Pauline literature.

Faith is the means whereby the new life is made possible.²⁰ That life is lived, not by works, but by faith. Such a use of *pistis* is not unusual in the writings of Paul. Faith is active, not passive. It is an attitude or relationship, not an objective fact. It is the result of a soul-shattering encounter with the resurrected Christ. In Paul's own case, this encounter so convinced him of the power of God in his Son that Paul was able, through grace, to abandon his life completely to the direction and control of the Lord of love. This assured abandonment is faith. The confident trust that exists between God and man is able to free the latter from the nagging anxiety of uneasiness and frustrated attempts to establish his own position. Once a person becomes thus integrated into the life which man has been created to live, all of man's furious strivings for recognition are fearlessly abandoned. As far as Paul was concerned, he was recognized for what he was, a helpless sinner. In this act of recognition, Paul was forgiven and justified. He received from a gracious God the treasure that could not be earned. Along with this came the greatest treasure of all. This was the ability to continue in the knowledge and fellowship of Christ through faith. Or, to put it still more explicitly, faith was the greatest gift of all because it gave man a certain assurance or confident trust in God's faithfulness. This assurance permitted man to proceed to his true human destiny—to live a life in love. In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul leaves little doubt that love "is the greatest of these spiritual gifts." Faith, however, must exist between man and God before man can participate in the life of love. In this sense, faith is a means to an end. It is a means to the end that Christ may live in our lives. In this ultimate life of love the covenant relationship is renewed in a new and dynamic way.

One factor that must not be omitted in any consideration of Paul's concept of faith is his frequent mention of "the faith" (Rom. 1:5; 3:3; Gal. 1:23; 3:23; 3:25; Phil. 1:27; etc.). It is at this point that Paul may have given rise to the misunderstanding which John studiously attempted to rectify. In some instances it is entirely possible to interpret "the faith" as a reference to a codified and deposited body of truth. Such an interpretation makes the object of religious devotion a group of objective facts to be

20. On the place of faith in the new life in Christ, cf. Gal. 2:20.

accepted in much the same way as some accept the creeds today. They have truth in them but they in no way affect my life.

If such an interpretation of Paul's references to "the faith" is accepted, how can the following Pauline statements be reasonably interpreted? He writes: "The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God" (Rom. 14:22); "... for you stand firm in your faith" (2 Cor. 1:23); "... receive the promise of the spirit through faith" (Gal. 3:14). These references suggest that faith has an interpersonal quality. It appears to be a relationship rather than a body of truth.

The conception of faith as a relationship is in accord with earlier uses of *pistis*. I suggest that references to "the faith" can best be interpreted as references to the *relationship*, of which Paul was so keenly aware, between himself and Christ. The faith which he coveted for all men and so vigorously defended was the interpersonal trust which dominated the lives of the early believers. This faith which led to life in Christ was the foundation upon which Paul erected his ethical precepts. If confident trust characterized the relationship between God and man, then surely this vertical relation must have horizontal implications. "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control . . ." (Gal. 5:23). All of these are earthly reflections of what Paul conceived to be the life of faith. The world ought to participate in the *abandoned assurance* and *confident trust* that the convert knew from a gracious Lord.

It is obvious that St. Paul's frequent use of "the faith," even though he meant to refer to the relationship that existed between Christ and converts, was apt to be misunderstood. "The faith," taken in isolation from Pauline thought as a whole, does suggest a deposit of truth. It is possible that it was just such a misinterpretation of Paul that John was attempting to correct.

The church in the twentieth century is called to remedy a similar misunderstanding of the Pauline writings. John has failed to make his point by his subtle omission of the noun *pistis*. The church must continue to work for the recovery of the religious significance of faith as an interpersonal relationship rather than the acceptance of an impersonal body of truth.

This is not to say that there is no objective truth in faith. Paul himself was well aware that the acceptance of Christ could not be separated from his historicity. Faith presupposed certain facts. Christ had lived, had been crucified, and was alive. The faith-relationship with the living Lord presupposed this salvation-history. It is understandable, then, that men should have substituted the salvation-history for the living Lord as the object of faith, without realizing that they were departing from New Testament teaching. Nevertheless, the evidence which we have been considering points unmistakably to a notion of faith which goes far beyond any mere allegiance to an objective body of truth, and it is a matter of urgent importance that the biblical meaning of *pistis* should be reclaimed in all its richness by the modern church.