

# Faith: New Testament Perspectives

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Every branch of the Christian family claims that it follows the New Testament and that human traditions are to be subject to criticism by the New Testament. But it is not so simple. In dialogue each branch of the Christian family is forced to face the question: how in actual fact have we used the New Testament? Each branch discovers how varied its usage has been, which leads to openness in dialogue.

Historical study of the New Testament *itself* has also led to openness in dialogue, for suddenly one discovers how varied New Testament usage is. Treasured convictions about the New Testament collapse, for it turns out that assumptions about New Testament patterns will not hold. For example, famous scholars like Schlatter and Bultmann have held that a New Testament pattern exists for the word "faith."<sup>1</sup> But historical investigation proves otherwise. Faith is used in a variety of ways in the New Testament. No single meaning for faith exists because the New Testament was not being asked to

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define faith. It is not even quite exact to state that faith has a spectrum of meanings in the New Testament, for the metaphor of a spectrum brings too much of the quantitative to bear on the meaning of faith. Qualitative differences are also present. After the New Testament, to be sure, as it became "canon," the various traditions about faith came to be understood as a unified concept, as the "Christian" concept.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, faith is closely related to other words, not only to its own verbal form "believe," but also to those that might be called its brothers and sisters in the faith, such as "seeing" and "knowing" in the Gospel of John and "confidence" in the Letter to the Hebrews. For this reason it is inadequate to make a study of the word "faith" by itself. Instead, faith must be understood within the total context of each writer's thought. Only in this way will the contextual nature of all language be truly respected. This brief essay can only point to what this implies for faith in the New Testament, but it is an essay that follows well-known paths.

*Paul.* Faith can mean the power to work miracles (1 Cor 13:2) and a *charisma* or power (1 Cor 12:9). It can also mean a virtue (Gal 5:22) and be one in a triad of virtues (1 Cor 13:13; 1 Thess 1:3; 5:8; cf. Rom 5:1-5). It can be used to describe God's faithfulness (Rom 3:3). Such meanings for the word "faith" were current in Judaism and the early church before Paul appeared on the scene.

The question is: how does one discern the central thrust of Paul's use of "faith" and "believe"? At first glance it would appear that for Paul faith is the response a person makes. Thus he writes of faith as believing in the death and resurrection, that is, in the Gospel (Rom 6:8; 1 Thess 4:14; 1 Cor 15:2, 11), as confessing Jesus is Lord (Rom 10:9-10), and as hearing with faith (Gal 3:2, 5; cf. Rom 10:14). Paul can even write of grades of faith (Rom 12:3), growth in faith (2 Cor 10:15), that which is lacking in faith (1 Thess 3:10), and being weak in faith (Rom 14:1). Along the same line of thought there is an "obedience of faith" (Rom 1:5), "obedience in acknowledging the gospel of Christ" (2 Cor 9:13), "faith active in love" (Gal 5:6), and the "work of faith" (1 Thess 1:3; cf. 3:6, 5:8).

Therefore one might conclude that for Paul faith simply means an act of the human will, the response a person makes to God's call. But such a conclusion would fail to take into account the larger context of Paul's thought. Paul would reject any hint that faith is a human achievement. At the same time Paul makes it absolutely clear that salvation is only possible for the one who has faith (Rom 4:5). Any other way of salvation is excluded. No "works of the law" can lead to salvation (Gal 3:6-14). Only the ungodly are justified; only the one who can appeal to no work but instead trusts is saved (Rom 4:5). "Works of the law" and "faith" are antitheses (Rom 3:21-22, 28; 4:14; 9:32; Gal 2:19-20; Phil 3:9).

Such faith is and can only be a gift (Rom 3:24); it is not determined by its

subject, but wholly by its object, which is Christ (Rom 3:22; Gal 3:22). In this way faith can even be spoken of as a power that came to free us from the law (Gal 3:23, 25). But of course this faith has no power by itself; it only has power because the preaching of Christ creates faith (Rom 10:14, 17; Gal 3:1-5).

Is faith then not "my" faith but something that is imposed upon me? No human logic is able to explain how it is that faith is faith precisely because it does not do anything, for it does not depend on works but leaves everything to the God who justifies the ungodly. Such faith is a miracle, a gift. Another does not believe for me. My faith can be weak (Rom 14:1) and even fail (1 Cor 10:12). But finally there is no continuity between the sinful self before faith enters in and the new self living by faith (Gal 2:20). Otherwise sin has not been taken absolutely seriously. Only the cross is adequate to this task, even though the cross is an answer which our human logic rejects (1 Cor 1:18, 22-24; Gal 2:20). Until the *parousia*, to be sure, the Christian has joined Christ only in his death, not in his resurrection (Rom 6:3-8; 1 Cor 15:52; Phil 3:9-11).

*The Gospel of John*. It is generally thought that the editor or editors of this Gospel used a "signs source"; according to this source, miracles (signs) produce faith (2:11, 23; 4:53-54; 11:45; 20:30-31). Such faith is censured by a later editor: "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe" (4:48). Yet signs serve to lead to faith in Jesus (7:31; cf. 6:26; 11:47-48; 14:11), as 'do "earthly things" (3:12). Nevertheless the highest is not seeing and yet believing (20:29). Sometimes the words "seeing" and "knowing" may describe more profound stages of believing (1:50; 12:44-45; 10:38; 13:7). Faith is faith in Jesus (5:46; 8:31; 12:42; 14:11), his word (2:22; 4:41), his works (5:36; 10:38; 14:11), the doctrine about Jesus (11:27), and the testimony about him (1:7; 3:11; 32-33). The one who believes in Jesus has life (3:15; 5:24; 11:26) and will be taken from this world to be with Jesus (14:1-3). At this point, however, the believer is still in the world and endangered by the evil one (17:15).

Once again, as with Paul, one might conclude that for the Gospel of John faith simply means an act of the human will, the response a person makes to God's call, but the total context of the Gospel would indicate otherwise. The Johannine polarities of darkness and light are well-known. Sin is an absolutely serious problem, for everyone who sins "is a slave to sin" (8:34) and "men loved darkness rather than light" (3:19; cf. 1 John 5:19: "the whole world is in the power of the evil one"). Faith is therefore God's gift, for no one can come to Jesus "unless the Father who sent me draws him" (6:44-45). It is God who causes men to be born (1:13; 6:65; 8:47), it is Jesus who has chosen his own out of this world (1:12; 15:19; 17:14), and it is by the Spirit that one is born (3:5-6). The basic thrust is clear, even though in the editing process various points of view have been retained.

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*The Letter to the Hebrews*. In this letter faith is understood as that which is very close to the Christian virtues of hope, patience, and endurance (3:6; 6:11-12; 10:35-11:1; 12:2). Such a meaning for faith is to be found in the Judaism of the time, particularly in Philo. Faith is not understood as faith in Christ. The author of Hebrews wrote to a community where some were losing hope and patience. Christ thus becomes the supreme model for "our faith" (12:2; cf. 10:20), for holding faithfully to the "good news" (4:2). Such endurance is rewarded (12:2, 11).

Yet it would be a mistake to conclude that faith simply means an act of the human will through which each person decides to be saved. The author of Hebrews makes it clear that Christ accomplished salvation once for all, having destroyed sin, death, and the devil (2:14-15; 7:27; 9:12, 26; 10:2, 22). Just as in Paul salvation by "works of the law" is excluded, so here salvation by keeping the regulations of the Jewish cult is excluded. Sin and the cross are not as radically understood as in Paul, but the basic thrust of the message is the same: "...we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (10:10).<sup>5</sup>

*The First Letter of Peter*. Although the word "faith" is not used in 3:21, "appeal" (RSV) is. Brox interprets "appeal" as the "pledge" which is an inner bond with God.<sup>4</sup> Is an act of faith and will implied? The immediate context is not that of willing, but of being cast upon the flood in an ark, that which is done to someone. In order that using this context might not be considered pushing an illustration too far, the wider context of 1 Peter's baptismal theology needs to be described. In a very Pauline and Johannine fashion, 1 Peter states that "you have been born anew...through the living and abiding word of God" (1:23, cf. Rom 10:17; John 3:5-6). Even more

striking is the doctrine of election in 1 Peter. In 2:9 (and 2:5) a parallel is drawn between the elect people of God (cf. Exod 14:13-14) and the election of Christ (2:4, 6); the point made is that here is something God has done in spite of being rejected by everyone. He has chosen Christ and he has chosen his people; neither happened because of human decisions.

*The Gospel of Matthew.* This Gospel, like the Gospel of John, has come into being through an editing process. In the so-called "Q" source and the miracle stories faith is "prayer faith" as in the Old Testament (cf. Ps 55:17; 91:15); such faith precedes but does not cause the miracle, which comes from the Lord who can be trusted to hear praying faith. At this point Jesus himself is not the object of faith (8:10; 9:22; 17:20; 21:21-22). To Mark 9:42 Matthew, however, adds "in me," meaning "in Jesus" (18:6). For Matthew, faith also includes understanding (13:51; 16:5-12; 17:13) and may even be combined with "little faith," an idea found among the rabbis and in O<sub>1</sub> (6:30). "Little faith" (8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20) and "doubt" (28:17) are used of disciples who have failed. The one with "little faith" sinks in the waves (14:30-31), indicating

that the disciple having "little faith" is lost, and yet somehow for Matthew such a disciple is not an unbeliever either.<sup>5</sup>

Is faith an act of the human will? In 15:28 faith and will are synonyms, and elsewhere faith is understood to include will (8:13; 9:29). Yet in certain passages sin is taken seriously (5:29-30; 6:23). Although Matthew understands that Jesus fulfills the Old Testament and that the law of Moses is superseded (5:21-47; 15:2-6; 19:3-9; 22:31), the evangelist has not worked out what this necessarily implies for faith, sin, and even for the law. As a consequence, the anthropology found in this Gospel is comparatively undeveloped.<sup>6</sup>

*The Letter of James.* Faith is defined as faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (2:1). It seems to be an imperfect virtue, for when it is tested, it produces steadfastness, a more complete state (1:3-4). One is reminded of the Letter to the Hebrews.

In 2:14-26 James clearly is attacking Paul, the first to juxtapose faith and works. The key to James is his understanding of the law, for by following the law one is able to produce works (2:1-15). Faith has to prove itself by producing works (2:17-18). For Paul the law is not liberty (1:25; 2:12) but slavery (Rom 7:6) and faith does not have to prove itself, because it is established by its object, Christ (Gal 3:22). It may be that James misunderstands the real Paul. If that be the case, the best one can say for James is that his answer to Paul is confused and confusing. Even as a corrective to a misunderstood Paul,

James' positive view of being able to keep the law (2:8) and his weakened view of sin (4:17; 5:19-20) are problems.<sup>7</sup>

*Where do these perspectives lead?* The varying perspectives in the New Testament at the very least allow for faith as a gift of God. Lutherans customarily state this in the words of Luther's explanation to the third article of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel."<sup>8</sup> At this point some will raise the spectre of the *opus operatum*, or of magic, or of sacramental manipulation in baptism. Yet none of these spectres is a problem unless the absolute seriousness of sin is diminished. If my faith or even my repentance were able to be a contribution to salvation, then sin would not be sin and grace would not be grace.

To the one who objects that grace must be *pro me* and that salvation is not mine unless I am personally involved, the answer in part is that even our restored relationship with God (not to speak of our broken relationship with God) is not an I-Thou relationship in the same sense in which one has an I-Thou relationship with another human being; somehow in our modern hybris we have lost track of the infinite distance between Creator and creature just as we have sublimated the seriousness of sin. To be sure, God's grace is *pro me*, but that too is part of his grace.

Thus faith is a gift, purely and simply. All are in the same situation when

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it comes to faith, just as all are in the same situation with respect to sin. That means adult baptism is simply delayed infant baptism. Infant baptism admittedly cannot be shown with absolute certainty to have been church practice until the end of the second century, but the theological rationale was there from the beginning. This is the essential meaning of sin and grace.

We must not allow ourselves to be trapped into making the validity of faith the decisive question. God breaks through to me by his words and actions, in spite of my sin and weakness. Though deaf, I hear; though blind, I see. Thank God my salvation does not depend on my feelings, my consciousness (whether I still believe if I am asleep, senile, mentally ill, or retarded), my level of psychological development (whether I still believe I believe or doubt I believe), the faith of the Church, or, finally, on me (in any way, shape, or form), lost and helpless as I am.

#### notes

1. Adolf Schlatter. *Der Glaube im Neuen Testament* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1963); Rudolf Bultmann. *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. K. Grobel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954-5) 2 vols.; Rudolf Bultmann, "believe, etc." *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, trans. G. Bromiley. Vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 174-182, 197-228.
2. Gerhard Dautzenberg. "Der Glaube im Hebräerbrief," *Biblische Zeitschrift Neue Folge* 17 (1973) 175, 177; Dieter Lührmann. "Glaube." *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 11 (1979) 64-5, 79; D. Lührmann, *Glaube im Frühen Christentum* (Gutersloher: Gutersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1976) *passim*. Lührmann should be consulted throughout this essay.
3. Dautzenberg, "Der Glaube," 161-177; Erich Crasser. "Rechtfertigung im Hebräerbrief." *Rechtfertigung*, Festschrift Kasemann, ed. J. Friedrich, W. Pohlmann, and P. Stuhlmacher (Tübingen: Mohr, and Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1976) 79-93, esp. 92.
4. Norbert Brox, *Der Erste Petrusbrief*. Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 21 (Zürich. Einsiedeln. Cologne: Benziger Verlag, and Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1979) 178-9.
5. Gunther Bomkamm, Gerhard Eber, and H.J. Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963) 112-16, 275-96.
6. Ulrich Luz, "Die Erfüllung des Gesetzes bei Matthäus (Mt 5, 17-20)," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 75 (1978) 434-5.
7. Lührmann, "Glaube," 78.
8. SC 2:6; BC 345; cf. LC 4:53; BC 443; LC 4:57; BC 444; Ap. 13:4-5; BC 211-2.

## Faith in Baptist Teaching

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Baptists typically have sought to hold in balance the divine and the human aspects of faith. They have tried to keep in proper perspective the nature of faith as both gift and response. It has always been felt that an overbalance of one or the other element inevitably must lead to an unbiblical view.

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The Philadelphia Confession of Faith (1742) speaks of "the grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls. Faith is "the work of the Spirit of Christ" wrought in the heart by ministry of the Word. The Confession also speaks of faith being increased strengthened by the administration of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and other means appointed by God (Chapter 14).

The emphasis in these statements is on the divine aspects of faith, or God initiative (gift): "the grace of faith," "the elect," "enabled to believe," work of the Spirit of Christ" wrought in believers' hearts. There is also however, the implication of the human aspect or response in the fact that elect *do believe* to the saving of their souls; they actively participate in sacraments. Karl Barth's comments with respect to the nature of faith relation to baptism are interesting in this regard.

Neither by exegesis nor from the nature of the case can it be established that the baptized person can be a merely passive instrument (*Behandel*). Rather it may be shown, by exegesis and from the nature of the case, in this action the baptized is an active partner (*Handelnder*) and therefore whatever stage of life he may be, plainly no *infans* can be such a person.

In this sphere of the New Testament one is not brought to baptism; comes to baptism.'

The human, active, response side of faith is underscored in the Philadelphia Confession by its statement concerning the Christian's believing to be whatever is revealed in the word as the authority of God himself and "attests an excellency therein . . . above all other writings and all things in world, as it bears forth the glory of God in his attributes, the excellency of Christ in his nature and offices, and the power and fulness of the Holy Spirit in his workings and operations." The emphasis of these statements is largely the conceptual aspects, together with the self-authenticating witness (*autopistia*) of the Holy

Spirit.

As the Confession proceeds, strong voluntary and behavioral aspects appear in the statement that the Christian is "enabled to . . . cast his soul upon truth thus believed; and also acts differently upon that which each part passage thereof contains; yielding obedience to the . . . commands, trembling at the . . . threatenings, and embracing the . . . promises of God for life and that which is to come."

Lest this description of faith be misunderstood in any sense as constituting a work, the Confession makes clear that "the principal acts of saving have immediate relation to Christ, accepting, receiving, and resting upon him alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of covenant of grace."

Many passages of Scripture contain the command to believe (Mark Luke 8:50; John 14:1, 11; Acts 16:31), or express an act of faith as th

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Baptism is the event and Christian education provides the memory and recall that is necessary.<sup>2</sup>

On the analogy used above this implies that the catechumenate should continue beyond baptism, as various early Fathers believed and carried out in their instruction of the baptized.

#### NOTES

1. *Of Baptism* (1646); Cited by M. Walker in an unpublished thesis, "Early Baptist Thought on the Child in the Church" (M.Th. thesis, King's College, University of London, 1963) 255f.

2. Warren Carr, *Baptism, Conscience and Clue for the Church* (New York: Holt, Reinhart, & Winston, 1964) 182.

## A Lutheran Response to George Beasley-Murray

Joseph A. Burgess

1. In general the New Testament reflects the variety of views in the surrounding Jewish-hellenistic world, but with the addition of Christian "accents"; a very positive view of children is attributed to Jesus, as can be seen in his receiving children and asserting that "of them" is the Kingdom (Mark 10:13-16). But even though Mark 10:13-16 was used together with children's baptism in worship from the earliest centuries, it was not until the Reformation and the struggle with the Anabaptists that this text was used to support the baptism of children. Our view of children is unconsciously shaped by the ideas of Rousseau, Dickens, Dostoevski, Freud, Piaget, and Kolberg, disparate though they be. To what extent should our theology take account of these views?<sup>1</sup>

2. Is 1 Cor 7:14 a verse which supports the innocence of children? The difficulty with this passage is the material concept of holiness Paul used. Only here does he use "holy" in this sense. Elsewhere for Paul holiness is the mark of the Christian in contrast to the heathen. Over against Baptist usage of this verse it must be pointed out that nothing is said about what conclusions can

be drawn from the "holiness" of the children of "mixed" marriages for their membership in the church, for in 1 Cor 7:16 the holiness of the Christian partner does not "save" the other partner who is being "sanctified." At best the outcome is doubtful.

3. At what date do children lose their innocence, consciously perceive, and need to be converted? Baptists argue for as early as three years of age and as late as nine. In this dialogue we have been told that children are frequently converted at age five. Do children under three sin? Much depends on the definition of sin. For Paul sin is an arena in which we are caught, a power to which we are enslaved (Rom 6:6, 16, 20; Gal

3:22), the "flesh" (Rom 8:7). Children die, and death is the power of sin (Rom 6:23; cf. 5:14, 17, 21; 6:16; 8:2). Thus all are evidently involved in sin for all die. Can a child, or for that matter an adult, have faith? Not if faith is understood to be effective in itself, for sin eliminates that possibility. It is only because Christ is always at work in faith that faith works salvation.

4. What of centuries of infant baptism by the universal church? Is there no possibility of legitimate development, as with the doctrine of the trinity? It is admittedly difficult to find texts from the first two centuries proving infants were being baptized, but it is equally difficult to find texts proving that sons and daughters who had grown up within the Christian family were baptized upon confession of faith. Were they treated exactly like pagan converts?

.I. G. Haufe, "Das Kind im Neuen Testament," *Theologuche Literaturzeitung* 104 (1979) 637-8; G. Krause, *Die Kinder im Evangelium* (Stuttgart/Gottingen: Klotz, 1973); P. Aries, *Centuries of Childhood*, trans. R. Baldick (New York: Random House, 1965).

## A Baptist Response to George Beasley-Murray

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Although there is no lack of concern, materials, or programs for infants and children in their churches, some Baptists in recent years have acknowledged that they have no developed theology of childhood. Yet regardless of varied Baptist viewpoints in other matters, I believe that the great majority of contemporary Baptists hold that infants dying in infancy are saved. Children are in a state of salvation until they become morally responsible, and become "actual transgressors."

To virtually all Baptists, the Christian nature of the child is a primary responsibility of the Christian family and the church. Baptists are conver-

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