



# TRUTH ON TOUGH TEXTS

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FROM SOLA SCRIPTURA PUBLICATIONS

ISSUE 136 (Sept./Oct. 2022)

## WHAT IS FAITH?

### SELECTED TEXTS

**WHAT IS FAITH? WHILE THAT MIGHT SEEM TO BE AN** odd (if not even a little silly) question—after all, “Everybody knows what faith is,” many (if not most) people would say—there are actually few words in our day that are more misunderstood than is “faith.” While I have noted this in previous TOTT articles and in some of my books, this issue continues to concern and burden me, hence the deeper study here.

For example, many in our world today view faith as “belief without evidence,” or “pretending to know what you can’t know,” or “belief that isn’t based on good enough proof to be called knowledge.” In other words, in the latter case, if you believe something without good enough reason, it’s faith, but if you do have good reason, it’s knowledge.

More troubling is the fact that many religious people (even evangelicals), actually agree that faith is belief without evidence, and then they just quote Hebrews 11:1—“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen”—and all is well. More troubling still, however, and even more basic, is that many think that “faith” is *just* believing something (with or without evidence). In other words, *belief* is the key word, the one and only concept involved.

That, however, I lovingly submit, is very serious error that has brought some catastrophic results. Now, do we believe in “faith alone” (*sola fide*). Absolutely! But the real issue is what faith really means in totality, its *full* meaning. In both Classical and NT Greek, there is much more involved in “faith” than what we call “belief,” “trust,” “confidence,” or other synonym. Let us look deeper. Why? Because if we do not understand exactly what faith is in its entirety, we will preach a false gospel, which is precisely what is happening.

#### Words Mean Things

If there is one statement that the dear sheep I have shepherded for 36 years are very familiar with coming from their pastor, it is, “Words mean things.” (Please pity them for how often they hear it.) But without knowing words and exactly what they mean, it is impossible to convey Truth. As Louisa May Alcott wrote, “I like good strong words that mean something.”<sup>1</sup> Well, should we not likewise be aware of and “like” the words of Scripture since they are the strongest words

ever written? Should we not want to know what they mean with absolute precision? Should we not be troubled by how inaccurately words are used nowadays to teach the Bible and even to “share the Gospel”?

To put it another way, as I have scribbled elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> the *words* of Scripture are the *stones* used to build its structure. If I may illustrate with a controversial subject (I hope I don’t ruffle too many feathers), any translation approach that is not word-for-word is *dangerous* at best and *disastrous* at worst. The popular approach dubbed “dynamic equivalence” (e.g., the NIV) is unconcerned with the exact words themselves; instead, it is only the “thought of the writer” that matters. But please think about that for a moment. How can we know the thoughts of the writer without the exact words? Without a word-for-word approach (“formal equivalence”), in which the Hebrew and Greek words are rendered as closely as possible into English, how can we expect accuracy?

If I may also interject here, the primary reason William Tyndale (1494–1536) is a focal point in church history is not only because he was a brilliant linguist—he mastered six languages besides his native English (French, German, Italian, Greek, Hebrew, and Latin)—but also because of the genius of his “translation theory,” a theory that has all but vanished in our day. He took the English and molded it around the Hebrew and Greek, even going so far as replicating idioms and expressions from those languages into English. Modern thinking is the polar opposite, where translators foolishly mold the biblical languages into English vernacular, however sloppy the result. In other words, for Tyndale, the English served the biblical languages, while today the languages are forced to serve the English. This was so critical that almost a century later the King James Version translators (themselves outstanding scholars) used Tyndale’s work as part of their foundation and rarely touched what he had done. Ninety percent of the King James Version, in fact, is identical to Tyndale’s.

So, if we don’t have accuracy, how can we have authority? It continues to puzzle and grieve me that many Christian leaders, who profess to be concerned about biblical authority, continue to defend dynamic equivalence, which often is little more than a paraphrase. How important are the biblical languages? Having always been strong on the mastery of the biblical languages, Martin Luther wrote:

And let us be sure of this: we will not long preserve the gospel without the languages. The languages are the sheath in which this sword of the Spirit is contained; they are the casket in which this jewel is enshrined; they are the vessel in which this wine is held; they are the larder in which this food is stored; and, as the gospel itself points out, they are the baskets in which are kept these loaves and fishes and fragments. . . . Therefore, although faith and the gospel may indeed be proclaimed by simple preachers without a knowledge of languages, such preaching is flat and tame; people finally become weary and bored with it, and it falls to the ground. But where the preacher is versed in the languages, there is a freshness and vigor in his preaching, Scripture is treated in its entirety, and faith finds itself constantly renewed by a continual variety of words and illustrations.”<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the critical importance of the languages in a preacher’s study and preaching, it is that first sentence—“we will not long preserve the gospel without the languages”—that is exactly what this article is about. I say again, the Gospel today has, in fact, been greatly compromised because of a lack of knowledge about (or even rebellion against in some cases) what “faith” is in its entirety.

### The Full Meaning of “Faith”

That brings us to one of the most important Greek word studies for our day. There are three key words here. First, there is the noun *pistis*, which appears 244 times and is usually rendered “faith” but also “believe,” “belief,” and “fidelity” in a few instances. Second, the verb *pisteuō* appears 248 times and is usually rendered “believe” or “believed” but also “trust,” “commit,” and “committed” in just a handful of instances. Third, we also find the adjective *pistos* an additional 67 times, which is usually rendered “faithful” but also “believing,” “believed,” “sure,” and “true” a few times.

Now, that staggering number of occurrences of these words should immediately draw us to the reality of how critical this concept is. So, what do they mean? To find out, we will turn to undisputed authorities on the Greek. One of those is the four-volume *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, edited by Colin Brown (from here on abbreviated *NIDNTT*). Another is the classic and unequalled 10-volume *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel (from here on abbreviated *TDNT*), as well as its large one-volume abridged version (affectionately dubbed “Little Kittel”). We will note others as well.

My Dear Reader, I pray that as we look closely and meditatively at this word “faith,” we will agree with Emily Dickinson’s reflective thought: “I know nothing in the world that has as much power as a word. Sometimes I write one, and I look at it, until it begins to shine.”<sup>4</sup> As we continue, may this word, indeed, begin to shine with new light and greater intensity on each of us.

### Classical Greek Usage

Classical (ancient or secular) Greek is the Greek prior to NT times, the Greek used, for example, by Plato (c. 427–435 BC), Sophocles (496–406 BC), and the poet Homer (eighth-century BC), who is famous for his epic poems, *The Illiad* and *The Odyssey*. So, what did this word group mean to them? Quoting several ancient sources, the *NIDNTT* first gives us the

basics (for ease of reading, I include only the ancient writer’s name, not the specific works cited):

In classical Greek Literature, *pistis* means the trust that a man may place in men or the gods (Hesiod). . . . Similarly, *pisteuō* means to trust something or someone (Herodotus, Aeschylus). . . . With reference to people, *pisteuō* means to obey (Sophocles).<sup>5</sup>

The *TDNT* (Kittel) concurs: *pisteuō* “means ‘to trust, to rely on’” and in reference to people “can acquire the nuance ‘to obey.’”<sup>6</sup> This is further verified by the opposite of belief—“unbelief.” The Greek *apisteuō* (the “a” is the alpha negative, indicating the opposite), which means not only “unbelieving” but also “developed the sense of ‘not to obey,’ especially with laws (Sophocles).”<sup>7</sup> All this immediately, fundamentally, and inarguably emphasizes that “faith,” as originally understood by the ancients, is more than just mental assent or some vague “belief.” It does, in fact, as we will detail, mean *to obey*, a meaning that many nowadays flatly deny.

### Old Testament Legacy

We see the same emphasis of obedience in the concepts of “faith” and “belief” in the OT. As the *TDNT* (Kittel) emphasizes, “In the Rabbinical writings, to believe in God and to obey God are equivalent in meaning. Hand in hand with obedience goes trust.”<sup>8</sup> “Little Kittel,” however, puts the deeper discussion of the *TDNT* more simply:

OT faith corresponds to Greek *pisteúein* [present participle of *pisteuō*] inasmuch as both involve trust in persons and belief in words (including God and his word). The OT term, however, carries a stronger element of acknowledgment and obedience. Thus the divine commandments can be objects of faith (Deut. 9:23), and believing God is acknowledging him as such in a unity of trust, hope, fear, and obedience.

### New Testament Continuation

The ancient and OT meaning of faith is unchanged when we turn to the NT. The clearest declaration is again the *TDNT*:

The fact that “to obey,” as in the Old Testament, is particularly emphasized in Heb. 11. Here the *pisteuein* [faith] of Old Testament characters has in some instances the more or less explicit sense of obedience. . . . Paul in particular stresses the element of obedience in faith. For him *pistis* [faith] is indeed *hupakon* [obey] as comparison of Rom. 1:5, 8; 1 Thes. 1:8 with Rom. 15:18; 16:19, or 2 Cor. 10:5 with 10:15 shows. Faith is for Paul to *hupakouein tō euangeliō* [literally, “obedient to the good news”], Rom. 10:16. To refuse to believe is not to obey the righteousness which the Gospel offers by faith, Rom. 10:3. . . . He coins the combination *hupakon pisteuō* [literally, “obedience of faith”], Rom. 1:5.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, as one reads Hebrews 11, obedience is always involved. Is obedience the *cause* of salvation? Absolutely not! It is, however, always the *result* of salvation and *evidence* of it simply because obedience is part of true, saving faith.

As also noted above, Romans 1:5 is a critical verse: “By whom we have received grace and apostleship, for obedience to the faith among all nations, for his name.” The phrase “obedience to the faith” should be rendered “obedience of faith.” The construction of the Greek (*eis hupakoēn pisteōs*) indicates “the obedience which springs from faith (the act of assent or

surrender).<sup>10</sup> As commentator William Hendriksen explains:

The purpose for which Paul was appointed was to bring about obedience of faith. Such obedience is based on faith and springs from faith. In fact, so very closely are faith and obedience connected that they may be compared to inseparable identical twins. When you see the one you see the other. A person cannot have genuine faith without having obedience, nor vice versa.<sup>11</sup>

We find the same construction again in Romans 16:26 (*eis hupakoēn tēs pisteōs*) concerning the Gospel, which “now is made manifest, and by the scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the obedience of faith,” “that is, that it may be believed and obeyed.”<sup>12</sup> A. W. Pink likewise wrote in his classic work *Studies on Saving Faith*:

There is no such thing as a saving faith in Christ where there is no real *love* for Him, and by “real love” we mean a love which is evidenced by *obedience*. Christ acknowledges none to be His friends save those who do whatsoever He commands them (John 15:14). As unbelief is a species of rebellion, so saving faith is a complete subjection to God: Hence we read of “the obedience of faith” (Romans 16:26). Saving faith is to the soul what health is to the body: it is a mighty principle of operation, full of life, ever working, bringing forth fruit after its own kind.<sup>13</sup>

Renowned lexicographer, Joseph Thayer, weighs in on this matter as well, writing that *pisteuō* is

used especially of the faith by which a man embraces Jesus, i.e. a conviction, full of joyful trust, that Jesus is the Messiah the divinely appointed author of eternal salvation in the kingdom of God, conjoined with obedience to Christ.<sup>14</sup>

Among the most definitive examples of how faith is used in Scripture is that found in James, as stated in the *NIDNTT*:

James is conscious of the need to prove faith (Jas. 1:3; cf. 1 Pet. 1:7). He demands renunciation of all conduct that conflicts with living faith and confession (1:6ff.). For him, faith and obedient conduct are indissolubly linked. Faith understood merely as trust and confession is not able to save. Only through obedience . . . and conduct which fulfills the commandments of God does faith come to completion (Jas. 2:22). The opponent that James has in mind does not attack *faith* but exempts himself from *obedience*.<sup>15</sup>

But what about our Lord Himself? Did He weigh in on this matter? Did He view “faith” as just vague “belief”? Indeed not, as the *NIDNTT* again answers:

It must not be forgotten that every summons and statement of Jesus contained the elements of faith, trust, knowledge, decision, obedience, and self-direction. The preaching of Jesus cannot be understood apart from the many-sided aspects of faith and trust.<sup>16</sup>

Consider also our Lord’s Great Commission: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen” (Matt. 28:19–20). No, *pisteuō* does not appear here, but the concept of obeying what Jesus commands certainly is, and *that* is what we are to teach those to whom we witness.

## English Usage

It is also troubling that many do not even realize that our *English* word “faith” means more than just mental assent or other vague “belief.” Noah Webster, a godly believer himself, understood this of our English word in light of the Latin and Greek, as he wrote in his 1828 *Webster’s Dictionary*:

Latin *fides, fido*, to trust; Greek to persuade, to draw towards any thing, to conciliate; to believe, to obey. . . .

Evangelical, justifying, or saving faith, is the assent of the mind to the truth of divine revelation, on the authority of God’s testimony, accompanied with a cordial assent of the will or approbation of the heart; an entire confidence or trust in God’s character and declarations, and in the character and doctrines of Christ, with an unreserved surrender of the will to His guidance, and dependence on His merits for salvation. In other words, that firm belief of God’s testimony, and of the truth of the gospel, which influences the will, and leads to an entire reliance on Christ for salvation.

Notice that not only is “to obey” stated in the first paragraph, it is clearly implied in the statement: “an unreserved surrender of the will to His guidance.” While a far cry from that clarity, even a modern Webster’s says, “Allegiance to duty or a person,” which at least implies obedience.

The preceding should be enough to demonstrate the true depth of the concept of “faith” and forever expunge the shallow ways in which it is commonly applied, which is our final emphasis.

## The Application

First and foremost, the application of all this is how misleading (and unbiblical) it is to say to someone we are witnessing (or preaching) to, “Just believe in Jesus,” or, “Just trust in Jesus,” or, “Put your faith in Jesus,” *unless* we tell them exactly what “believe,” “trust, and “faith” really mean. Everyone wants to talk about *faith*, but they avoid, shun, ignore, and, in the case of some teachers, even condemn the idea of *obedience*. It is increasingly troubling to hear some preachers and “personal workers” say, “Faith does not mean obey,” or “Obedience has no part in believing something,” for as we have seen, that is patently false and demonstrates the increasing lack of study of the original languages by Bible teachers today. It is no wonder that there is so much false teaching on so many issues.

It should also be clear from our language study that *this issue should not even be an issue at all*. It is truly puzzling (and again distressing) why some evangelicals argue otherwise. It should deeply grieve us, for it most certainly grieves our Lord. It is ludicrous, if not even blasphemous, to the very character of Christ, to teach a distinction between His Saviorhood and His Lordship. To “believe” fundamentally demands Lordship because it includes the desire to submit and obey.

We can put this in the form of an axiom: *when someone believes something, regardless of what it is, that belief somehow changes them and results in some action or behavior that is characteristic of and consistent with the belief*. In other words, true belief results in actions that reflect that belief.

The pivotal nature of 2 Corinthians 5:17—“Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new”—simply

cannot be overstated. “New” is *kainos*. While another word for “new” (*neos*) refers to something new in *time*, something that recently has come into existence, *kainos* refers to something new in *quality*, as it would be distinguished from something that is old and worn out, something that has never existed before. “Creature,” then, is *ktisis*. In Classical Greek it meant the act of creation, the created thing, or the result of the act. It (and the verb *ktizō*) was often used in the Septuagint (Greek OT) to translate the Hebrew *bara* “to create from nothing.”

So what does it mean to be a “new creature”? It means that the Christian is not new in the sense of *time* (*neos*)—as in the date he received Christ as Savior—rather new in *quality* (*kainos*), a creature that has never existed before, a creature with a new character. When Christ comes into a life, *that life changes*. God’s Word everywhere declares, in fact, that a change is automatic when someone truly believes. This includes lifestyle, loyalty, longings, and even language. While we once obeyed ourselves, the world, and Satan, we now desire to obey only Christ. Our Lord, in fact, made the issue clear: “If ye love me, keep my commandments. . . . If a man love me, he will keep my words . . . He that loveth me not keepeth not my sayings” (Jn, 14:15, 23, 24; also 1 Jn, 2:1–6).

The “easy believeism” of our day, therefore, is inarguably wrong—*period*. No one is saved because they “walked an aisle,” “said a prayer,” “believed in Jesus,” or because they were baptized or confirmed. May we put it clearly: *Salvation comes from a conviction of sin, repentance from that sin, and reception of Jesus Christ as Lord, which results in a transformation of life and the desire to obey Him.*

So why is this resisted? Why do many today vehemently deny what we have seen here? One reason is a misunderstanding of the principle of “faith alone,” which, as we have seen, comes from not understanding faith itself. Yes (and again *yes!*), salvation is by grace alone (*sola gratia*) through faith alone (*sola fide*), but the fact is that faith means far more than some nebulous “belief,” whatever it might entail.

I once heard a Bible teacher who defends no-lordship teaching, make the statement, “I don’t like the term ‘easy-believeism’ because it implies that there is a ‘hard-believeism.’” While his intention is to prop up the no-lordship view (which originally was, by the way, an American invention out of Dallas Theological Seminary), he actually emphasizes the real truth: believing *is* hard because it demands recognition of sinfulness, repentance from sin, and the intention to obey. If I may say it again: *that is what true saving faith entails according to the meaning of words.*

Another reason I fear that all this is denied, however, is to make salvation “easier,” more attainable, and less “offensive.” After all, no one wants to hear that they are a sinful wretch (Jer. 17:9; Mk. 7:20–23; Rom. 3:23; 1 Cor. 6:9–10; Gal. 5:19–21), under the wrath of God (Rom. 1:18; Eph. 5:6), and even dead in trespasses and sins (Rom. 5:12; 6:23; Eph. 2:1–3, 5). But sadly, here is how “the gospel” is often presented by a Christian worker (CW) to a new prospect (NP):

CW: If you were to die today, do you know you’d go to heaven?  
NP: No.

CW: May I take a moment to show you how to get there?

NP: Sure.

CW: Well, first the Bible says you are a sinner, but let me show you a simple verse, John 3:16 [he reads the verse]. Who does the word “whosoever” include?

NP: I guess everyone.

CW: Yes, it does, and that includes you. So, will you believe right now that Jesus loves you and died for you?

NP: Yes.

CW: Wonderful. Let’s bow our heads and you can pray this prayer with me to ask Jesus into your heart.

And with that (or similar script) the worker assures the prospect that he is saved and can claim for himself that he has won another to Christ. But such methodology reflects “the wisdom of men” not “the power of God” (1 Cor. 2:5).

As we close, please consider Jude 4 for a moment: “For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only *Lord* God, and our *Lord* Jesus Christ” (emphasis added). Is it possible that Jude is saying that those who deny the Lordship of Christ are, whether knowingly or unknowingly, ungodly and are perverting the grace of God? Does it also tell us anything about a misunderstanding of true, saving faith?

My Dear Reader, please bear with me one more time: *words mean things.*

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*, “Chapter 4: Burdens”

<sup>2</sup> This paragraph, and the one following with the Luther quote, adapted from the author’s *A Hebrew Word for the Day* (AMG Publishers, 2010), xi–xii.

<sup>3</sup> From “To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools” (1524).

<sup>4</sup> Emily Dickinson, *Letters*.

<sup>5</sup> Colin Brown (General Editor). *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (NIDNTT) (Zondervan, 1975), Vol. 1, 594

<sup>6</sup> Gerhard Kittel (Ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (TDNT) (Eerdmans, 1964; reprinted 2006), Vol. VI, 177–78.

<sup>7</sup> Kittel, *TDNT*, Vol. VI, 178.

<sup>8</sup> Kittel, *TDNT*, Vol. VI, 199.

<sup>9</sup> Kittel, Vol. VI, 205.

<sup>10</sup> A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, comment on Rom. 1:5.

<sup>11</sup> William Hendriksen, *Baker New Testament Commentary*, comment on Rom. 1:5.

<sup>12</sup> *Matthew Poole’s Commentary on the Holy Bible*, comment on Rom. 16:26.

<sup>13</sup> A. W. Pink, *Studies on Saving Faith*, Part II, Chapter 2 (“Its Nature”) (emphasis in the original).

<sup>14</sup> *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon*, entry πιστευω (G4100).

<sup>15</sup> Brown, *NIDNTT*, Vol. 1, 604 (emphasis added).

<sup>16</sup> Brown, *NIDNTT*, Vol. 1, 600–01.

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**CONTENTS**

- Introduction
- 1 The Preface to the Ten Commandments
- 2 The First Commandment: The Law Concerning Religion
- 3 The Second Commandment: The Law Concerning Worship
- 4 The Third Commandment: The Law Concerning Reverence
- 5 The Fourth Commandment: The Law Concerning Time
- 6 The Fifth Commandment: The Law Concerning Authority
- 7 The Sixth Commandment: The Law Concerning Life
- 8 The Seventh Commandment: The Law Concerning Purity
- 9 The Eighth Commandment: The Law Concerning Property
- 10 The Ninth Commandment: The Law Concerning the Tongue
- 11 The Tenth Commandment: The Law Concerning Contentment
- Conclusion: Summary of the Moral Law

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