

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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Faith in Hebrews 11

W. Gary Crampton

Two Definitions of “Faith”

The word “faith” (*pistis*), as it is found in the New Testament, has both a subjective and an objective usage. The subjective usage is concerned with the act of believing, as found in passages such as *Romans* 1:16-17 and 10:17. There we have that which the Westminster Standards refer to as “saving faith.”¹ According to the *Shorter Catechism* (Q. 86), “[saving] faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the Gospel.”

The objective usage, on the other hand, has to do with that which is believed. In this latter sense, it is frequently referred to in the New Testament as *the faith*. According to Gordon Clark, in the objective sense, *the faith* “is the doctrinal content of Christianity.”² For example, in *Jude* 3 we read that we are “to contend earnestly for *the faith* which was once for all delivered to the saints.” In *1 Timothy* 6:12 Paul exhorts Timothy to “fight the good fight of *the faith*.” Earlier in the same epistle Paul had written that some have turned away “concerning *the faith* [and] suffered shipwreck” (1:19). This objective usage is brought home powerfully in *Galatians* 3:23 & 25, where Jesus himself, or his institution of the New Testament age, is called *the faith*. In each of these verses, the faith referred to is not the subjective act of believing the truth of God’s Word; it is the Word itself. Functioning as a metonymy, it is “the doctrinal content of Christianity,” or that which is to be believed. In the objective sense, the faith is the propositions revealed by God in Scripture.

Faith and Belief are the Same

In the New Testament, there is only one word for belief or faith, *pistis*, and its verb form is *pistein*, believe. There is

no separate word for faith, and those who wish to say that faith is something different from and superior to belief have no support from Scripture. Gordon Clark once remarked that the Bible’s English translators could have avoided a lot of confusion if they had not used the Latin-based word “faith” and had instead simply used “believe” and “belief” throughout the English Bible, as the writers of the New Testament use *pistis* and *pistein* throughout the Greek Bible.³

How Subjective and Objective Faith are Related

We must distinguish between the subjective faith of the believer (that is, his mental act of believing) and the objective truth of God’s Word (“the faith”). But we must never separate one’s subjective saving faith from “the (objective) faith” which is to be believed. The reason is that saving faith always believes “the doctrinal content of Christianity.” It is that doctrinal content, the objects believed, that makes saving faith saving. Or, in the words of *Hebrews* 4:2, it is essential that the truth of Christianity be “mixed with faith” in those who hear it in order for them to be saved. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* (14:2) says it this way:

By this [saving] faith, a Christian believes to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God himself speaking therein; and acts differently upon that which each particular passage thereof contains; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come. But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.

1. See chapter 14 of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, “Of Saving Faith.”

2. Gordon H. Clark, *The Pastoral Epistles* (The Trinity Foundation, 1983), 190.

3. See Gordon Clark’s *What Is Saving Faith?* The Trinity Foundation, 2004.

Nowhere in Scripture is this taught more clearly than in *Hebrews* 11, a chapter on the Old Testament “heroes” of the faith. The opening words of the chapter confirm this: “Now faith is the substance [*hupostasis*] of things hoped for; the evidence [*elenchos*] of things not seen.” As John Owen averred, this statement cannot be made *merely* with regard to our subjective believing. That is, our subjective believing is not alone “the essence of things hoped for,” though saving faith is evidence of things not seen.⁴

The Word of God (see *Hebrews* 1:3) is the certain truth of the triune God (*John* 17:17; *Luke* 1:1-4; *Proverbs* 22:17-21); the Word is God the Son himself (*John* 1; *Psalms* 31:5; *John* 14:6; *1 John* 5:6). As the Presbyterian J. Oliver Buswell stated: “The system of truth to which we adhere, the truth which centers in our Lord Jesus Christ, is the substance and evidence for all the gracious promises of God in reference to unseen things to be realized eschatologically in the future life.”⁵ The Lutheran theologian R. C. H. Lenski wrote: “[Subjective] Faith is never its own basis.... faith rests on something outside of itself and not on itself.... Evidence, proof, etc., is the objective contents of the Word [of God], the ground, basis, productive power of faith.”⁶ *Habakkuk* 2:2-4 is a powerful example of this teaching, for there we read that the doctrine of “salvation by faith alone” (verse 4) is founded upon the certainty and truthfulness of the Word of God (verses 2-3).

Therefore, Owen concluded, the only way that *Hebrews* 11:1 can apply to the act of subjective faith is if that “faith mixes and incorporates itself with the Word of promise.”⁷ That is, to speak more clearly, only when faith believes the propositions of Scripture is it saving faith, “the essence of things hoped for, the proof of things not seen.” Jonathan Edwards agreed. According to Edwards, the saints of *Hebrews* 11 placed their faith, that is, their “hope” (hope, like trust, is belief of a proposition or propositions in the future tense) in God’s promises in Christ: “Hope is our acquiescing and relying on God’s truth and sufficiency as to what concerns our own future happiness.”⁸ And again: “Seeking God in Scripture commonly implies trusting in God or the exercise of true faith.”⁹ In commenting on *Hebrews* 11:1-2, Matthew Henry wrote: Saving faith “is a firm persuasion and expectation that God will perform all that He has promised to us in Christ.... Faith is the firm assent of the soul to the divine revelation and every part of it, and sets to its seal that God is true. It is a full

approbation of all that God has revealed as holy, just, and good.”¹⁰

This is precisely what the author of *Hebrews* teaches in 11:13: It was “the promises” which they “embraced” (that is, believed) that rendered these Old Testament saints pleasing to God. And it is much in line with what the author said earlier in 10:23: “Let us hold fast the confession of the hope [God’s promised blessings in Christ] without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.”

Reading Hebrews with Understanding

This being the case, when we read *Hebrews* 11 we might insert the definition “his (or their) believing God’s Word” for the word “faith” in order to clarify things. Verse 2 reads: “For by it [their believing God’s Word] the elders obtained a good testimony.” It was their subjective faith in the truth of “the faith,” that gave the Old Testament saints a “good testimony” before God. That is, it was “the simple elementary truths of the Gospel,” as taught in the Scriptures, “which constituted the ground of [their] future hope.”¹¹ These saints “embraced the promises.”

Verse 3 reads: “By faith [our believing God’s Word] we understand that the worlds were framed by the Word of God.” It is the Scripture itself, that is, “the doctrinal content of Christianity,” which tells us, as the *Shorter Catechism* (Q. 9) says, that “the work of creation is God’s making all things of nothing, by the Word of his power, in the space of six days, and all very good.” And by faith, the saints acquiesce to God’s Word on the subject; they believe these things to be so, simply because God said it in his Word.

In verse 4 it is “by faith [his believing God’s Word] [that] Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained witness that he was righteous.” Abel’s more excellent sacrifice was based on what he believed about God and sacrifices, as taught by God. Hence, he offered a bloody sacrifice, anticipating the cross work of Christ, as opposed to the unbloody offering of Cain (*Genesis* 4:3-5). As stated by Matthew Henry: “Abel brought a sacrifice of atonement, the blood whereof was shed in order to remission, thereby owning himself a sinner, placating God’s wrath, and imploring his favor in a Mediator.”¹² Again, Abel believed in the God who accepts such sacrifices. But he could know about this God and his good pleasure in accepting such sacrifices only from *the faith*, that is, the Word of God. In this way Abel embraced the promises. Notice, again, that “embracing” means nothing different from or more than believing. It is a figure of speech, the literal meaning of which is “to believe.”

Verse 5 says that it was by his belief in the promises of God that Enoch “was translated so that he did not see

4. John Owen, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, VII:11.

5. J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, 2:185.

6. R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Epistle of James*, 375-376.

7. Owen, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, VII:9.

8. *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, II:809-810; see also John H. Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, I:330-331, 378ff.

9. Cited in Gerstner, *Rational Biblical Theology*, I:387.

10. Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, VI:938.

11. Buswell, *A Systematic Theology*, 2:185.

12. Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, I:37-38.

death." He had placed his faith in the Gospel truth and so lived by it that "he pleased God" (see *Amos* 3:3: "Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?"). Verse 6 teaches us that "without faith [believing, putting our trust, in God's Word] it is impossible to please God, for he who comes to God must believe that he is [God], and that he is a rewarder of those who diligently seek him." How is a sinner able to know in order to believe (for one cannot believe what one does not know) "that he is [God], and that he is a rewarder of those who diligently seek him?" One can know only by the teachings of Scripture, "the doctrinal content of Christianity," "the faith."

In verses 7 through 11 we learn that Noah's faith was based on the "divine warning" of God's Word (verse 7); Abraham's faith was founded on God's "call" for him "to go out to the place which he would afterward receive as an inheritance" (verse 8), and the promise God had made regarding "the land of promise" (verse 9); and Sarah's faith focused on the promise God had made to her regarding the child which would be born to her (verse 11). All of these responses of faith are responses to God's Word. They are all consent to, agreement with, assent to, the propositions that God had revealed to these saints. They were not feelings, trances, intuitions, or anything other than assent to propositions revealed by God.

The final two verses of *Hebrews* 11 elaborate the opening words of the chapter: "And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith [through believing the Word of God], did not receive the promise [the things hoped for and not yet seen], God having provided something better for us [all of the elect], that they should not be made perfect apart from us." That is to say, even though the Old Testament saints looked forward to their eschatological hope, they did not witness the coming of Christ and their everlasting inheritance. Yet by what they believed, they embraced the promises. We too, living in the New Testament era, and looking back on the finished work of Christ, still await the second coming and our everlasting inheritance. And it is by believing the teaching of God's Word that we are assured that it will occur.

It is the Word of God alone, "the faith," which gives substance to the subjective faith of the elect sinner. Subjective faith, without being "mixed" with the objective "doctrinal content of Christianity" (*Hebrews* 4:2), is not saving faith. It is faith, that is believing, but it is not saving faith, for it is not a believing of the Word of God. Saving faith is that which embraces the promises of God. It is that faith which was exercised by all the Old Testament saints, who, like their New Testament counterparts, were "looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith" (*Hebrews* 12:2). And in him alone all of God's elect are "made perfect."

Open Letter to Joe Morecraft

Pastor Joseph Morecraft

Executive Editor

The Counsel of Chalcedon

Dear Pastor Morecraft,

In his letter to the Galatians Paul writes of his amazement that this fledgling church would so quickly desert "him who called you by the grace of Christ for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the Gospel of Christ." Paul pronounces the most severe judgment on those distorting the Gospel by damning them, and he chastises the Galatians for being "men pleasers" instead of Christ pleasers. Paul even gets personal and excoriates Barnabas for joining Peter in his "hypocrisy" and rebukes Peter publicly and to his face "because he stood condemned." Paul calls the Galatians "foolish" and asks who had "bewitched" them into doubting the Gospel of justification by faith alone and embracing a clever substitute. Peter's hypocrisy, which contributed to leading men astray, Barnabas in particular, stemmed from his fear of men, who, we are told, were of "high reputation." While Paul would not "yield subjection" to these men "for even an hour," Peter expressed his submission to these "false brothers" by separating himself physically from Gentile believers, thereby sanctioning the false doctrines of the Judaizers without ever having to say a word. Peter's actions were enough to illustrate his shameful accommodation of those who "had sneaked in... in order to bring us into bondage." But I am sure you know all these things.

Paul's letter to the Galatians provides the single best parallel in all of Scripture to the current defection from the Biblical doctrine of justification by belief alone.

Paul's letter to the Galatians provides the single best parallel in all of Scripture to the current defection from the Biblical doctrine of justification by belief alone that is corrupting Reformed churches. The error Paul was fighting was the subtle yet deadly idea that belief of the Gospel alone is not the sole instrument of justification. The teaching of the Judaizers was that justification results from a combination of belief plus our faithful obedience to the demands of the covenant – in the Galatians' case, circumcision. Paul damns this Jewish notion that mere belief of the Gospel alone – the Biblical idea that Douglas

Wilson derides as “raw faith” – is not sufficient to render a sinner righteous before God, along with those who teach it.

So, I ask you, what excuse could the Elders of the Galatian Church have offered if, following Paul's letter, they had continued to open their homes and pulpits to the Judaizers? What excuse could Peter and Barnabas have offered if they had continued to eat with the Judaizers? What excuse could the Session of the Galatian Church have given for holding a Pastors Conference on the role of our covenant obedience in obtaining salvation? Would Paul have overlooked an article or two in *The Counsel of Galatia* magazine defending the efficacy and importance of circumcision for all believers, or even something as seemingly innocuous as an essay on the importance of Sabbath-keeping by devotees of “Second Temple Judaism” who also acknowledged Christ as Lord?

What excuse could the Elders of the Galatian Church have offered if, following Paul's letter, they had continued to open their homes and pulpits to the Judaizers?

If the Galatian Session could have offered no good excuse, what should we make of the recent issue of *The Counsel of Chalcedon* featuring the work of one of Neolegalism's most prominent and recognized defenders, Dr. Richard Gaffin, Jr., of Westminster Seminary? Your magazine even gave his essay the recognition and prominence of a cover story! Is it possible that you have forgotten Gaffin's decades-long defense of the false gospel of Norman Shepherd, documented in Palmer Robertson's book *The Current Justification Controversy* and elsewhere? Have you forgotten Gaffin's glowing endorsement of Shepherd's counterfeit gospel on the cover of Shepherd's book, *The Call of Grace*: “This lucid and highly readable study provides valuable instruction on what it means to live in covenant with God. God's covenant is the only way of life that fully honors both the absolute, all-embracing sovereignty of his saving grace and the full, uninhibited activity of his people. *The Call of Grace* should benefit anyone concerned about biblical growth in Christian life and witness.”

Have you forgotten Gaffin's official, public defense of one of Shepherd's defenders and friends, OPC Ruling Elder John Kinnaird, who was tried for and convicted of heresy in the OPC, only to have his conviction overturned by the OPC General Assembly, thanks to Gaffin's influence, prestige, and help? You might recall that Kinnaird is the man who taught, among other errors, that “It is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous at the day of Judgment.” Yet, Gaffin argued at his trial that Kinnaird's conflation of faith and works in justification is “well within the system of doctrine taught in Scripture.”

Has Gaffin publicly recanted his errors? Has he repented of his own “new perspective” on Paul and the false gospel

of salvation by Existential Union with Christ – not belief of the Gospel – that he has taught for four decades in his book *Resurrection and Redemption*? For Gaffin, water baptism, not belief alone, brings sinners into union with Christ.

When I spoke to Wayne Rogers, Editor of *The Counsel of Chalcedon*, about this matter, he explained that, in his view, Gaffin “has stated a very helpful and important perspective on keeping the Sabbath which...is desperately needed today among Christians who are by and large Sabbath breakers.” Is keeping the Sabbath so important that you must commend an author to your readers who perverts the Gospel? No doubt the Judaizers believed in God and Christ as Messiah, and they may have even had some interesting things to say about other doctrines. But does Paul for one moment consider such possibilities? Or does he immediately damn these men who believed in God and the Sabbath for teaching a false gospel? What “helpful and important perspective” can Gaffin offer to your readers, since any assertion he might make about the Sabbath must be governed by his rejection of the Biblical and Reformed order of salvation (*ordo salutis*) in favor of his doctrine of Existential Union with Christ? Even more incredible was Editor Rogers' claim that *The Counsel of Chalcedon* “broke the story” on the current justification controversy, and yet Mr. Rogers was unfamiliar with Gaffin's central role in that controversy. How can that be? Can anyone imagine the editor of *The Washington Post*, which broke the Watergate story, being unfamiliar with G. Gordon Liddy, Chuck Colson, or Richard Nixon?

I hope and pray that you will inform your readers of Dr. Gaffin's and Westminster Seminary's central role in defending and furthering the false gospel that is now sweeping through Presbyterian and Reformed churches.

Whatever we conclude about Mr. Rogers' performance as Editor of *The Counsel of Chalcedon*, you, Pastor Morecraft, must have known that Dr. Gaffin is and has been on the wrong side of the debate over justification for more than thirty years. Is it possible that you are so impressed by Dr. Gaffin's “high reputation” that you have joined his band of admirers who look for any excuse to downplay and ignore his responsibility for teaching and defending a counterfeit gospel for almost all his adult life?

I hope and pray that you will inform your readers of Dr. Gaffin's and Westminster Seminary's central role in defending and furthering the false gospel that is now sweeping through Presbyterian and Reformed churches.

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