

FAITH AND KNOWLEDGE—PART II

What is the connection between faith and knowledge? Or is there one? Can one both “know” and “have faith” at the same time, or is it an either/or proposition? Some have suggested that having faith automatically rules out possessing knowledge. Sadly, the idea that one has either faith or knowledge, but not both, is quite common even within the religious community. But what is the truth of the matter? Can biblical faith and knowledge coexist, or must one be viewed as the antithesis of the other?

The late Guy N. Woods, who served for a number of years as editor of the *Gospel Advocate*, wrote:

...[A] much more sophisticated form of subjectivism has appeared wherein faith and knowledge are compartmentalized, put in sharp contrast, and each made to exclude the other. The allegation is that a proposition which one holds by faith one cannot know by deduction. This conclusion is reached by taking one definition of the word “know,” putting it in opposition to the word “faith,” and thus making them mutually exclusive. To do this is to err with reference to both faith and to knowledge! (1994, 136[2]:31).

Pitting knowledge against faith, or pitting faith against knowledge, is indeed “to err.” Knowledge and faith are neither diametrically opposed nor mutually exclusive. In fact, **faith is dependent upon knowledge**. The Lord Himself hardly could have been clearer in His assessment of the part that knowledge has to play in establishing faith when He said: “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32). If knowledge relates to the truth, then faith relates no less to Him Who is the truth (John 14:6). Both faith (John 16:27-30) and knowledge (John 7:17) realize that He and His teaching are from the Father. The apostle Peter’s desire was that Christians should “grow in the grace and knowledge” of the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18). Peter’s fellow apostle, Paul, expressed the desire “that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding” (Colossians 1:9). God “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). Furthermore, not only can men **know** the truth, but they can **know** that they know it, as the apostle John emphasized repeatedly. John stated that we can know the truth (1 John 2:21) and that we can “know that we know” Jesus and “know that we are in him” as we keep His commandments or His word (1 John 2:3,5).

FAITH AND EVIDENCE

From a logical (and scriptural) standpoint, any view of faith that lacks objective evidence is unworthy of the name “faith.” If faith is not objective, how, then, do we know that we “have faith” in the first place? It is with ob-

jectively measurable evidence that Christians are commanded to **prove** our case “to everyone who asks a reason for the hope” that we possess (1 Peter 3:15). The fact is that we believe **because** of the evidence, not in spite of it! Whether or not God exists, and what He is like, are issues to be settled by an appeal to credible evidence. Proving such things as God’s existence and the legitimacy of Christianity is not an **option**; it is an **obligation**! Paul commanded: “Prove all things [literally, “put all things to the test”]; hold fast to that which is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21). When the apostle wrote to the first-century Christians in Philippi, he spoke of his “defense and confirmation of the gospel” (Philippians 1:7).

In the book of Acts, we are told that Apollos “vigorously refuted the Jews publicly, showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ” (Acts 18:28). Apollos compelled the Jews to interact with the evidence, and in so doing he publicly refuted their many religious errors. He did not accomplish that task via an irrational, nebulous concept called “faith.” Rather, he used irrefutable evidence. When John the Baptizer, while in prison, heard about the works of Christ, he sent his disciples to inquire: “‘Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?’” Jesus answered and said to them, “Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them’” (Matthew 11:3-5). Christ’s point was this: look at the evidence, and make up your own mind—which is exactly what John and his disciples did!

The fact is, neither Christ, Paul, Apollos, nor any of the other Bible characters ever saw faith as anything but evidence-based/knowledge-based. We today should view biblical faith no differently.

FAITH AND CREDIBLE TESTIMONY

While it is true that a portion of the evidence that builds and sustains a person’s faith derives from experiential knowledge, it also is true that a portion of the evidence does not. The fact of the matter is, a sizable portion of the evidence that we use to build and sustain a legitimate, scriptural faith derives from credible testimony. Skeptics, of course, have suggested that reliance upon the testimony of another person cannot result in reliable knowledge. However, we **know** that historical characters such as George Washington, Napoleon, and Alexander the Great lived, even though no one still living has seen them. We **know** that Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates lived, even though no one for many generations ever set eyes on them. We **know** of numerous other people and events in the same manner, as a direct result of credible testimony passed faithfully from age to age. Were we to reject credible testimony, we would lose all knowledge of people and events beyond the lifetimes of the actual eyewitnesses that saw those actual people or events.

Further, biblical material provides a good test case for the accuracy of information passed from one person to another. In Mark 16, the account is recorded of Mary Magdalene having seen the Lord after His resurrection. She immediately went and told other disciples who, the text indicates, also “disbelieved” (Mark 16:11). Later, Jesus appeared to two men walking in the country. They, too, returned to the disciples and reported that the Lord was alive, but the disciples “did not believe them either” (Mark 16:13). Were these disciples justified in rejecting the report of the Lord’s resurrection merely because they had not been eyewitnesses themselves? Was their disbelief somehow evidence of “intellectual integrity” on their part? Were they correct in, and to be commended for, their rejection of two different reports that originated with trustworthy eyewitnesses?

No, the disciples were not justified in their disbelief. Nor was that disbelief evidence of any type of intellectual integrity on their part. Later, when the Lord appeared to them, He made it crystal clear that He did not appreciate either their skepticism or their failure to accept credible testimony when He “rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen” (Mark 16:14). Thus, the Lord verified the fact that credible testimony represents adequate evidence upon which to base one’s faith. If Mary Magdalene had expressed accurately to the disciples what she had seen, and if they in turn expressed accurately what they had been told, would this not constitute valid evidence-based testimony that would warrant genuine faith in the resurrection? Facts must be reported before they can be believed. In Acts 18, the circumstances are discussed in which “many of the Corinthians hearing, believed...” (v. 8). What did they hear that caused them to believe? It was the testimony provided by Paul. Thus, faith can be described as knowledge based upon credible testimony.

Another biblical instance that documents the legitimate faith-building nature of reliable testimony can be found in the case involving the refusal of one of Christ’s apostles to believe in His resurrection without empirical evidence. In John 20:24-29, the account is recorded of how Thomas (often referred to as “doubting Thomas”) rejected the testimony of his fellow disciples, saying: “Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe” (20:25). While Thomas is to be commended for the fact that he demanded evidence adequate to the task of building and sustaining his faith, at the same time he is **not** to be commended for refusing to accept one of the legitimate avenues of obtaining that evidence—credible testimony. Notice that when Christ appeared to Thomas He said: “Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed” (John 20:29b). Christ’s point was that while Thomas could build and sustain his faith via firsthand, empirical evidence, there would be some who would find it necessary to build and sustain their faith on the

basis of credible testimony that came long after the actual events to which such testimony referred. The people of whom Christ spoke never would have the opportunity to witness, from a first-person perspective, the things that Thomas had seen. Yet that did not mean they would possess a faith that was any less valid. Their faith would not be diminished by a lack of empirical evidence, since credible testimony from reliable eyewitnesses could serve just as well to establish the authenticity of Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

FAITH AND SIGHT

There is little doubt that much misunderstanding about faith and knowledge has arisen from an abuse of Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 5:7 where the apostle remarked that "we walk by faith, not by sight." In order to properly understand this passage (or any other passage of Scripture for that matter), we must look carefully at both the immediate and the remote contexts. Paul's point in 2 Corinthians 5:7 is both amplified and clarified by his statement in verse 16 of that same chapter: "Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer." In other words, Jesus had been here in the flesh in the past, and hence could be known. But at the time Paul wrote 2 Corinthians 5:16, the situation had changed because Christ no longer was on the Earth—which is why the apostle reiterated the point that "**now** we know him thus no longer." Of course, Christ still could be known (cf. 2 Timothy 1:12), but not "according to the flesh." Had Paul written 2 Corinthians several years earlier while Christ still was alive and living in the Middle East, these passages (5:7,16) never would have been included among his remarks. But since they were written at some point after Christ's ascension, Paul therefore was compelled to make the comparison he did in 2 Corinthians 5:7.

His point, quite simply, was this. There was a time when faith and sight went together. That is to say, at one time in history, men walked by faith **because of sight**. This was true of Thomas, for example, when Christ said to him after His resurrection, "**Because you have seen me**, you have believed" (John 20:29, emp. added). The Samaritans believed on the Lord, at least in part, because they had **seen** Him (John 4:41). This was true of many first-century people who were fortunate enough to witness, firsthand, such things as Christ's miracles, death, and resurrection, or the marvelous wonders and signs performed by the apostles after His ascension.

However, as we stated earlier, while on occasion faith may be contrasted with a **means of obtaining knowledge** (e.g., sight), faith never is contrasted with **knowledge itself**. Paul's intent in 2 Corinthians 5:7 that "we walk by faith, not by sight" was not to contrast faith and knowledge, but instead to contrast faith that is produced by sight with faith produced by other means of gaining knowledge (e.g., credible testimony, deduction, etc.).

Today Christians can have a genuine, rock-solid faith **without** sight, thanks to credible testimony from reliable eyewitnesses and other means of knowledge that are not necessarily dependent upon having seen something personally. In fact, that was Peter’s point of emphasis when he wrote of Christ, “whom **having not seen**, you love. **Though now you do not see Him, yet believing**, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls” (1 Peter 1: 8-9, emp. added). All of us believe in people, places, and events that we never have seen personally, and that no one of our generation has seen firsthand. Yet that in no way diminishes the factuality of those people, places, or events. Nor does it diminish the faith routinely produced via credible testimony from people of the past who **did** witness such things. Truly, one may “walk by faith, not by sight,” yet still possess knowledge.

FAITH AND REVELATION

Biblical faith, in addition to being produced by such things as sight, experiential knowledge, and credible testimony, often is produced by revelation. Revelation is defined as “a supernatural disclosure by God of any truth that could not be discovered by the unaided powers of human reason.” The theist contends that God has revealed Himself to mankind—via the sixty-six books of the Bible—in a very specific fashion. Speaking in broad terms, there has been only one permanent revelation—the supernatural revelation found within the Holy Scriptures. Actually, however, throughout human history God has disclosed Himself and His will in at least three different ways: theophanies, miracles, and direct communications.

Theophanies were appearances of God Himself. He is spoken of as dwelling between the cherubim (Psalm 80:1; 99:1). He appeared to Moses in a burning bush (Exodus 3:2). And He appeared to Job in stormy winds (Job 38:1; 40:6). Theophany reached its highest point in the incarnation, in which Jesus Christ became flesh and dwelt among men (John 1:1-5, 14; 3:16; 14:9).

God chose to reveal Himself through **miracles** that not only showcased His power and presence, but emphasized great truths as well. The Maker of the Universe manifested His presence in the works of His creative genius (Psalm 19:1; Romans 1:20-21). Miracles confirmed the words of prophecy, and stood as evidence of God’s omnipotence to the people He had created.

God also disclosed Himself through **direct communications**. In doing so, He made His thoughts and His will known to men. Sometimes it was through an audible voice, such as when God instructed Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:16-17). At times He worked through visions and dreams (Genesis 20:3; Numbers 12:6). On

unique occasions, He even made known His presence in such an unusual manner as to speak via the mouth of a donkey (Numbers 22:28). And, God has communicated His thoughts and will to men via the Holy Spirit (John 16:13; 2 Peter 1:20-21).

True biblical faith can be based upon numerous avenues of obtaining evidence. Sometimes (we might even say often), such evidence is based upon the testimony gleaned from revelation, which is why Paul wrote: “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God” (Romans 10:17).

Reason plays an important role in building faith via revelation since it is by the capacity for proper reasoning that a person builds his or her faith. Is it reasonable to believe in God? Considering the amount and type of evidence available to establish His existence beyond any reasonable doubt, indeed it is! Is it reasonable to accept the Bible as His inspired Word? Considering the amount and type of evidence available to establish that fact beyond any reasonable doubt, indeed it is! Is it reasonable to accept Jesus Christ as the virgin-born, resurrected Son of God? Considering the amount and type of evidence available to establish such claims beyond any reasonable doubt, indeed it is! By reasoning correctly, and by employing the Law of Rationality (which states that we should accept only those conclusions for which there is adequate evidence), Christians not only can build a legitimate faith, but they also can establish the validity of God’s Word and refute erroneous claims concerning false revelations.

FAITH AND DOUBT

Does biblical faith in any way imply doubt? No, it certainly does not—ever! In fact, that faith is the very antithesis of doubt can be seen by examining Romans 14:23 and James 1:6-8. In the passage in Romans, Paul wrote: “[H]e who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin.” In James 1:6-8, James urged the faithful Christian to “ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.”

Throughout the New Testament, “doubt” is couched in negative terms as something to be avoided. Jesus explained to His disciples that they would be able to move mountains if only they would believe and not doubt (Matthew 21:21-22; Mark 11:23-24). Paul warned the Roman Christians that they would stand condemned if they doubted the propriety of eating food sacrificed to idols (14:23). And the classic example, of course, is that of “doubting Thomas,” to whom Christ said: “Be not faithless, but believing” (John 20:27). Being a Christian does not mean that our faith never will be chal-

lenged or strained, or that we never will experience doubt. But it is one thing to state that faith does not **imply** doubt, and entirely another to suggest that faith never will **encounter** doubt.

In John 7:15, the Bible indicates that when Jesus addressed the Jews in their own temple, they marveled at His teaching. But Jesus demurred, and said: “My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me. If anyone wants to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority” (John 7:16-17). Jesus’ point to the devout temple Jews was simply that God has given mankind the ability to **choose**. If a person **wills**, he can accept God and His teaching, but God never will force Himself on that person. As the apostle John brought the book of Revelation to a close, he wrote: “Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely” (Revelation 22:17). The operative phrase, of course, is “whoever desires.” Unbelief must be replaced by a strong determination and a renewed zeal, both of which are capable of sustaining our faith, even (or especially!) in the face of doubt.

CONCLUSION

Biblical faith is a conviction based upon credible evidence, regardless of whether that evidence derives from experiential knowledge, reliable testimony, or divine revelation. But one important fact needs to be stressed: the Bible nowhere discusses or recognizes the legitimacy of any such concept as a “leap of faith.” Faith always is evidence based/knowledge based. Instead of a “leap into the dark,” biblical faith is a “walk in the light.”

REFERENCES

Woods, Guy N. (1994), “Faith vs. Knowledge?,” *Gospel Advocate*, 136[2]:31, February.

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Questions—Lesson 2

TRUE OR FALSE

DIRECTIONS: Write TRUE or FALSE in the blanks before the following statements.

- _____ 1. Proving such things as God's existence and the legitimacy of Christianity is an option, not an obligation.
- _____ 2. Faith is independent of knowledge.
- _____ 3. Not all faith is based upon experiential knowledge.
- _____ 4. Biblical faith cannot be derived from credible testimony.
- _____ 5. The disciples were quick to believe the testimony of Mary Magdalene.
- _____ 6. We often have faith in things we can see with our eyes.
- _____ 7. Biblical faith never implies doubt.
- _____ 8. God has not endowed man with free will.

MULTIPLE CHOICE

Circle the correct answer(s).

1. This man said he would not believe Jesus had risen from the dead unless he could physically touch Him.
(a) Paul (b) John (c) Thomas (d) Andrew
2. This is the one permanent revelation of God.
(a) Scripture (b) Theophanies
(c) Miracles (d) Direct communications
3. Those who wrote the Bible were guided by:
(a) Jewish rabbis (b) The Holy Spirit
(c) Monks (d) Their own thoughts

4. A supernatural disclosure by God of truth that cannot be discovered by the unaided powers of human reason.
 (a) Theology (b) Revelation
 (c) Inspiration (d) Confirmation
5. Biblical faith can be obtained through all of the following ways except:
 (a) Reliable testimony (b) Experiential knowledge
 (c) Divine revelation (d) Doubt

MATCHING

Match the related concepts (place the correct letter in the space provided by each number).

- | | | |
|----------|--|-------------------------|
| 1. _____ | Grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus | A. John 20:27 |
| 2. _____ | God wants all men to have knowledge of the truth | B. 1 Thessalonians 5:21 |
| 3. _____ | Give a defense/answer for what you believe | C. 2 Peter 3:18 |
| 4. _____ | Test all things | D. 1 Timothy 2:4 |
| 5. _____ | “Walk by faith, not by sight” | E. 2 Corinthians 5:7 |
| 6. _____ | Don’t be faithless, but believe | F. James 1:6-7 |
| 7. _____ | Whatever is not of faith is sin | G. Romans 14:23 |
| 8. _____ | Ask in faith, without doubting | H. 1 Peter 3:15 |

FILL IN THE BLANKS

1. Faith is not a _____ into the dark, but a _____ in the light.
2. God has _____ Himself to mankind, via the _____ - _____ books of the Bible.
3. _____ is the very _____ of doubt.

- 4. Apollos used the _____ to prove that Jesus is the _____ (Acts 18:28).
- 5. _____ confirmed the words of prophecy.

NOTES/COMMENTS

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