

SALVATION BY
ALLEGIANCE
ALONE

Rethinking Faith, Works,
and the Gospel of Jesus the King

MATTHEW W. BATES


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With gratitude and love to my marvelous parents,
Michael G. Bates and Linda K. Bates

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FOREWORD

“The Church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord,” proclaims the hymnist Samuel Stone. Upon the absolutely secure foundation of Jesus, the true gospel sits as a secondary substructure, undergirding the universal church. So when the gospel is compromised, despite its unshakable foundation, the building leans, sways, and slides. Unfortunately the gospel preached in much of the Western world has corroded and destabilized the church—and the deconstruction continues at an alarming pace. But the problem is not just the pseudogospel that is being preached. It runs deeper. How so? The gospel message also includes a proper response, and misunderstandings about what constitutes an adequate response are further compromising the church and her mission to the world.

Without dismissing the real gains and genuine growth, few would deny that the church in the West is not what it could have been and ought to be. Attendance is down; holiness is wanting; love is superficial; discipleship is thin; seminaries are struggling to find a young generation even interested in church ministry. The attempt to bolster attendance, to press for more holiness, to summon more to be shaped by love, and the constant plea for more focus on discipleship and deeper theological preparation proves that criticisms of the church are on target. But the solutions aren’t working. Why? Jesus the foundation is rock-solid, but the secondary and tertiary substructures are weak. When the gospel and its proper response have been eroded, recarpeting the foyer, rearranging the pews, and reshingling the roof will not help. The changeless foundation of the church can never be moved; it is the shoddily built “gospel” and “faith” substructure that is in need of renovation.

Salvation by Allegiance Alone is an exciting book because it takes us to that place of renovation: a rediscovery of the genuine gospel and its truly fitting

response. As Matthew Bates shows, the gospel is the power-releasing story of *how Jesus became king* and the only adequate response is *allegiance alone*. But unfortunately the clarion call to allegiance in the New Testament has all too often been muted by misguided teachings about grace, or worse, grace-ism.

Regarding this grace-ism, who has not heard that grace means “God’s riches at Christ’s expense” or that it means “pure gift” or “God’s unconditional love” or, from a different angle, “God’s mercy to those who don’t deserve it.” One also hears what follows: you don’t have to do a thing, you don’t have to worry, it’s all been done for you, just sit back and relax in this unconditional grace of God. One wonders if proponents of such theological understandings have spent much time examining what grace means in the New Testament (and the Old Testament, where it is also taught).

Among other stimulating insights in *Salvation by Allegiance Alone*, Matthew Bates helpfully brings to our attention the important work of John Barclay on grace, *Paul and the Gift*. We discover that grace is more complex than we might have otherwise imagined. In fact, Bates, following Barclay, contends there are six dimensions of grace that different authors and theologians may or may not “perfect” or take to their extreme limit. (For these six dimensions and some implications, see chap. 5, sec. “Grace and Allegiance Alone?”) Yet for many today, grace has been reduced to only two or three of these six themes. Grace *only* means God’s superabundance, God’s priority, and most especially the incongruity of God’s gift to sinners. Anything else is not grace. But listen to what we discover: *gift-giving, or grace, in the ancient world always required reciprocation*.

Grace, then, was according to the apostle Paul’s contemporary, the philosopher Seneca, much like playing a game of catch:

There is no doubt that when the ball is dropped it could be the fault of either the thrower or the catcher. The game goes along nicely when the ball is thrown and caught by both in a suitable manner, back and forth between the hands of thrower and catcher. But a good player needs to throw the ball differently to a tall partner and to a short one. It is the same with granting benefits: unless it is adjusted to the social roles of both parties, the giver and the recipient, the benefit will not actually be given by the one nor be received by the other in the right manner. (*On Benefits* 2.17; Griffin and Inwood)

Continuing, Seneca then explains the image, helping us to better understand the true nature of grace or gift-giving during the New Testament era: just as we “give” the short player a low throw so that he can make the catch and return the throw, but we “give” the tall player something different, so it

should be with all cases of grace or gift-giving. Seneca suggests that all givers and receivers should monitor and adjust the gift-giving so that the cycle of grace can be perpetuated.

Notice that in antiquity a gift *implicated* the person who received the gift to respond with some kind of gift given back to the original giver. Of course, the receiver of a gift responds by beginning with gratitude, but ideally gratitude turns into a reciprocal gift. Matthew Bates demonstrates in this book that grace in the New Testament fits this pattern: God's superabundant, prior gift is granted without regard to our relative worth, but the reception of God's gift demands a return gift from us, a response of grateful discipleship marked by allegiance to King Jesus.

Allegiance, then, is at the heart of grace as it was perceived in the ancient world. Grace was not simply—or ever—pure gift in spite of what some say today. One must define terms by their usage not by our contemporary beliefs or usages. Grace can both be one hundred percent gift *and at the same time* summon the gifted person with an obligation, a heartfelt and intentional duty, to respond in gratitude and behavior in accordance with the new social bond created by the gift-giver's gift. This grace runs right through the Old Testament, through Judaism, and into the New Testament. What distinguished the kind of Judaism that did not believe in Jesus and the one that did was not the appearance or absence of *grace itself* but *how grace was understood*. It is, then, a popular misunderstanding of Paul to conclude that grace did not obligate the Christian—the one who received God's gift of Christ and redemption—to respond to God through real behavioral change. Grace in fact required a life of gratitude, praise, and—here's the language from Matthew Bates's outstanding book—“*allegiance to Jesus as king*.”

Some theologians (past and present) think that any kind of obligation attached to grace must somehow entail a dangerous works righteousness. Such people are wrong. But you'll have to read *Salvation by Allegiance Alone* to see how deftly and biblically Matthew Bates dismantles this worry about works while simultaneously offering fresh proposals regarding how a gospel-infused allegiance connects with righteousness.

I want to approach the obligation of grace from another angle, that of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. As a college student I became a voracious reader and, so, as a sophomore I began reading Bonhoeffer, beginning with (what was then called) *The Cost of Discipleship*. Perhaps his most enduring contribution to Christian theology, at least Christian ethics, is his section on “costly grace,” a concept that put into words my deepest convictions and concerns about the church I was then witnessing. The church was marked by sanctimonious attendance, judgmentalism on all outsiders, expressed certitude of the

security of the believer because of a single act of accepting Christ into one's heart, and rigor in theological propositions. It was also a church pockmarked body-wide with a lack of love, a lack of genuine holiness, and an inability to foster discipleship in the heart of the true believer. Sadly, what it lacked was created by its deficient gospel: "if you just believe" was its watchword and safety net. But "believe" meant mental acceptance and a single act of reception, and never meant what the term also means in the whole Bible: the kind of faith that is also faithfulness.

The superficiality of American evangelicalism's gospel-obsession with security and assurance has led me at times to wonder if we should not teach justification by *discipleship*. Or justification by *faithfulness*. But Matthew Bates has landed on a beautiful and biblically sound term: *allegiance*. When Jesus first called the four disciples along the Sea of Galilee he didn't say "receive me into your heart" but "follow me." When a crisis arose among his followers he didn't say "you're safe" or "get your orthodoxy on" but "deny yourself and take up your cross." Moreover, when he finished the greatest sermon on earth, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus didn't say "Repent and believe these things" but "the one who hears these words of mine and *does* them." So, too, the apostles Paul, Peter, and John called their listeners to a life swamped by the Spirit, a life of holiness amidst suffering, and a life of living in the light of love. These apostolic expressions are all condensed in this book into the term "allegiance."

King Jesus summons people into a kingdom where he alone is king, and kings expect one thing from their subjects: *allegiance*.

Scot McKnight
Julius R. Mantey Professor in New Testament
Northern Seminary
Lombard, Illinois

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This book has been on my heart for nearly ten years—often with a burning-in-the-bones urgency as I mulled preliminary ideas. Write. Write. Write. Yet even though this book restlessly loomed as a fire waiting to be kindled, circumstances required that the flint, steel, and tinder be stowed away for several years. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to complete the task.

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If this book finds an audience among pastors, scholars, and general theological readers, then much of its purpose will have been met. But it has also been crafted with the college or seminary classroom in mind. If it succeeds in this capacity, then this will be in no small measure due to my students at Quincy University. I'd like to give a grateful shout-out to my Exploring the New Testament classes (spring 2015, 2016) for reading the bulk of the manuscript and testing the "for further thought" questions. Meanwhile, my Romans class (spring 2016) gave useful feedback on chapter 8. Several students went beyond the call of duty in interacting with the manuscript: Sarah Alexander, Bridget Bicek, Andrea Brown, Nick Clark, Michael Crotteau, Sammi Goble, Teresa Gorrell, Brianna Johnson, Katherine Rathgeber, Lacey Rokita, and Genesis Torrens.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis
Exod.	Exodus
Lev.	Leviticus
Num.	Numbers
Deut.	Deuteronomy
Josh.	Joshua
Judg.	Judges
Ruth	Ruth
1–2 Sam.	1–2 Samuel
1–2 Kings	1–2 Kings
1–2 Chron.	1–2 Chronicles
Ezra	Ezra
Neh.	Nehemiah
Esther	Esther
Job	Job
Ps. (Pss.)	Psalms (Psalms)
Prov.	Proverbs
Eccles.	Ecclesiastes
Song of Sol.	Song of Solomon
Isa.	Isaiah
Jer.	Jeremiah
Lam.	Lamentations
Ezek.	Ezekiel
Dan.	Daniel
Hosea	Hosea
Joel	Joel
Amos	Amos
Obad.	Obadiah
Jon.	Jonah

Mic.	Micah
Nah.	Nahum
Hab.	Habakkuk
Zeph.	Zephaniah
Hag.	Haggai
Zech.	Zechariah
Mal.	Malachi

Old Testament Apocrypha

1–4 Macc.	1–4 Maccabees
Add. Esth.	Additions to Esther
Sir.	Sirach/Ecclesiasticus
Tob.	Tobit

New Testament

Matt.	Matthew
Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke
John	John
Acts	Acts
Rom.	Romans
1–2 Cor.	1–2 Corinthians
Gal.	Galatians
Eph.	Ephesians
Phil.	Philippians
Col.	Colossians
1–2 Thess.	1–2 Thessalonians
1–2 Tim.	1–2 Timothy
Titus	Titus

Philem.	Philemon
Heb.	Hebrews
James	James
1–2 Pet.	1–2 Peter
1–3 John	1–3 John
Jude	Jude
Rev.	Revelation

Ancient Writings*Apostolic Fathers*

2 Clem. 2 Clement

Augustine

Trin. Augustine, *De Trinitate*

Ignatius

Ign. Eph. Ignatius, *To the Ephesians*
 Ign. Trall. Ignatius, *To the Trallians*

Irenaeus

Epid. Irenaeus, *Epideixis tou apostolikou kerygmatos*
 Haer. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*

Josephus

Ant. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*
 J.W. Josephus, *Jewish War*

Justin Martyr

1 Apol. Justin Martyr, *Apologia i*
 Dial. Justin Martyr, *Dialogus cum Tryphone*

Minucius Felix

Oct. Minucius Felix, *Octavius*

Origen

Cels. Origen, *Contra Celsum*

Philo

Fug. Philo, *De fuga et inventione*
 Opif. Philo, *De opificio mundi*
 Spec. Philo, *De specialibus legibus*

Pliny the Younger

Ep. Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae*

Tacitus

Ann. Tacitus, *Annales*

Other Abbreviations

BDAG Danker, Frederick W., Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000

chap(s). chapter(s)
 def. definition
 esp. especially
 LXX Septuagint
 NS new series
 NT New Testament
 OT Old Testament
 par(r). parallel(s)
 s.v. *sub verbo* (under the word)

INTRODUCTION

Back in 1987 George Michael crystalized an aspect of contemporary spirituality with his hit song “Faith.” At the same time that Michael donned his skinny jeans, waggled around on the stage, and belted out the chorus, “Because I’ve got to have faith, faith, faith—I’ve got to have faith, faith, faith—baby!,” emerging cultural convictions about faith were being solidified and reinforced. For Michael in this song, we should have faith, but in what? Seemingly in faith itself. In fact, when I did an internet search to find the lyrics for the song, I took a casual glance at the recent comments. The very first comment that I found distills how this George Michael–infused understanding of faith is still operative today: “I’m no religious freak. In fact I hate organized religion! But without faith I’d be lost and I’d be a wreck most of the time. So I’m going to listen to my mate George Michael and say *!&# the rest, I’ll just do my best! And leave the rest up to faith!”

From a charitable Christian standpoint, although the person who penned this internet comment may be crass, he surely gets something right. *Faith*, however we define it, is indeed connected to *good news* for humanity. Moreover, even if we deeply love the church or other forms of organized religion, we have all encountered empty religiosity in one form or another—and undoubtedly we have found it distasteful. Yet much of this commenter’s sentiment seems to be off the mark. But in what way? How has modern-day culture, both non-Christian and Christian, affected how we think about central Christian concepts such as faith, works, the gospel, and salvation? What is at risk if the working ideas that we and others hold with regard to these terms are skewed with respect to the biblical witness? And pushing deeper, what if we were to discover that the meaning of *faith* itself needs to be reconsidered not just by thoughtful Christian leaders but also by professional scholars and theologians?

In academic circles a major storm has been churning around what it means to be right with God—that is, what it means to be “justified.” Because of its overwhelming importance, the debate has spilled over from learned journals into popular books and mainstream Christian discussions. On the one hand, for instance, N. T. Wright has suggested that the Christian’s final declaration of innocence by God will be rendered “on the basis of the whole life”—that is, eternal judgment will be based to some degree on performing good works, albeit clearly not through rule-based effort.¹ John Piper has responded, arguing that the Bible describes eternal life as a present possession for the believer. So our right standing before God in the present moment cannot be treated as if it is merely a fictive anticipation of the future verdict. We do not have to wait for the last day to obtain right standing before God.² Subsequently Wright has offered further clarifications in his book *Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision*, indicating that his intention is not to deny the reality of our present right standing before God. For Wright the final verdict has been determined in advance already, because those who have faith in the Christ will invariably be found innocent on the day of judgment. In addition to Wright and Piper, many other scholars are involved in ongoing conversations about justification and related matters.³

I hope to move the discussion forward by approaching salvation from a different, wider angle. Our understanding of salvation can most profitably be advanced not by endlessly reassessing the details of exactly how justification works but by reconsidering precisely what we mean by some pervasive Christian concepts that were originally sharply focused but have become increasingly blurry—especially faith and the gospel.

A Proposed Surgery

In this book I want to demonstrate that our contemporary Christian culture often comes prepackaged with functional ideas and operative definitions of belief, faith, works, salvation, heaven, and the gospel that in various ways truncate and distort the full message of the good news about Jesus the Messiah

1. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 57. For his first major foray into justification, see Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 33–35, 95–133. For a further statement, see Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 113–22, 148.

2. Piper, *Future of Justification*, esp. 93–116.

3. It is not possible to list even a fraction of the literature. For a student-friendly primer, see Beilby and Eddy, *Justification*. For recent scholarly syntheses, consider Westerholm, *Justification Reconsidered*; Allen, *Justification and the Gospel*; Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2:774–1042.

that is proclaimed in the Bible. For example, the gospel cannot be accurately summarized by saying, “I trust that Jesus paid the price for me, so I am saved,” or “Faith in Jesus’s death for my sins saves me as a free gift apart from my works,” or even “I am saved because I am trusting in Jesus’s righteousness alone.” Although these statements do contain important partial truths, they confuse the content of the gospel, the true nature of “faith” (which is not even the best term to use), the direction in which “faith” must be exercised, the proper interfacing between grace and deeds, and probably also what we are “saved” into and for. Surgery is necessary. The proposed operation could create conditions conducive to healing within the fractured church.

What is this necessary surgical procedure? Although the words “faith” and “belief” are mentioned in virtually every sermon preached in the English language, although they are prominent in nearly all translations of the Bible, although faith is currently so much at the heart of Christianity that the whole tradition is often called “the Christian faith,” the persistence of this terminology as it pertains to eternal salvation has had, and continues to have, a misleading effect. The best corrective is that “faith” and “belief,” insofar as they serve as overarching terms to describe what brings about eternal salvation, should be excised from Christian discourse. That is, English-speaking Christian leaders should entirely cease to speak of “salvation by faith” or of “faith in Jesus” or “believing in Christ” when summarizing Christian salvation. For the sake of the gospel we need to revise our vocabulary.

Although the Greek word *pistis*, the word that most often stands behind our English translations of “faith” or “belief” in the New Testament, can and does frequently involve *regarding something as true or real*, akin to how we might say “I have faith that God exists” or “my beliefs are different from yours,” the word *pistis* (and related terms) has a much broader range of meaning. This range includes ideas that aren’t usually associated in our contemporary culture with belief or faith, such as reliability, confidence, assurance, fidelity, faithfulness, commitment, and pledged loyalty. The question is, then, when a person today says, “I am saved by my faith in Jesus,” what portion of the range of meaning of “faith” is understood to effect salvation? Are certain portions of the legitimate meaning of “faith” being unwittingly shaded out? In what capacity is Jesus being regarded as the object of “faith”? And what mental images surround the process of salvation?

Let’s get to the heart of the matter by exploring a couple examples. When the apostle Paul says, “For it is by grace you have been saved through faith” (Eph. 2:8), what if Paul’s idea of “faith” (*pistis*) differs from typical contemporary understandings? More specifically, how might our understanding of salvation

and the gospel change if we were to determine that Paul's understanding of "faith" here is nearly the same as in the following selection from 1 Maccabees?

First Maccabees, written about 150 years before Jesus's death, contains a letter from King Demetrius. He is concerned that his rival, Alexander, may have beat him to the punch in forging an alliance with the Jewish people. King Demetrius, in seeking to persuade the Jews to his cause, writes:

King Demetrius to the nation of the Jews, greetings. Since you have kept your agreement with us and have continued your friendship with us, and have not sided with our enemies, we have heard of it and rejoiced. Now continue still to keep faith [*pistis*] with us, and we will repay you with good for what you do for us. (1 Macc. 10:25–27 NRSV)

Here Demetrius is asking the Jews to continue showing *pistis*—that is, loyalty or allegiance—to him rather than to his rival, promising a reward for the allegiance. Just a few lines later King Demetrius further promises that some Jews will be put in positions demanding loyalty (*pistis*) as administrative leaders in the royal government. Could it be that when Paul and others talk about salvation by "faith," not by works, they intend something close to what Demetrius means by *pistis*—so that we should translate, "It is by grace you have been saved through *allegiance*" (Eph. 2:8)?

N. T. Wright offers a different example that helps us reconsider the first-century meaning of "believe" gospel language. Wright notes that the Jewish general Josephus, in his autobiographical recounting of the events of the Jewish-Roman war in AD 66, reports an incident where he urged a rebel leader to "*repent and believe in me*," using language nearly identical to what we find in the Gospel of Mark with respect to Jesus's proclamation, "The kingdom of God is near! *Repent and believe the good news*" (1:15).⁴ Our own cultural experiences might lead us to think that "repent" means to turn away from private sins such as adultery, greed, and exploitation. Meanwhile, in Christian circles "believe" is so often linked to Jesus and the forgiveness of sins that it may be hard to weigh what it means in this example featuring Josephus. But Wright's point is that Josephus was not trying to convince this rebel to turn away from private sins or to "believe" that God can forgive, rather Josephus

4. All Scripture translations in this book are my own unless otherwise noted. The other text is from Josephus, *The Life* 110, cited in Wright, *Challenge of Jesus*, 44. The exact phrase in Josephus is *metanoēsein kai pistos emoi genēsthai*, which Wright renders as "repent and believe in me" but which can be more precisely rendered "to repent and become loyal to me." This example from Josephus features the adjective *pistos*, which derives from the same root as the noun *pistis*. Meanwhile in Mark we find the related verb *pisteuō*: "Repent and believe the good news!" (*metanoēite kai pisteuete en tō euangeliō*).

wanted this man to join him in supporting the Jewish cause—that is, as I would put it, to show *allegiance*. So, what “repent and believe in me” means for Josephus in this context is “turn away from your present course of action and become *loyal* to me.”

The needed surgery involves not just an excision of “faith” language but also a transplant. With regard to eternal salvation, rather than speaking of belief, trust, or faith in Jesus, we should speak instead of fidelity to Jesus as cosmic Lord or allegiance to Jesus the king. This, of course, is not to say that the best way to translate every occurrence of *pistis* (and related terms) is always or even usually “allegiance.” Rather it is to say that allegiance is the best macro-term available to us that can describe what God requires from us for eternal salvation. It is the best term because it avoids unhelpful English-language associations that have become attached to “faith” and “belief,” as well as limitations in the “trust” idea, and at the same time it captures what is most vital for salvation—mental assent, sworn fidelity, and embodied loyalty.⁵ But we do not need to avoid the words “faith” and “belief” entirely. For example, they do carry the proper meaning in English for *pistis* with regard to confidence in Jesus’s healing power and control over nature; moreover, these terms are suitable when *pistis* is directed primarily toward facts that we are called mentally to affirm. Our Christian discourse need not shift in these contexts but only with regard to eternal salvation.

The opportunity to rethink the gospel, faith, and other matters pertaining to salvation stands before us. Indeed, we have already made a beginning. Yet before we travel further, it might be helpful for the reader to receive additional orientation—to learn more about the aims, assumptions, background, and intended audience that have informed this study. This, I hope, will help clarify why this book has been written in this particular way and what various types of readers can expect.

Gaining Perspective

The reader deserves to know something about my background, for my academic training and ecclesial convictions have undoubtedly shaped this book in

5. Although my overarching “allegiance alone” proposal has novel features, it is important to recognize that it nonetheless enjoys appreciable continuity with classic studies that focus on “trust” (or *fiducia*) as part of “faith.” For example, Murray, *Redemption—Accomplished and Applied*, 134, speaks of faith as “a whole-souled movement of self-commitment to Christ for salvation from sin and its consequences.” He further describes faith as having three components: knowledge, conviction, and trust (133–40). My focus on *pistis* as “allegiance” attempts to show that the “trust” idea captures much of the truth but is too limited in light of the evidence.

ways even I do not fully comprehend. I am a committed Christian who seeks to serve the church and the academy, and this reflects my goals and assumptions in penning this book. Although this book undertakes a substantial rethinking of the gospel, faith, and other matters pertaining to salvation, the intention is to clarify the Christian narrative, not to question its fundamental value. Accordingly, basic truths that are widely accepted by Christians are simply presupposed: God's gracious revelation to humanity; the incarnation; Jesus's death for sins; the resurrection as a genuine historical event; Father, Son, and Spirit as one God; Jesus as the only path to final salvation; and the inspired and authoritative nature of the Bible. So, even while rethinking the meaning and significance of tenets central to Christian theology, the framework and goal of the exploration is for the church.

I consider myself fortunate to have received training as an undergraduate in the Reformed tradition (Whitworth University), at seminary in a trans-denominational Protestant environment (Regent College in Vancouver, BC), and at the PhD level at a Catholic institution (University of Notre Dame). This ecumenism is mirrored in my practices. I am a Protestant. Yet I participate with reasonable comfort in a Catholic context—in fact, I pray the morning office on weekdays with my colleagues in theology at Quincy University, the Franciscan school where I teach. In various seasons of life, I have regularly and gladly worshiped with nondenominational, Baptist, Presbyterian, Mennonite, and Evangelical Free churches. In writing this book I do hope my ecumenical experiences have helped me to engage the Scriptures more sympathetically and from more diverse angles than might have been possible had I been steeped in only one Christian tradition.

However, in the final analysis this book does not claim to speak from or for a specific Christian subgroup or denomination. That is, nothing here intends to be distinctively Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, or Baptist, although it may both affirm and critique dimensions of all these traditions. The truth purifies. And to the degree that I have managed to capture it, it is hoped that the reassessment offered in this book will ultimately contribute to the healing of that long-festering wound between Catholics and Protestants. (Not to exclude the need for reconciliation with the Orthodox, but the issues addressed here are generally more pertinent to the Catholic-Protestant divide.) The message of salvation as expressed in the Bible's ancient context will be the primary focus, not because further systematic and philosophical inquiry is irrelevant—on the contrary, it is essential—but because the biblical story should supply contours that direct further inquiry. Moreover, by focusing on the ground common to all Christians—the Bible, especially the New Testament—the exposition should be relevant to all Christians and

any other readers of goodwill. This is appropriate because salvation cannot be restricted to any Christian subgroup. The gospel has been entrusted to the whole church for the sake of the entire world.

Yet, since this book has novel dimensions, some may judge that it would have been more appropriate to aim it exclusively at specialists. I have taken a riskier tack, writing for as broad an audience as possible—for students, pastors and clergy, church groups, and general readers, as well as for professional theologians and biblical scholars. I have done this for several reasons. First, while readers will have to make their own judgments about the value of this study, the import of the subject matter is undeniable, so it is fitting to write for a wide audience. Second, any freshness found herein is not primarily in new readings of the biblical details (although there are a number of such moments) but in how the details point to a series of realignments. For example, other biblical specialists are well aware that the Greek word *pistis* has a broader range of meaning than “faith,” “belief,” and “trust,” but biblical scholars and systematic theologians haven’t generally connected these insights to the gospel and final salvation in the way done here. Third, in my own teaching I find that students are bored by textbooks that offer the “assured” results of the collective guild—indeed, not just bored but frequently misled as the “assured” results are neither uncontested nor incapable of additional nuance. I find that students, and all other readers for that matter, learn most deeply and eagerly when they are compelled to wrestle with arguments involving new ideas. In short, my hope is that all readers, whether novice or expert, will find that this book has something to offer. Scholars will encounter more personal stories than is customary; church leaders and groups more footnotes. I trust students will find a nice balance of each.

Although this is not a textbook—it is more an exploratory “rethinking” of vital topics designed for a diverse audience—this book has also been tested in the college classroom. I think it is particularly well suited for courses on systematic theology, biblical theology, or the New Testament. It should also prove helpful for specialized offerings in which a component of the course focuses on the gospel and salvation, such as courses on evangelism, mission, apologetics, and homiletics. There are study questions at the end of each chapter that can be used for personal contemplation, to prompt group discussion, or as the basis for written reflection.

Finally, a key pastoral point for all readers to keep in mind throughout: with regard to salvation, we dare not think of God as the one who stands against us. The sin problem is real. But God’s love is so great that he sent his Son on our behalf even when our sins had made us his enemies (Rom. 5:6–10), showing that God’s ultimate desire is to see *all* saved and *all* come

to a knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4). Although the point that “God loves us” is obvious, it needs to be said at the outset, because at times the false notion that “God is enemy, but Jesus is friend” can be held at a nonrational, deeply emotional level—even though we know that it is not true when we actually stop to think. So as we begin, we should all keep the love of God at the forefront of our minds.

So the aim is to rethink the gospel, faith, and salvation in the church and the academy, but to do so within a broad Christian framework for the sake of the *entire* church. My contention is that salvation is by allegiance alone.

Realigning “Faith” and the Gospel

Nevertheless allegiance is frequently missing in discussions of faith, the gospel, and salvation. Some still need to be convinced that enacted obedience is essential to salvation. Those who are already persuaded need a more robust theological grammar to help articulate this truth. For even among the persuaded, why does the proclamation of the gospel in our churches and in our communities so often leave allegiance out? Or if we are pressed to say what it means to “put our faith in Jesus,” why do we frequently revert to confusing slogans such as “faith, not works” and “just believe Jesus died for your sins” that would seem to render enacted loyalty unnecessary? We might intuitively sense that allegiance to Jesus is determinative for salvation, but in trying to articulate the gospel, once saving faith is made to demand specific deeds such as giving to charities, taking care of relatives, or volunteering time, many of us fumble for words or get queasy.

Perhaps in those moments we fall back on a “genuine saving faith will inevitably *produce* good works” statement. But is this cause-and-effect assertion fully satisfactory in light of the biblical testimony? Is preestablished faith really the engine driving the good-works machine? Or, perhaps, could it be that buying into this “genuine faith produces good works” slogan presupposes questionable definitions of “faith” and “works” in the first place? In discussing final salvation we are on the firmest ground when we drop “faith” language altogether, speaking instead of allegiance alone. The adoption of “allegiance” language is pressing for the church, for “faith” and “belief” blot out vitally important dimensions of meaning in the *pistis* word family that need to be recovered.

Allegiance relates closely to the gospel and salvation. But because of the lengthy history of these ideas in the West, misperceptions have crept in, so precisely what is meant by “the gospel” and “salvation” requires sharpening

as well. This book attempts to explain in a forthright fashion the central biblical teachings about salvation, faith, works, and the gospel—although the reader will discover that this straightforward rehearsal does not always align tidily with popular presentations and understandings of these topics. My argument, reduced to its simplest terms, is as follows:

1. The true climax of the gospel—Jesus’s enthronement—has generally been deemphasized or omitted from the gospel.
2. Consequently, *pistis* has been misaimed and inappropriately nuanced with respect to the gospel. It is regarded as “trust” in Jesus’s righteousness alone or “faith” that Jesus’s death covers my sins rather than “allegiance” to Jesus as king.
3. Final salvation is not about attainment of heaven but about embodied participation in the new creation. When the true goal of salvation is recognized, terms such as “faith,” “works,” “righteousness,” and “the gospel” can be more accurately reframed.
4. Once it is agreed that salvation is by allegiance alone, matters that have traditionally divided Catholics and Protestants—the essence of the gospel, faith alone versus works, declared righteousness versus infused righteousness—are reconfigured in ways that may prove helpful for reconciliation.

This inadequate identification of the climax of the gospel and faulty aiming of “faith” is not a new problem. Nor is it a problem specific to certain Christian denominations or subgroups. It has been a norm across the full spectrum of the church for many hundreds of years. In fact, both Protestants and Catholics alike generally were invested in this slightly skewed scheme in the sixteenth century—indeed these problems extend at least in part all the way back to Saint Augustine in the fifth. Our task here is not to trace that history but rather to look at the earliest Christian sources with an eye to casting fresh vision for the church today. I hope that the correct identification of the high point of the gospel as Jesus’s kingship and a retargeting of “faith” as allegiance will reinvigorate the life and mission of the church today.

My conviction is that the story of what God has done for us through the Christ and the Holy Spirit should above all be welcomed as *good news*. And any news that is as wonderfully marvelous as the story of what God has accomplished for us is worthy of our utmost attention. Yet not everyone thinks that the gospel is truly good news. Some, like the man featured in the next section, have walked away depressed and sad.

One Person's Quest for Eternal Life

The story of the rich young ruler is something of an embarrassment for the contemporary church. In Mark's Gospel, when Jesus is just beginning his fateful journey to Jerusalem, he is suddenly accosted by a wealthy man. The man, who is further described in Matthew's Gospel as young (Matt. 19:20) and in Luke's as a ruler (Luke 18:18), dashes up to Jesus and collapses in a subservient and beseeching posture, saying, "Good Teacher, what must I *do* to inherit eternal life?" (Mark 10:17).

The question asked by the ruler is unambiguous—what *action* is required of me so that I can come to participate in life everlasting? Jesus's reply, however, although it seems clear enough on the surface, has proven disconcerting in at least two ways. First, Jesus says in response, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone" (Mark 10:18). Is Jesus hereby denying his divinity, asserting that God (the Father) alone is good and that the appellation "good Teacher" is therefore inappropriate, because it makes Jesus divine?⁶ Or, as is much more likely, is this a test designed to make the man reflect more deeply upon the true meaning of the homage that he has offered to Jesus—as if Jesus were querying, "You have bowed and called me 'good,' a title fully suitable to God alone, but to what degree do you really recognize who I am?"⁷

A second disquieting feature of Jesus's response to the rich young man introduces other central concerns of this book—salvation, faith, and works. For in replying to the man's question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus, to the chagrin of many contemporary pastors, priests, evangelists, and teachers, does not give a response that neatly fits our tidy theological systems. "You know the commandments," Jesus states, "Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness, do not defraud, honor your father and mother" (Mark 10:19). In other words, Jesus cites from the covenantal center of the Old Testament, the Ten Commandments, and intimates that proper *performance* of these commandments will result in eternal life. Jesus says nothing here about faith, trust, or belief. Rather, Jesus in a relatively straightforward fashion asserts that it is necessary to do certain "works" to attain eternal life.

6. Regarding how and when Jesus's earliest followers came to regard him as divine, see Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*; Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*; Bates, *Birth of the Trinity*.

7. In seeking to weigh Jesus's intentions, we can compare Mark 10:18 (// Luke 18:19) with Mark 2:7, for only here in the NT do we find the Greek phrase *ei mē heis ho theos* ("but God alone"). In Mark 2:7, "who can forgive sins *but God alone*" serves as evidence that Jesus wields the forgiving power that God alone holds after Jesus is able to supply miraculous healing. The reader is thereby invited to conclude that Jesus is somehow both God and distinct from God. It seems likely that the reader of 10:18 is expected to make the same leap.

As the dialogue continues in Mark's Gospel, the man then promptly replies to Jesus, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth" (Mark 10:20). Notice that Jesus does not dispute this young man's claim to adequate performance of the Ten Commandments, nor does he question his ability to meet the demands of the law. Instead Jesus says, "You lack one thing: go, sell whatever you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven—and come, follow me" (10:21). Thus, even when Jesus clarifies that the man still lacks one thing, it is not faith or belief, but rather he is required to perform specific additional "works" beyond the Ten Commandments in response to Jesus's instructions—to *sell* all that he has, *give* the money to the poor, and *follow*. It is reported that the man was greatly discouraged by this and sorrowfully departed.

If this were the lone instance in which Jesus taught the primacy and absolute necessity of good works (including proper performance of the law) for eternal life, then it might be plausible to import the "faith alone" idea into this passage without resorting to special pleading. One could, for instance, argue that Jesus was making these legal demands simply to help the man realize that although he *thinks* he has kept the law blamelessly, the man cannot possibly have met its fullest demands. That is, one could claim, as did John Calvin, that by bringing up the rigorous demands of the law, Jesus was attempting to smash the man's pretensions toward law-based righteousness in order to help him see that faith alone can save him.⁸ Alternatively, an interpreter might conveniently skip over Jesus's tacit affirmation that the man must keep certain Old Testament commandments and that the man must *sell* everything and *give*, focusing on Jesus's additional demand to "follow me." Here it might be suggested that the man can only be saved by faith in Jesus alone (as evidenced through his willingness to undertake discipleship) and that his performance of the commandments and the charitable deeds would not contribute in any fashion to his attainment of eternal life, except as a token of his willingness to surrender the self.⁹ Yet this ignores Jesus's emphasis on keeping the commandments as the first and primary actions in the sequence of necessary events for the man, not to mention the additional specific "good works" of selling and giving.

An even larger problem for a purely faith-alone interpretation of the story involving the rich young man is that every other passage in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke)—that is, the Gospels that scholars agree most closely adhere to Jesus's own style of speech—that explicitly describes how to

8. See *Calvin's Commentaries*, 16:394–95.

9. See Lane, *Gospel according to Mark*, 366–68.

attain eternal life emphasizes not “faith alone” but rather the absolute necessity of right action.¹⁰ Even if some of the actions are presented in metaphorical or hyperbolic terms, to find eternal life the *correct action* is without fail required. One must enter through the narrow gate (Matt. 7:13–14 and parr.); take up the cross and follow Jesus (Matt. 10:38–39; 16:25; and parr.); give up homes, families, and possessions in following Jesus (Mark 10:30); remove one’s own offending hand or eye (Matt. 18:8); stand firm in testifying to Jesus in the face of persecution (Luke 21:19); provide food, water, hospitality, and clothes for the least of Jesus’s brothers; tend the sick; and visit the imprisoned (Matt. 25:31–46). In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus says to Zacchaeus, “Today salvation has come to this house, since he is also a son of Abraham,” not because Zacchaeus is described as putting his “faith” solely in Jesus, but rather because Zacchaeus declares, “Look, half of my belongings I give to the poor, Lord, and if I have extorted anything from anyone, I am paying it back fourfold” (Luke 19:8–9). It is Zacchaeus’s concrete gift to the poor and action to make reparation that prompts Jesus’s “salvation” declaration.

Meanwhile, in an earlier passage from Luke’s Gospel, a certain lawyer asks Jesus how to gain eternal life. When queried further by Jesus, the lawyer is able to state that the two greatest commands are required: to love God and to love one’s neighbor as one’s self. In reply Jesus does not say, “Forget the commandments! Have faith in me alone and you will live!” but rather, “You have answered correctly; *do this*, and you will live” (Luke 10:28). Then Jesus proceeds to define what it means to be a loving neighbor by telling the parable of the good Samaritan, all of which reinforces the basic point—that it is necessary to perform concrete acts of service to those who are in need in order to gain eternal life.

Of course, those anxious to harmonize Jesus’s teachings with their understanding of Paul’s gospel of salvation by grace through faith tend to see any suggestion of the necessity of works as a threat to God’s free gift of salvation and an insult to the sufficiency of Jesus’s sacrifice. So the specific teachings in the Synoptic Gospels pertaining to eternal life are filtered, often ingeniously, through the lens of Paul in order to explain how they do in fact teach salvation by faith alone—that is, if one reads with enough care. The discerning reader should judiciously evaluate such maneuvering. How many beams of good works must we toss aside as we strain to find the sawdust speck of “faith

10. A. Stanley, *Salvation by Works?*, affirms that Jesus did teach that good works are ultimately necessary for final salvation. For a contrary view stressing the importance of faith alone for salvation in the Synoptics, see Schreiner, *Faith Alone*, 112–16. However, Schreiner’s evidence feels strained, as his examples pertain to healing and temporary vindication but not clearly to final salvation. The perspective of the Gospel of John will be discussed subsequently.

alone” before we start to wonder precisely how this salvation house has been constructed? If we have to read the “good works” requirement out of so many of Jesus’s teachings about eternal life, might it be the case that the assumed Pauline interpretative lens of “by grace alone through faith alone” and “not by works” is causing the distortion? Or could it be that we have foisted our own questionable contemporary understandings of faith, works, the gospel, and salvation onto both Paul and the Gospels?



For reasons that will become clear in due course, I submit that the gospel is not primarily about the necessity of the human response of “faith” in Jesus’s saving work, but rather about how Jesus came to be enthroned as Lord of heaven and earth. *Allegiance alone* is required for salvation.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

1. Where outside of a religious setting have you heard people use the term “faith”? What did it mean in that context?
2. If the word “faith” were instantly forbidden, what words do you think would tend to replace it in the various communities in which you participate (e.g., family, school, church, work)? Why?
3. To what degree are our spiritual and religious journeys bounded by our own horizons of experience? Which of your experiences most control how you presently understand “faith”?
4. What did Josephus mean when he urged the rebel, saying, “Repent and believe in me”? Why might this be important for understanding the overall framework of Jesus’s ministry?
5. Can you identify several factors that pressure readers to read all passages in the Bible in a “faith, not works” direction?
6. Do you think it is significant that Jesus does not say to the rich young man, “Just believe in me and you will have eternal life”? Why or why not?
7. Have you ever tried to explain to a friend or acquaintance how faith and works fit together? How did (or would) you explain it?

1

FAITH IS *NOT*

Christianity is all about the human response of faith, or so popular teaching and perception would have us believe. Undeniably, faith is essential to Christianity—right? Or is it? I would argue that like rot in an apple, much of the malaise in contemporary Christianity stems from a rotten core. The gospel, salvation, and the Christian life have little to do with “faith” or “belief” as generally defined or understood, and this is the decay in the interior—so much so that it would be best if these words were abandoned with regard to discussions of salvation among Christians. The Greek word *pistis*, generally rendered “faith” or “belief,” as it pertains to Christian salvation, quite simply has little correlation with “faith” and “belief” as these words are generally understood and used in contemporary Christian culture, and much to do with *allegiance*. At the center of Christianity, properly understood, is not the human response of faith or belief but rather the old-fashioned term *fidelity*. Chapters 2–4 will reframe the gospel while developing the concepts of allegiance and fidelity more robustly. Those who are anxious to get to the heart of my argument and evidence are welcome to leapfrog the present chapter. But as I have taught this material in the university classroom, I have found that the best first step is to clear away popular misconceptions. So each subsection in what follows seeks to explain what faith is *not*.

Not the Opposite of Evidence Assessment

Several years ago some zealous young missionaries happened to knock on the door of my sister’s apartment where I was visiting. These two young women,

the radiance of their faces only surpassed by the gleam of their tracts, were eager to do God's work. As they began to tell us the reason for their mission and the source of their joy, I asked a few probing questions about a sacred text known as *The Book of Abraham*.

The Book of Abraham is a text that Joseph Smith Jr., the leading figure of the Latter-Day Saints (Mormon) tradition, claimed to have discovered when a traveling mummy exhibit came through Kirtland, Ohio, where Smith was living at the time. Smith asserted that the manuscript was an ancient document called *The Book of Abraham*, and, after purchasing it, Smith eventually offered his own interpretative translation. Smith claimed it told the story of Abraham's departure from Chaldea, and that it included nonbiblical traditions, such as Abraham's being bound to an altar to be sacrificed by a pagan priest. According to Smith, it also contained speculation about Kolob, a creation alleged to be near to God's celestial residence. Both the pictographs and Smith's translations are easily available online.

But there are large discrepancies between Smith's claims and subsequent scholarly findings. For example, Smith takes the first image as a representation of a pagan priest seeking to sacrifice Abraham on an altar, translating: "And it came to pass that the priests laid violence upon me [Abraham], that they might slay me also, as they did those virgins upon this altar; and that you may have a knowledge of this altar, I will refer you to the representation at the commencement of this record."¹ So Smith asserts that an image in the manuscript and the words associated with the image describe a pagan attempt to sacrifice Abraham. But scholars of the ancient world have determined *The Book of Abraham* to be from a class of Egyptian funerary documents known from elsewhere as "Books of Breathing," and that this particular document was "copied for a Theban priest named Hor."² As to the alleged near-sacrifice of Abraham, it is actually a representation of "the resurrection of the Osiris Hor on the customary lion-headed funerary couch." Meanwhile, an authoritative translation of the words associated with the image reads: "[Osiris, the god's father], prophet of Amon-Re, King of the Gods, prophet of Min who slaughters his enemies, prophet of Khonsu" (and so forth).³ So there is significant publicly available evidence that Smith's *The Book of Abraham* has nothing to do with Abraham at all if ordinary methods of scholarship and translation are applied.

These young women were unflappable when presented with these evidence-based questions, simply stating, "We believe that we can only know the truth

1. *The Book of Abraham* 1:12 in Smith, *Pearl of Great Price*, 27. *The Book of Abraham* is available on the official Latter-Day Saints website: www.lds.org/scriptures/pgp/abr/1?lang=eng.

2. Ritner, "Breathing Permit of Hor," 162.

3. *Ibid.*, 169.

by faith,” and inviting us all to consider through prayer whether or not we might have a warm sensation in our hearts as we considered the truth of their presentation.

I tell this story not to nitpick the Mormon tradition (which is complex and intellectually diverse) but rather because I think this story captures well a fundamental misperception about the nature of faith for many in our contemporary culture. Faith is for many of us, much as it was for these exuberant and well-intentioned missionaries, the opposite of evidence-based assessment of truth. A truth claim had been made—“Mormonism is the one fully true story” (including the role of *The Book of Abraham* in the Mormon worldview since this is an authoritative text as part of *The Pearl of Great Price*)—but the assessment of the truth value of that claim was deemed by these young women to be a matter of faith or belief *totally apart from publicly available evidence that might be pertinent to the value of the truth claim*. Faith or belief was being put forward as the opposite of reasoned judgment in consideration of the evidence. Indeed such evidence was deemed immaterial in advance! Faith was reckoned not just an alternative but a *superior* way of knowing what is true and what is false. Judgment could be rendered on the basis of inward feelings alone. For these women, and they are not alone in our culture, faith is defined as something one simply *must* privately and personally affirm regardless of whatever contrary public evidence exists. In short, for many today faith is defined as *the opposite of evidence-based truth*. This is neither a biblical nor a Christian understanding of faith.

In its more egregious forms, such as in the story of the missionaries just recounted, it is perhaps easy to see that this definition of faith is both naive and dangerous because the error is so overt. However, this private, experiential, anti-evidential notion of faith (often called *fideism* in scholarly circles) is not unique to groups such as the Mormons. It also sneaks into the mainstream church in more subtle modes.⁴ For instance, we find belief or faith being defined in this basic manner when an inquirer asks a tough question about evolution and creation (on the basis of data available in the public arena) and receives a curt anti-evolutionary response simplistically affirming, “The Bible says it, and I personally have found the Bible to be true, so I believe it,” a response that does not attempt to deal seriously with *all* the available data (including complexities in the Bible itself). Regardless of precisely how one comes down on the complex creation or evolution (or both!) debate, we should all agree that the “faith” God requires of us has nothing to do with ignoring relevant evidence that is easily available when adjudicating truth claims. And

4. See Noll, *Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*.

is it not largely due to this abusive use of “faith” and “belief” that so many, past and present, are quick to dismiss Christianity and religion in general, seeing it as purely “faith” based, while taking “faith” to mean the opposite of evidence-based truth?⁵ True Christian faith is not fideism.

Not a Leap in the Dark

As Christians, we are frequently encouraged to *step out in faith*, to do something bold for God or for Jesus that intentionally pushes us outside our comfort zone: to travel halfway around the world, to build an orphanage in a third-world country, to contribute money to a kingdom-growing project beyond what we think our finances can bear, or to befriend the socially disadvantaged. All of these things are undoubtedly worthwhile endeavors—but is this at the heart of *faith*? And is the reason for doing them really that we should “step out”? Is it true that we should—like the hero in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (in a movie clip that is sometimes shown at churches to encourage such action)—take a step off of a ledge into a dark chasm, obediently following arcane instructions, even when no obvious path to safety can be achieved by making the leap? To be a true Christian, so it is asserted, or at least to foster maturity *in the faith*, we must plunge into the darkness, launching into what appears to be utter nothingness, knowing that the unfailing God will catch us. This, so it is claimed, is not an irrational leap, because we know that God will indeed safely cradle us.

It is not just popular Christianity that would encourage this type of faith. The Danish existential philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard, reacting with strong aversion to the predominant but all-too-easy Christian culture in which he found himself (what he calls *Christendom*), waxes eloquent when he considers Abraham.⁶ For Kierkegaard, Abraham is the greatest example of faith in the Bible—a paragon of faith—because of his unquestioning obedience to God’s command with regard to Isaac. In Genesis 22, Abraham is commanded to do the unthinkable, to offer his son as a sacrifice to God. And not just his son, but his beloved son Isaac, who, after years of infertility and frustration, was given in fulfillment of God’s promise. Contrary to natural paternal instinct and all basic laws of moral decency, Abraham must kill his

5. Fideism is not just a contemporary issue but was a problem in early Christianity too. For example, the pagan Celsus speaks derisively about Christians, saying, “Some do not even want to give or to receive a reason for what they believe, and use such expressions as ‘Do not ask questions; just believe,’ and ‘Thy faith will save thee’” (Origen, *Cels.* 1.9 [Chadwick]).

6. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*.

own son on the altar. For Kierkegaard, Abraham in his unquestioning obedience is a knight of faith, willing to do what is irrational, what is in fact by mere human standards immoral, in obedience to the divine commandment. In Genesis 22 it is clear that Abraham never wavers; he is single-mindedly committed to executing the divine will until the angel calls out, restraining Abraham's hand even as he is about to plunge the knife. Kierkegaard summons us to act with the same faith as Abraham, to abandon ourselves recklessly to the necessary leap in the dark, because it is only in midflight that we truly encounter God.⁷

This stepping-out-from-security definition captures an essential component of biblical faith but simultaneously introduces a dangerous half-truth when it is coupled with an irrational leap-in-the-dark notion. The truth portion of this half-truth is best illustrated by examining the most straightforward definition of faith given in the Bible. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews defines *pistis*, saying, "Now faith [*pistis*] is the underlying substance [*hypostasis*] toward which hope is directed, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1). The point of this definition—as is made clear by examples in the rest of Hebrews 11—is that by means of *pistis*, the true people of God are willing to act decisively in the visible world not for reasons that are immediately apparent but because an unseen yet even more genuine underlying substance (*hypostasis*), God's reality, compels the action. This willingness to act on the deeper, truer, but nonetheless hidden reality is "faith" for the author of Hebrews. And we should eagerly agree that true knowledge of God and saving "faith" are often bound up with such a notion.⁸ For example, Noah was saved when he acted on things not yet seen, responding to the command of God to build an ark, even in the absence of tangible, this-present-world evidence (Heb. 11:7)—all of which is instructive for our salvation (1 Pet. 3:20–21; 2 Pet. 2:5).

Yet—and now for the way in which this leap-in-the-dark idea is a dangerous half-truth—it must be remembered that neither Noah nor Abraham launched out into the void, but rather each responded to God's command. They acted in response to the call of a promise-fulfilling God with whom they had experience. Abraham was asked to sacrifice Isaac by the God who had miraculously provided Isaac—a God who had proven to be trustworthy

7. Kierkegaard's ideas about faith are much more sophisticated than this brief recounting might suggest. For further analysis, see Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*.

8. Although I have cautioned against imposing Kierkegaard's existential definition of faith onto our ancient texts, at the same time I welcome Kierkegaard's insistence on the necessity of a subjective knowing with respect to God. Kierkegaard does offer a helpful antidote to any vestige of naive objectivism that remains in the academy and the church—and a way to hold head and heart together. See Crump, *Encountering Jesus, Encountering Scripture*.

to Abraham through a lengthy life journey together. One might even dare to say that in so acting Noah and Abraham above all *showed allegiance* to God as the sovereign and powerful Lord who speaks all human affairs into existence, but more on this later.

The key point is that true *pistis* is not an irrational launching into the void but a reasonable, action-oriented response grounded in the conviction that God's invisible underlying realities are more certain than any apparent realities. Stepping out in faith is not intrinsically good in and of itself, as if God is inherently more pleased with daring motorcycle riders than with automobile passengers who cautiously triple-check their seatbelt buckles; it is only good when it is an obedient response to God's exercised sovereignty. We are not to leap out in the dark at a whim, or simply to prove to ourselves, God, or others that we "have faith." But the promise-keeping God might indeed *call us* to act on invisible realities of his heavenly kingdom.

If the call is genuine, we may indeed be bruised by the leap. Yet if it is genuine, in gathering the bruises from the hard landing, we can be certain that we will come to look more like the wounded Son, which is the final goal of redeemed humanity. If the call to leap is not genuine but an idolatrous response to a false god of our own making, we may jump into the emptiness only to find ourselves unable to gain secure footing or to reverse course. True *pistis* is not an irrational leap in the dark but a carefully discerned response to God's reign through Jesus over his kingdom and that kingdom's frequently hidden growth.

Not the Opposite of Works

I grew up in a fundamentalist, King-James-Version-only Bible church in Northern California. In this brand of Christianity the Bible sometimes has a way of taking on a certain luminous quality. The Bible was certainly not worshiped, but some of the hymnody perhaps unwittingly encouraged a covert bibliolatry. For instance, each and every Sunday, prior to the Sunday school service, the leader would hold up a worn leather Bible, and the congregation would enthusiastically belt out, "The B-I-B-L-E, yes that's the book for me! I'll stand alone on the Word of God, the B-I-B-L-E!" If no one bowed face-down on the dusty carpet in homage to the book, a few knees might have ever so slightly buckled.

My pastor at that time was (and still is) a kindhearted man, deeply devoted to God, Jesus, the church, the unsaved, his family, and the Bible—perhaps not in that precise order. When I reflect on his role in my life, I can only speak

with gratitude. Although my mother had introduced me to Jesus and the Christian life when I was a young child, during my teenage years my pastor's formal teaching awakened something new—a brighter light, a moral rigor, a passion for God's ways, and above all else a reverence for Scripture. I am profoundly grateful for his role in my life.

Yet in retrospect the preached message I heard weekly growing up was subtly confused. No matter what passage of Scripture was being expounded, regardless of the liturgical season (my church was not exactly into following the ecclesial calendar), despite whatever contemporary political or societal affairs might be pressing, virtually every sermon had the same conclusion—a presentation of “the gospel” and an invitation “to accept Jesus into your heart.” Now, do not misunderstand: I think the gospel should be preached and invitations to follow Jesus need to be extended—urgently so. However, invariably the good news was presented in its classic “Romans Road” form and accompanied by a stern warning. That is, the gospel was given as follows: (1) we are all perniciously bent on trying to earn our salvation by doing good deeds; (2) yet all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God—and that includes *you*; (3) but the good news is that Jesus died for your sins; (4) so if you will just believe this and pray along with me, then the free gift of eternal life is yours today. And now the warning: the only thing that you must not under any circumstances do is believe that you can earn your salvation through good works, for this was the mistake of many Jews in Paul's day and is still the error of Catholics today.

Within this version of the gospel, which involves several dangerous distortions, good works end up playing the confusing dual role of friend and foe. Good works are “friend” because they are believed to *flow from* the more primal response of belief and are evidence of genuine faith. In this way, it is still possible for those who adhere to this system to affirm James 2:26, “faith without deeds is dead,” because good works are felt to emerge spontaneously from the wellspring of faith. Yet good works are “foe” because they can all too easily lure us, seduce us, become our false security blanket, causing us to rely on ourselves for our own salvation—and then, so it is presumed, we stumble (cf. Rom. 9:30–33). We must instead ever and always just trust, avoiding the seduction of seeking to earn God's favor through moral or religious performance.

In this way faith and works are pitted against one another as opposite paths to salvation, one that is successful (faith) and one that fails (works). Chapter 5 will explain more fully how treating faith and good deeds as opposite and mutually exclusive paths to salvation distorts the gospel. Here I merely want to point out that the faith/works divide taught in churches like the one in

which I was raised relies on assumed meanings of “faith” (*pistis*) and “works” (*erga*) that may not be linguistically or contextually sound. If, for instance, we were to discover that Paul is concerned not primarily with “good works” in general but rather with “works of law”—that is, works demanded by the law of Moses—then what difference might that make? Furthermore, if we were to determine that in appropriate salvation-oriented contexts in the New Testament *pistis* most likely means faithfulness, or fidelity, or allegiance, then might not *pistis* by its very definition *include* concrete acts that are inseparable from allegiance? In other words, we might come to discover that faith and works are not mutually exclusive after all.

Not an “It’s All Good” Attitude

You just lost your job. Rent is overdue. Utility bills are piling up. Your roommate just told you that she is moving out next month. Then you receive the notice that your tuition payment for next semester is due in three weeks. Enter your well-intentioned Christian friend, who offers the following words of consolation: “Everything is going to be all right—you just need to have faith,” or “God brings about these sort of events to test our faith—just believe in God and he will deliver you from this trial.”

Now in the most general theological terms, this might in fact be sound advice. Although not everything that happens in life reflects God’s *desired will* (most obviously our own sin or the sin of others is not what God would wish to occur), all that happens is allowed within God’s *permissive will*. And we also know that whatever God permits, even if evil is allowed to temporarily flourish, it can be turned to good by God for us and for others. This is beautifully illustrated by the story of Joseph, who even after being sold into slavery by his brothers, suffering false accusation, imprisonment, and exile, is still able in the end to say to his brothers, “Although you meant evil against me, God meant it for good, in order that, as it is today, many people should be kept alive” (Gen. 50:20). So in the final analysis we truly can affirm with the apostle Paul that “all things work together for good for those who love God, for those who are called in accordance with his purpose” (Rom. 8:28).

The risk here is that if you, while staring disconsolately at your bank statement, were to accept your friend’s advice (“Everything is going to be all right—you just need to have faith”) in an unqualified fashion, then you might accept an inadequate definition of faith. You might begin to think of faith as equivalent to “maintaining a positive mindset.” As if the hippy tie-dye generation kind of faith—just chill out and relax, because everything is going to

be fine—is somehow what is needed in this stressful situation. You might be tempted to think that real Christian faith demands unfettered optimism. No matter what, you must relax and stay positive, so you should deny your real feelings, slap a plastic doll grin on your face, and try to keep up appearances of all-rightness. But this optimism is a bit self-delusional (if not neurotic). If everything does *not* turn out all right and the self-delusion collapses, you might think that you have somehow lost your Christian faith. “After all,” you might say, “if I had genuine faith, I would not feel so discouraged.”

A few minutes of reflection will probably reveal the inadequacy of a “positive mindset” definition of faith. Faith-as-optimism is an almost entirely vacuous idea (remember the George Michael example in the introduction), because in the final analysis *no concrete object of faith is in view at all*. It is faith merely for faith’s sake. The truth is that genuine biblical faith is not a conjured optimism, a pull-a-rabbit-out-of-the-hat, magical feel-goodism, nor is it aimlessly directed at some vague cosmic hope that affirms good karma will somehow prevail in the end. Let me give an example to help illustrate.

As a salute and celebration of the great American auto industry, let’s say I currently drive a 1972 Chevy Nova. Not only does its very name suggest that it won’t reliably run (*No va* means “it doesn’t go” in Spanish), but my own practical experience is that due to its age and lack of maintenance, my car will only start once out of every ten times I jump into it and turn the key. Now, I have a hugely important interview early tomorrow morning. Do I say to myself, “I simply have faith that my Nova will start tomorrow!” and do nothing but blindly hope, or do I make a backup plan? If this interview is truly central to my life goals, I am not going to chance it. Why? Because even if I wanted to channel a deep inner reservoir of “faith,” I would not really be able to do it. I would know in my heart of hearts that my car is an untrustworthy junker.

In other words, true faith cannot be spontaneously generated on the basis of wishful thinking, for it is rooted in a *concrete object toward which it is directed*.⁹ If the object upon which I am asked to rely (in this example, my Nova) has repeatedly proven to be untrustworthy, then unless I am adept at extreme and willful self-delusion, it will literally be impossible to *really* trust it, even should I desperately wish to trust it. The point is that real biblical faith is not a general positive mindset or a blind optimism but is directed toward

9. Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith*, 4, describes it this way: “*Pistis* is a relational concept whose meaning is always defined in part by the relationship in which it operates: the faithfulness of a slave towards her master is not the same as that of a client towards his patron or that of a believer towards Christ.” So, more precisely, *pistis* is a relational term, the quality of which is determined by the subject’s ability to invest trust in the object and the object’s ability to generate trust in the subject.

a defined object—and it is the trustworthiness of the object that sources and fixes faith’s genuineness. So if we want to grow in faith, we should study and contemplate God’s extraordinary reliability.

Not Reducible to Intellectual Assent

One of the greatest strengths of the Christian tradition is the depth and rigor of its intellectual heritage. Anyone who thinks that Christianity is nothing more than a naive tale suitable only for simpletons should spend a few hours reading ancient worthies such as Saint Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and John Calvin, or more recent thinkers such as Karl Barth, Alvin Plantinga, and N. T. Wright. Perhaps partly because this rich intellectual heritage is so compelling, some Christians, both ancient and modern, have felt that salvation depends solely upon knowing the right things, believing certain doctrines to be true.

In the period of the early church, some deviant groups came to believe that they were saved primarily through the acquisition of knowledge. These diverse groups are usually collectively called the Gnostics. Despite considerable variety in what they believed, they shared the conviction that salvation was contingent on the acquisition of esoteric knowledge. In short, without obtaining the requisite secret information, upon death they might not be able to escape from the enslaving material order (usually understood to be crafted by the god of the Old Testament, whom they regarded as an inferior deity) and to return to the spiritual fullness from which they originated—that is, to the most high God, the God of the New Testament as revealed by Jesus. So these Gnostics tended to believe falsely that the god of the Old Testament is different from the God of the New. The Gnostics thought that the latent spark of divinity inside you needed to be fanned into a white-hot flame through the acquisition of secret knowledge, all of which would allow you to pass through the various heavenly spheres as you returned to the fullness. You might even need to have memorized certain passwords so that angels guarding the gateways to the various heavenly spheres would allow you to pass through to the next level in your movement away from the material order and toward the fullness. For the Gnostics, secret knowledge was what was ultimately most necessary for salvation.

In more recent times the so-called free-grace movement approaches this notion of salvation by knowledge. This system asserts that all God requires of a person for eternal salvation is to hold a specific minimalistic belief as factual—that Jesus died for my sins. And the weight of emphasis here is on personal, intellectual assent (“I agree”) to the truthfulness (“reality”) of a

proposition (“that Jesus died for my sins”). In short, if you mentally agree that Jesus died for your sins, then nothing else is required for your salvation—you are on your way to heaven.¹⁰ The problem here is a deficient definition of faith (and for that matter of salvation). Advocates of free-grace salvation have correctly recognized the primacy of God’s grace and the necessity of holding certain doctrines as “true” or “real,” but by effectively reducing faith to intellectual assent, they have introduced a dangerous error.

Nobody, even in the free-grace movement, wants to claim that the demons in Mark’s Gospel—who know Jesus’s divine origins and who utter, “I know who you are, the Holy One of God!” (Mark 1:24) and “You are the Son of God” (3:11)—are in actuality saved because of their true knowledge of Jesus. Free-gracers are quick to disavow such a conclusion. All would agree with the Letter of James, which affirms that such “facts” are not enough: “You believe that God is one. You do well. Even the demons believe and shudder” (James 2:19). Nonetheless, problematically, at least some in the free-grace movement want to make salvation depend on nothing but a slight variation of the Son-of-God fact, an affirmation that Jesus died for my sins.



It is correct that we must hold certain intellectual truths as real or factual, including Jesus’s saving work, but this is not all God requires. As we seek to recover the Bible’s teachings about faith, works, and the gospel, in the next chapter we will explore further what essential “facts” do need to be intellectually affirmed as a necessary condition for salvation along with allegiance to Jesus as king.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

1. Why is it important for Christians to recognize that faith and evidence aren’t opposites?
2. Describe a time when you personally encountered a situation in which faith was being defined (overtly or covertly) as the opposite of evidence. Did you or others recognize it as problematic at the time?
3. Have you ever felt that God was asking you to make a leap in the dark? What happened?
4. Why does the leap-in-the-dark idea both approach and depart from the biblical notion of *pistis* (“faith”) as described in Hebrews?

10. As representative voices in the free-grace movement, consider Hodges, *Absolutely Free*; C. Stanley, *Eternal Security*.

5. At what point (or points) is the line crossed between a healthy respect for the Bible and an inappropriate bibliolatry (worship of the Bible)?
6. Do your past experiences, especially religious experiences, lead you to see works more as friend or foe? Why?
7. Do you think it is psychologically helpful for a person to have faith just for faith's sake? What are the potential risks and rewards?
8. If you were to catch a Christian friend placing faith in faith and you had an opportunity to correct your friend gently, how would you explain the deficiency?
9. What is the risk to Christianity as a whole if faith or belief is defined only as mental agreement with certain "facts"?
10. Can you think of at least one practical way (a concrete action) to help yourself or another remember that when the Bible speaks of saving "belief" or "faith," more than mental agreement is intended?