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What is Faith?

Shane Rosenthal



THE HUMBLE SKEPTIC
TRUTH ISN'T AFRAID OF QUESTIONS

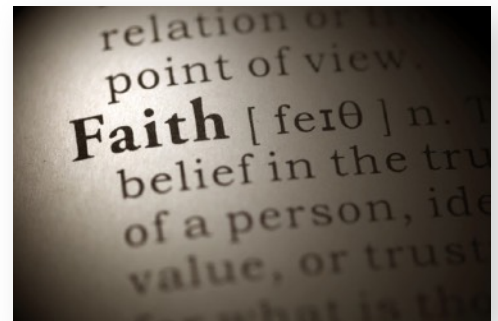
WHAT *is* FAITH?

by Shane Rosenthal

Some years ago on one of his television programs, Bill Maher defined faith as “the purposeful suspension of critical thinking.”¹ Similarly, Richard Dawkins, Neil deGrasse Tyson and others have defined faith as “believing something in the absence of evidence.”² But are these definitions of faith accurate?

In preparation for a lecture I recently gave on this topic, I decided to check the world’s foremost authoritative source for all things pertaining to the English language, namely, the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Featuring 20 volumes and over 21,000 pages of content, the OED isn’t a typical dictionary that you’re likely to find in an average household. But thankfully, it’s now accessible through an online subscription, so I created my own account, and began investigating the true meaning of the English word “faith.”

One thing that becomes clear with an exhaustive dictionary of this kind is that just about every word in the English language happens to have multiple definitions. And, as it turns out, the word “faith” is sometimes used in a variety of different ways. Sometimes it refers to an oath of loyalty (as with “a good-faith promise”), but it can also refer to a system of religious belief, such as “the Muslim faith.” But among all the varying definitions I was able to discover in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, one I was not able to find was the idea that faith is “believing something in the absence of evidence.” In fact, what I found was the complete opposite. According to the OED, one of the definitions of faith is this: “Belief based on evidence, testimony, or authority.”³



Among the citations included as an example of this definition of “faith” is a selection from a book by Isaac Watts written in 1725 titled, *Logic, or The Right use of Reason in the Inquiry after Truth*. Here’s the relevant passage:

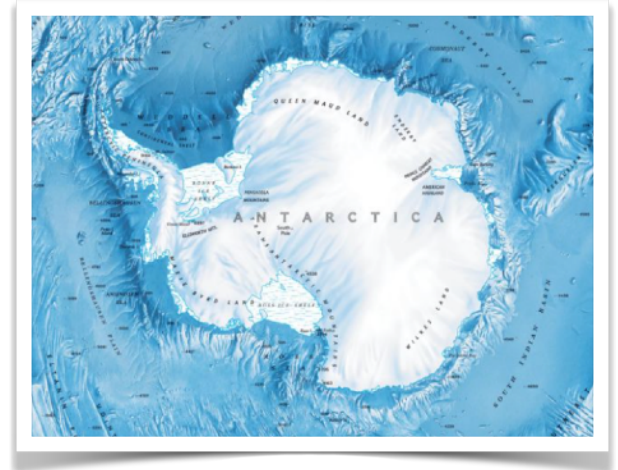
When we derive the evidence of any proposition from the testimony of others, it is called the evidence of faith; and this is a large part of our knowledge. Ten Thousand things there

¹ <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/jun/7/bill-maher-christian-faith-god-purposeful-suspensi/>

² You can listen to these soundbites (as well as the above quote from Bill Maher) on episode 2 of *The Humble Skeptic* podcast: <https://shanerose.substack.com/p/episode-2-is-faith-irrational#details>

³ See definition 7b of the word “faith” in the OED <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/67760>

are which we believe merely upon the authority or credit of those who have spoken or written of them. It is by this evidence that we know there is such a country as China, and that there was such a man a Cicero who dwelt in Rome. It is by this that most of the transactions in human life are managed. According as the persons that inform us of any thing are many or few, or more or less wise...and credible, so our faith is more or less firm or wavering, and the proposition believed is either certain or doubtful...⁴



Let me ask you this: Have you ever been to Antarctica? If not, why do you believe it really exists? Well, if you think about it, you likely believe in the existence Antarctica because of the evidence of so many trustworthy witnesses who have written and spoken about it, and they've never been contradicted. According to Isaac Watts, faith isn't believing in something in the absence of evidence, but instead rests on the credibility and trustworthiness of others. And as he states, the more witnesses you have, and the more credible their testimony, the more firm you will become in your faith.

In this light, faith is an entirely reasonable and rational thing. In fact, it's something we can't live without. I discussed this with Australian historian and New Testament scholar John Dickson a couple of years ago, while I was hosting the *White Horse Inn*, and here's what he said during that interview:

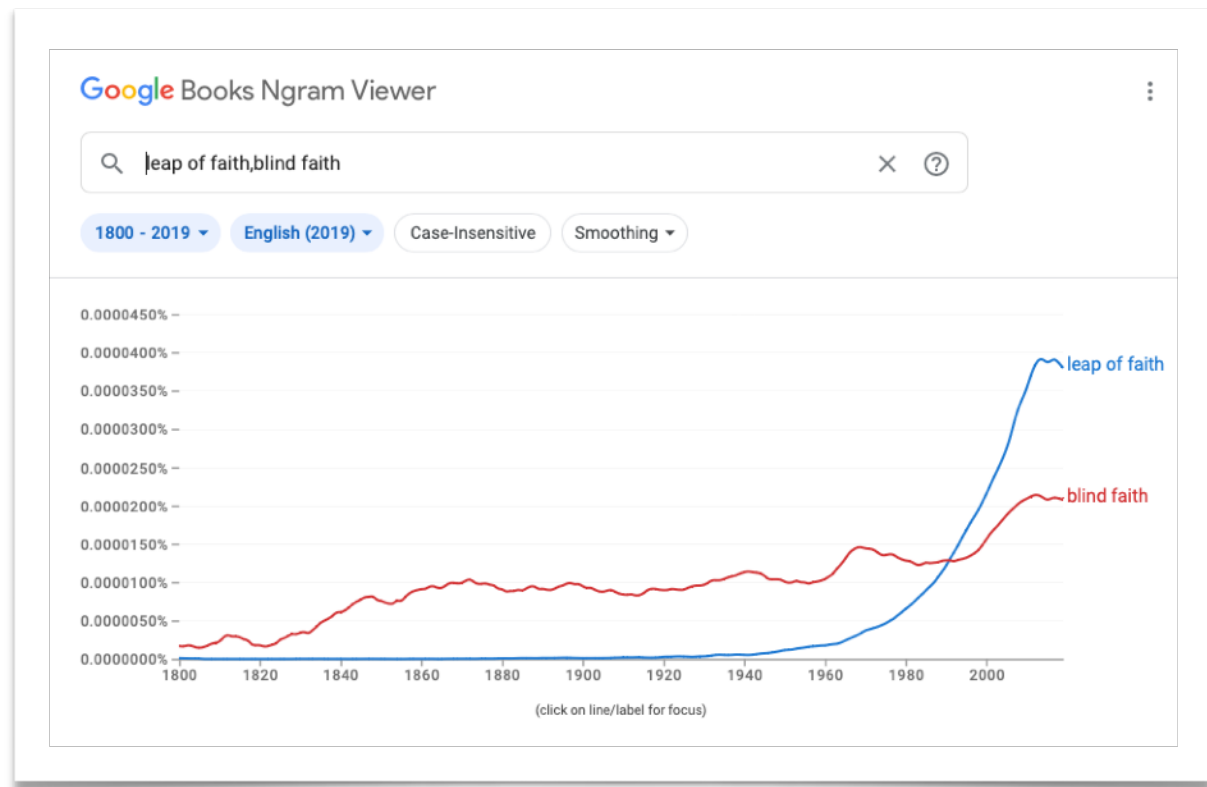
Faith, in its original meaning, really comes down to confidence or trust. That's the root idea of the word. The idea that it's sort of blindly accepting things without evidence is a brand new definition in the history of the world. You can actually date when this started to happen, when people started to use faith as "believing things without evidence"—it was in the 1800s. Now, I have never looked through the microscope at the things biologists tell me are going on in cells. So, everything I know about the nature of the cell I got from my science teacher and from the science textbook—and I accepted it! So even someone like Richard Dawkins...is relying on his buddies in physics to know about the speed of light or the cosmic background radio waves that are detected. He's never actually gone and tested that himself. He's relying on testimony from academic journals or his friends down the road in Oxford, he's relying on their testimony. He judges them to be worthwhile, valuable, trustworthy, and he believes it.⁵

In addition to using the *Oxford English Dictionary*, another way of verifying this point is by using Google's Ngram viewer, which is a tool that charts the occurrence of words or

⁴ Isaac Watts, *Logic, Or, The Right Use of Reason in the Inquiry After Truth. With a Variety of Rules to Guard Against Error, in the Affairs of Religion and Human Life, as Well as in the Sciences* (J. Buckland, London, 1772) II., ii., 9. This book was first published in 1725.

⁵ <https://whitehorseinn.org/resource-library/interviews/is-jesus-history/>

phrases in all the books Google has scanned from the 1500s to the present. So if, for example, you search for the popular phrases “leap of faith,” and “blind faith,” you’ll see that both didn’t actually come in to wide use until the 19th and 20th centuries.



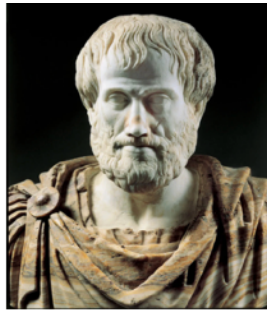
Now, I was able to find one section of the OED that defined faith as the “belief or confidence...without any evidence or proof.” But, as it turns out, this is the definition that appears under the phrase, “blind faith.”⁶ The word “blind,” you see, is the key term of this phrase, since it ends up modifying the kind of faith that is involved. But if faith always meant belief in the absence of evidence, why would anyone have felt the need to add this particular modifier? For if by definition, faith is a kind of blind leap, then the phrase “blind faith” would be completely redundant.

Another question I decided to investigate was the nature of the word faith as it appears in the Greek New Testament. In other words, is the original Greek word for faith similar to the English word as defined by the OED, or is it closer to the definition given by the likes of Bill Maher, Richard Dawkins and Neil deGrasse Tyson? As it turns out, the Greek word for faith is *pistis*, which is defined by one prominent lexicon as “that which evokes trust and faith.”⁷ In its verbal form it also means “to consider something to be true, and

⁶ <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/20224>

⁷ BDAG, 3rd edition, p. 818. This is the 1st definition that appears for the word *πίστις*.

therefore worthy of one's trust."⁸ Another form of this word means "to be sure about something because of its reliability...[to] be convinced."⁹ That's the way the first century Jewish historian Josephus used the word when he wrote to say, "I have demonstrated ...and confirmed the truth of what I have said, from the writings of



Aristotle



Strabo



Josephus

the Phoenicians and Chaldeans."¹⁰ Aristotle used this word when he wrote to say that "True theories are the most valuable for conduct as well as for science; harmonizing with the facts, they carry conviction."¹¹ And a first century writer by the name of Strabo used the word *pistis* when he said, "This investigation ...only confirms us the more in our belief."¹² In each of these cases, therefore, the Greek word for faith, just like it's English counterpart, isn't **viewed** apart from, but is supported by evidential considerations.

Furthermore, in John chapter 10, Jesus himself says, "If I do not do the works of my Father, do not believe me, but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works themselves, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me" (10:37-38). Here it seems clear that Jesus does not view faith as some kind of blind irrational leap, but instead recommends that people put believe on the basis of what they see and hear him do.¹³

In this sense I actually find myself agreeing to some extent with the critique of faith presented by Bill Maher, Richard Dawkins and others. Because if faith is defined as the suspension of critical thinking or believing in things without any appeal to evidence, then with them, I would conclude that faith isn't a good thing. In fact, this is the primary reason that I end up rejecting most of the world's religious and worldview claims. In most cases, you see, we're simply asked to accept as true a particular set of dogmatic claims, without any appeal to evidence whatsoever. Was evidence ever provided for the idea that Zeus fathered Apollo, that Yin and Yang are equal and opposite forces, or that Muhammad really heard from Allah? With regard to that last point, there's actually a revealing passage in the Koran in which the prophet of Islam asks Allah whether or not

⁸ Ibid., p. 816. This is the 1st definition that appears for the word πιστεύω.

⁹ Ibid., p. 821. This is the 2nd definition that appears for the word πιστόω.

¹⁰ Josephus, *Against Apion*, 2:1

¹¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 10.1172:2

¹² Strabo, *Geography*, 1.2:13

¹³ Cf. Jn 2:11, 5:36, 10:25, 19:35, 21:24. For references of this sort outside of the Fourth Gospel, see: Lk 24:48, Acts 1:22, 2:32, 3:15, 5:32, 10:39, 13:31, 22:15, 2Pt 1:16.

he'll give a sign in order to authenticate his revelations. But Muhammad was told, "The signs are only with Allah, and I am only a plain warner. Is it not enough for them that we have revealed to you the Book which is recited to them?"¹⁴ In short, no signs were to be given—nothing outside the Koran itself attests to its supernatural character or authority; it's something that people are simply asked to blindly believe.

The problem, however, is that few seem to be aware of the distinctive nature of the "Christian" faith claim, including among Christians themselves. In fact, after interviewing nearly a hundred individuals at a variety of Christian gatherings over the past few months, the overwhelming majority seemed to think that faith isn't something that can be established by evidence or objective considerations of any kind. To them, faith isn't something you can't see or prove, it's not cognitive, but something you know intuitively, deep down in your heart. It's gut thing that just can't really be explained—in fact, according to one person I interviewed, "It's sort of like grabbing air."

Another young Christian told me that "I think if there wasn't some semblance of blind trust to faith, then it's no longer faith—it simply becomes evidence." Oddly, the well-known atheist Richard Dawkins said something nearly identical to this in a public debate with John Lennox: "We only need to use the word faith when there isn't any evidence."¹⁵ So then, how is it that Richard Dawkins' definition of faith ended up winning the day, even in Christian circles?

Though this new definition of faith seems to have gone mainstream, there are a few people still around, even in the world of science, who recall the older definition. For example, some years ago physicist Paul Davies wrote a *New York Times* opinion piece in which he claimed that:

Science has its own faith-based belief system. All science proceeds on the assumption that nature is ordered in a rational and intelligible way. You couldn't be a scientist if you thought the universe was a meaningless jumble of odds and ends haphazardly juxtaposed. When physicists probe to a deeper level of subatomic structure...they expect to encounter additional elegant mathematical order. And so far this faith has been justified.¹⁶



¹⁴ Q29:50-51, 1974 Shakir edition.

¹⁵ Dawkins gives this definition 8 minutes and 28 seconds into this episode: <https://shanerose.substack.com/p/episode-2-is-faith-irrational#details>

¹⁶ Paul Davies, "Taking Science on Faith," *New York Times*, Nov. 24, 2007 <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/24/opinion/24davies.html>

When Paul Davies says that science itself is based on faith, he's not suggesting that it's some kind of irrational leap, but rather that it's an explanation that best accounts for the world around us. In fact, during an interview some years later, Davies elaborated on this point by saying, "You can't be a scientist without having faith that there really is a law-like order in nature; faith used not in terms of believing something you can't prove, but faith in the sense of a reliance on something—or an assurance—that when we wake up tomorrow the law of gravitation won't have switched in some arbitrary way."¹⁷

Did you notice the way Paul Davies distinguished between two different definitions of faith? In his comments, he tried to make clear that he wasn't using the newer definition of faith in the sense that it's "believing in something you can't prove," but instead, he was speaking of faith in the sense of a reasonable *assurance*, such as the idea that the law of gravity will be the same tomorrow as it is today. Unfortunately, few today seem to even be aware of this older definition.

According to Christian apologist Greg Koukl this newer definition of faith as "believing in something that you can't prove" happens to be deeply entrenched in contemporary Christianity. And so, after reflecting on this for some time, Koukl ended up concluding that we should probably stop using the English word "faith" altogether. In fact, in a lecture he gave titled, "Truth Isn't Ice Cream, Faith Is Not Wishing," Koukl said this:



I'll go to churches and make presentations and give all the reasons why it makes good rational sense to put your trust in Jesus Christ... And then Christians will come up to me afterwards and ask, "If what you say is true, if all these facts are really so, then where is the room for faith?" And I realize when they say that have a conviction deep down inside that somehow faith and facts do not go together. You exercise faith when you don't have the facts. But that is not a biblical understanding of faith...Biblical faith is trust based on what you have good reason to believe is true.¹⁸

In my humble opinion, this confusion about the true meaning of "faith" lies at the heart of our ever-increasing secularism—because if faith in God is no more rational than believing in Santa Claus or the tooth fairy, then why should anyone bother going to church? And why should one particular expression of faith be valued over and above all the other options.

In 1Pt 3:15, Peter famously says that Christians should "always be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks...for a reason for the hope that you have." Therefore, if with

¹⁷ This quote can be heard on episode 2 of *The Humble Skeptic* podcast, "Is Faith Irrational?" (at 26:28): <https://shanerose.substack.com/p/episode-2-is-faith-irrational#details>

¹⁸ Ibid. (at 27:57). His full lecture can be ordered here: <https://store.str.org/purchase/truth-is-not-ice-cream-faith-is-not-wishing>

Peter you agree that Christians can and should be able to give reasons for their faith, then I believe your faith is reasonable and rational. However, if you believe that faith is a leap in the dark for which *no reasons can be given*, then I believe your faith is irrational. Now, it may be that you currently trust the God of the Bible and believe true things about him, but if the foundation of your faith is ultimately irrational, then what is to prevent you from making leaps in other irrational directions sometime in the near future?

In Acts 26, Luke records Paul's defense of the Christian faith before governor Festus and King Agrippa. As he was speaking, Festus told Paul that he was "out of his mind" and that his great learning was driving him insane. But in his response, Paul simply said, "I am not insane, most excellent Festus; on the contrary, what I am saying is *true* and *reasonable*. For the king knows about these matters, and I also speak to him with confidence, since I am persuaded that none of these things escape his notice; for this has not been done in a corner." According to Paul, Christianity is not irrational because it's rooted in truth. These things really happened, and this is the source of our *confidence*.

Is Faith Blind?

According to many people in our day whether secular or religious, the answer to this question is an enthusiastic "Yes!", particularly in light of the fact that faith is often defined as "believing in something without evidence." But as we've seen, this definition is relatively recent. Now, though the word "faith" is frequently used this way, we need to understand that the biblical view of faith is something different entirely. According to the Bible, faith isn't believing in something without evidence; in fact, it's the complete opposite.



One passage that is worth considering at the outset of our investigation is found in Acts 17. After Paul and Silas arrive at a Jewish synagogue in Berea, Luke specifically says that the believers in that community were more noble than those of other regions, since they received the word with eagerness and "examined the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so." In other words, Luke is saying that the Bereans didn't blindly believe any of the claims that Paul had made. Instead, he praised them for carefully checking to see whether the things he was saying about Jesus, really had been written well in advance throughout the Hebrew Bible.

So, what would happen if we took this same approach? What kinds of things, for example, would we find if we were to investigate just a single book of the Bible, such as the Gospel of John? Well, John chapter 2 records the scene in which Jesus turned water

into wine, and according to verse 11, “this was the first of his signs that Jesus performed in Cana,” and the result was that “his disciples *believed* in him...” Therefore, this text makes clear that Jesus’ own disciples came to believe his messianic identity *after* they saw him perform this particular miracle. In other words, the faith of Jesus’ disciples wasn’t blind at all. Rather, it was the proper response to what they saw with their own eyes.

In John 5:36 Jesus says, “The...works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me.” Again, this is another passage which seems to make clear that first, people saw Jesus perform miraculous signs, and then they ended up realizing that this wasn’t something that ordinary men were able to do. This is why in John 7:31 we’re told that many people in Jerusalem believed in Jesus, since they were saying, “When the Christ appears, will he do more signs than this man has done?”

John chapter 11 records the fact that many people began to believe in Jesus after they witnessed him raise Lazarus from the dead. Verse 48 of that same chapter records that as a result of this miracle, the Jerusalem authorities called a meeting of the Sanhedrin saying, “If we let Jesus go on like this, *everyone* will believe in him...”

In the upper room discourse recorded in John 14, Jesus told his disciples, “Believe me [when I say] that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.” In other words, Jesus seems to be saying don’t just take my word for it, use your eyes—take a look at the things I’m doing! In chapter 19, John records his own eyewitness testimony relating to Christ’s crucifixion and death. And as he notes, some of the things that occurred that day seemed to correspond to a variety of Old Testament prophecies. So, John says in verse 35, “He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe.” If you think about it, John isn’t asking his readers to blindly believe anything. Rather, he’s saying that we should believe this particular report because he happens to be telling the truth about what he saw. In fact, his entire Gospel reads like a kind of written deposition containing all the first-hand accounts about the events in the life of Jesus during his three year ministry, as reported by all the key witnesses.

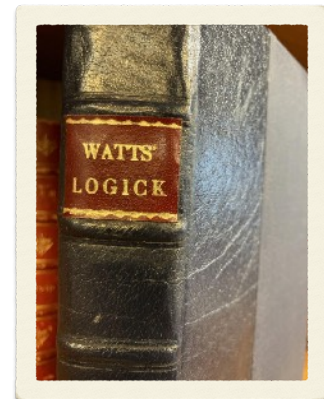
The first few verses of John 20 records the scene in which both Peter and John run to Jesus’ tomb, only to find it empty. And according to verse 8, when John entered the tomb, “he saw and believed.” Once again, the kind of faith that is being described here is a faith founded on observable facts. First John *sees* that the tomb is empty, and then he *believes*.

Later in that chapter John relates the story of Thomas who completely refused to believe in Jesus, saying, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.” Now if faith is believing something that you can’t see, then how are we to explain the faith of

Thomas? Since he refused to believe unless he saw the risen Jesus with his own eyes, what are we to think in his case? Well, as you'll recall, Jesus did reveal himself to this disciple saying, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." The result of this was that Thomas became a believer, and he did so, not in spite of, but on the basis of his senses.

John also uses this same sort of language in the opening lines of his first epistle. He writes, "That...which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life...that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you..." One of the things I love about John's description here is that he takes the time to point out, not only that he had seen Jesus, but that he happened to see him with his own physical eyeballs and touched him with his hands. In other words, this was not some kind of dream, vision, or mystical experience of any kind. In fact, this was the kind of eyewitness testimony that would stand up any modern court of law.

As mentioned above, eyewitness testimony happens to be its own kind of evidence. In his 1725 logic book, Isaac Watts referred to this as "the evidence of faith." The more witnesses you have and the more credible the testimony, the stronger faith becomes. How are members of any given jury able to know whether the defendant is innocent or guilty? They are instructed not only to listen to the claims of the various witnesses, but also to evaluate the credibility of their claims. And when there are competing claims, they need to ask which one best accounts for all the available evidence.



One of the problems with the English word "faith" is that over the past two centuries, it has taken on a kind of religious connotation. But the biblical writers didn't choose to use the Greek word for faith because it conveyed a particular religious sensibility which some people have, and some do not. No, they simply chose to use the ordinary word, *pistis*, which simply means "trust." Though trust certainly can be applied to religious questions, it's also something that no human being can live without on any given day. Should I trust the chair I'm sitting in? Should I trust that the food I'm about to eat hasn't been poisoned? Should I trust this particular babysitter or financial advisor? These aren't religious questions—but sometimes the way Christians speak of faith makes it seem like it's some kind of spiritual sixth sense. But if faith is viewed as some form of extra-sensor perception, it would appear as complete nonsense to those without that sensibility, making it impossible to reason with them about. But what do we witness Jesus' followers doing throughout the pages of the NT? We find them proclaiming that which they had seen with their eyes, heard with their ears, and touched with their hands. We see them reasoning with people both in the marketplace and in the synagogue, trying to persuade

them that Jesus really is the promised messiah (cf. Acts 17:2, 17, 18:4, 19, 19:8, 26:24-29).

So, believing that Jesus died and rose again on the third day isn't some kind of esoteric idea intended only for spiritually sensitive people, but rather, it's the appropriate response that everyone should have if they attend closely to the facts of this particular case, and the claims of these particular witnesses. If the resurrection really happened, everyone should believe it, and if it didn't happen, no one should believe it.

What Does Hebrews 11:1 Teach About Faith?

According to Hebrews 11:1, "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." So, if faith is the evidence of things "*not seen*," is this passage teaching that that faith is blind? First of all, if this really is the case, then how are we to make sense of all the passages we've looked at already from the Gospel of John in which faith came as a direct result of a person like Thomas *seeing* something extraordinary? Furthermore, what are we to do with the words of Jesus himself?

At one point in Matthew 15, Jesus was told that some of the Pharisees were offended by his teaching. But he simply responded by saying, "Let them alone, they are blind guides...If the blind lead the blind, "he said, "both will fall into a pit." Jesus' warning



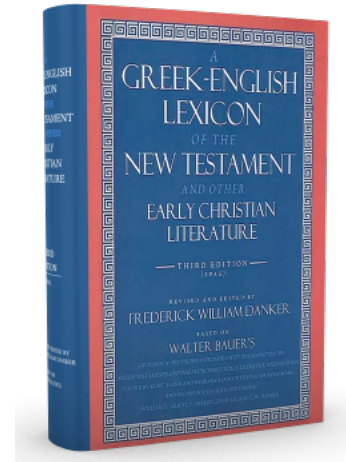
seems to be relatively straightforward. Blind adherence to religious authorities can be dangerous, and therefore should be avoided at all costs. Instead, all of us should carefully examine the claims made by those who seek to lead us—religious or otherwise. Now, it should be pointed out that Jesus wasn't introducing a new concept here. The basic purpose of the book of Proverbs, for example, was to cultivate and encourage wisdom and discernment. Because foolish ideas abound, one needs to be careful to

exercise discretion. In fact, Prov. 14:15 says that "The simple man believes everything, but the wise man gives thought to his steps." And in Romans 16:18, Paul was critical of those who "by smooth talk and flattery...deceive the hearts of the naive." According to the instruction given in both the Old Testament as well as the New, blind faith is dangerous.

So then, how are we to interpret the words of Hebrews 11:1? First, we should recognize that this verse has been translated in a variety of different ways. According to the ESV, this verse says, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." In the most recent edition of the *New American Standard Bible*, Heb 11:1 is translated this way: "Faith is the certainty of things hoped for, a proof of things not

seen.” But most of the people who cited this passage during my recent street interviews seemed to be recalling the language of the *King James Version* which says, “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”

So, the first question we need to investigate is which of these translations best represents the Greek original. Previously, I mentioned that the Greek word for faith is *pistis*, and that’s the word we find here at the beginning of this verse. The next important word which the KJV translated substance is the Greek word *hypostasis*. The author of Hebrews used this same word back in chapter 1 when he wrote to say that Jesus “is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.” The Greek word *hypostasis* is underlying the last word of that sentence, “*nature*.” Here’s how one lexicon defines it: “the essential or basic...nature of an entity...essence, actual being, reality.”¹⁹ This same lexicon went on to say that translating *hypostasis* in Hebrew 11:1 in “The sense ‘confidence’, or ‘assurance’...favored by Melanchthon, Luther [and Tyndale]...has enjoyed much favor but must be eliminated, since examples of it cannot be found.”²⁰ Instead, this standard lexicon preferred to translate the word *hypostasis* as it appears in Heb 11:1 as a “guarantee of ownership...or title deed.”²¹



Another Greek lexicon I consulted came to a nearly identical conclusion. In the ancient world, “all owners of building and land have to have deeds on record establishing their property rights. Thus, a *hypostasis* is a collection of documents establishing ownership, deposited in the archives, and proving the owner’s rights; hence it is a guarantee for the future.”²² Therefore, according to both of these lexicons, faith is “the title-deed of things hoped for.”

Now the second half of Heb 11:1 says that faith is also the “conviction or evidence of things not seen.” The Greek word being used here is *elenchos*. Josephus used this word when at one point he encouraged his readers to “consider the weight of the evidence” he presented. This I believe is a good way to understand the way this word is being used in Heb 11:1. In short, “faith is the title deed, of things hoped for, it’s documentary evidence of things not seen.”

¹⁹ BDAG, 3rd edition, p. 1040. This is the 1st definition that appears for the word *ὑπόστασις*

²⁰ Ibid., p. 1041 (see the third definition).

²¹ Ibid., (note the concluding sentence of section 3, along with the substance of section 4).

²² *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* by Ceslas Spicq, p. 423 (under the heading for *ὑπόστασις*).

So, if we look at the broader context of Heb 11, what specifically is the thing that is being hoped for? Well, according to verse 8, Abraham was looking forward to his inheritance. Then in verse 10 we're told that "he was looking forward to the city whose designer and builder is God." And finally in verse 16, all the patriarchs are described as those who desired "a better country, namely, a heavenly one." Therefore, when Hebrew 11:1 says that "faith is the title deed of things hoped for," specifically what is being addressed has to do with the believer's ultimate inheritance. This is the thing "not seen." And the reason it can't be seen with our eyes, is because *it's still yet future*. In other words, it doesn't have anything to do with invisible spiritual realities, or some kind of blind leap without evidence. No, Heb 11:1 is simply saying that if you have faith in Jesus, you are currently in possession of the title deed to something you can't see just yet, namely *heaven*.

So now, let's take a moment to consider what Heb 11:1 is and is not saying. This verse is not saying that faith is always blind, because, at the end of the day, this verse isn't actually defining the nature of faith itself. Instead, this passage is simply outlining one of the key aspects of faith—namely, that if you believe in Jesus, you can be confident that you'll go to heaven. You won't be judged on the amount of your tears, the quality of your good works, or *anything* for that matter, since faith itself is the "title deed" of your heavenly reward. This passage then is not focusing on unseen spiritual realities that need to be discerned by means of some additional spiritual sixth sense. No, this passage is simply saying that we're saved by faith alone.

When people begin to think that Heb. 11:1 is defining the nature of faith, rather than the specific nature of the Christian hope about the afterlife, I believe this creates a great deal of confusion, and contributes to the increasing acceptance of blind faith. To challenge this misunderstanding, I believe it's important to walk through the various New Testament passages we've already considered which make clear that various individuals placed their trust in Jesus *after* they saw him do extraordinary things. In short, these passages make clear that the faith of the earliest Christian believers was anything but blind.

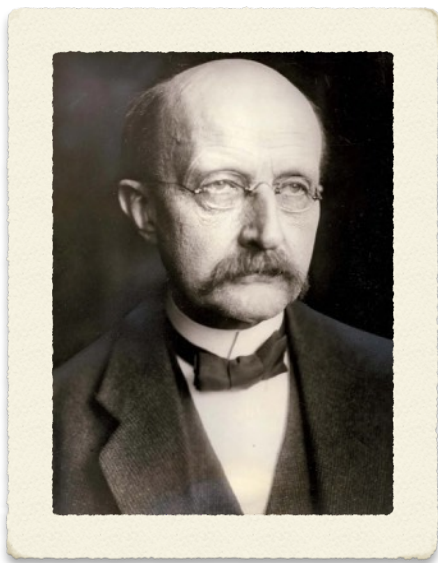
Now I'd like us to take one more look at the story of Thomas as recorded in John chapter 20. After he famously doubts the testimony of the other disciples, Jesus appears to all the disciples some eight days later, and says to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." Once again, Jesus is encouraging Thomas to believe *after* he had seen and touched him with his own eyes and hands. When Thomas famously says, "my Lord and my God!", Jesus responds by saying "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Now, Thomas put his trust in Jesus because of what he witnessed firsthand. However, in this scene, Jesus seems to indicate that his willingness to appear to Thomas wasn't

something he was going to do for everyone. In fact, in John 15:27, he told the disciples that those who had been with him from beginning would testify about him. Peter appears to allude to this in Acts 10, during a sermon he gave in the city of Caesarea: “We are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead...(10:39-41).

So, in light of this, there is a sense in which we could say that, because all modern Christian believers have not been given the opportunity to see, hear or touch Jesus directly, that we are putting our trust in something “*not seen*.” In fact, this is why Paul says in Rom 10:17 that “faith comes by hearing.” But in affirming that we presently “walk by faith and not by sight” (2Cor 5:7), is in no way to suggest that faith is somehow opposed to evidence. No, the eyewitness testimony provided by the apostles is itself compelling evidence in its own right.

As I mentioned earlier, the evidence provided by trustworthy and reliable witnesses happens to be a large part of our knowledge. In fact, along those lines, Max Planck the



famous physicist known for the role he played in originating Quantum Theory, wrote a book in 1933 titled, *Where is Science Going?*, and in that book he took some time to highlight the general “trustworthiness of oral and written information in scientific reports.”²³ This is scientific information that all of us receive, not by our direct experience or observation, but indirectly through the observation and reports of others. To reject this kind of information, Planck argues, would end up destroying science, since if one could never trust the reports of other scientists, then each of us would be limited to our own direct experiences and no comprehensive knowledge of the world could ever be established.²⁴ According to Max Planck, trusting the testimony of other observers is merely to follow “the call of common sense.”²⁵

I’d like to call your attention to the concluding lines of John chapter 20. In verse 29 Jesus said to Thomas, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Though sometimes this is used as a kind of proof-text for blind faith, the very next verse makes clear that Jesus has not encouraged

²³ Max Planck, *Where is Science Going?* (Ox Bow Press, Woodbridge, CT, 1933), p. 78.

²⁴ Ibid. pp. 67-77.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 81.

his followers to blindly believe things through some kind of spiritual intuition. For immediately after this, John added the following narration, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (Jn 20:30-31).

In these words, John has given us a kind of purpose statement for his entire Gospel. As he states, his goal is that all his readers would come to believe that Jesus is the promised messiah of Israel. Therefore, if you think about it, the substance of John’s entire narrative, with all the eyewitness testimony he presents, was written in order to instill faith. In short, as far as Christianity is concerned, faith comes, not in spite of, but as the result of, a careful investigation of the facts about Jesus.

Is Faith a Feeling?

In his classic novel, *1984*, George Orwell introduced his readers to the concept of “newspeak.” As you may or may not recall from your high school literature class, while some words had been entirely eliminated from Orwell’s dystopian world, other words

were invented in order convey express some of the ideas which IngSoc (newspeak for English Socialism) wished to promote. And among the list of newly invented terms authorized for public usage in Oceania, was the word, “bellyfeel.” According to Orwell, bellyfeel was defined as a kind of “blind enthusiastic acceptance.”²⁶



Though the word bellyfeel isn’t in wide use today (though perhaps this may change by the year 2050), the concept it conveys is rather popular in

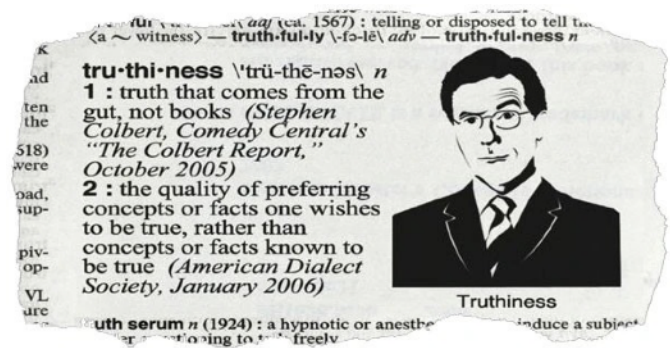
our time. To give an example of this from the world of popular culture, in the inaugural episode of *The Colbert Report*, which aired back in October of 2005, Stephen Colbert used the word “truthiness” to describe his personal distaste for books, which in his view are “all fact and no heart.” Truth, he argued, doesn’t come from books, but rather “from the gut.” All of this, of course, was a parody, which is why he concluded his segment saying, “Anyone can read the news to you, I promise to *feel* the news at you.”²⁷

By the following year, *truthiness* ended up being added to the *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary*, which also declared it to be the word of the year. Here’s the way truthiness ended up being defined: “a truthful or seemingly truthful quality that is claimed for

²⁶ This material is found in the Appendix of 1984, which can be found here: <http://www.telelib.com/authors/O/OrwellGeorge/prose/NineteenEightyFour/appendix.html>

²⁷ The full segment, which first aired on Oct. 17, 2005, is available for viewing at <https://www.cc.com/video/63ite2/the-colbert-report-the-word-truthiness>

something not because of supporting facts or evidence but because of a feeling that it is true or a desire for it to be true.” According to Wikipedia, truthiness is “the belief or assertion that a particular statement is true based on the intuition or perceptions of some individual or individuals, without regard to evidence, logic, intellectual examination, or facts.”



Now, Orwell invented the word *bellyfeel* over 70 years ago as part of the fictional world he had created for his dystopian novel, and Steven Colbert invented the word *truthiness* some 17 years ago in his parody of television news commentators. But in both cases, the same underlying reality was being addressed. For Orwell, *bellyfeel* was a “blind enthusiastic acceptance” of something based primarily on an internal feeling that one gets in his or her belly. And for Colbert, *truthiness* describes convictions that are ultimately derived, not from books or external facts of any kind, but rather, from a person’s gut feelings.

Now, what I found particularly striking is that which Orwell and Colbert each parodied in their own unique ways, seems to be the predominant view of “faith,” among the Christians I recently interviewed at a variety of settings. As I mentioned earlier, the overwhelming majority of the Christians I interviewed over the past few months expressed the view that faith was a blind leap. But as it turns out, most of these same individuals also affirmed this idea that faith is somehow related to our feelings. But is this really the case? Does the Bible support this view? Is faith a feeling?

One of the difficulties with trying to investigate this question using the original Greek and Hebrew terms, is that there are a variety of words that end up being translated into the English word “feeling”—and typically this only occurs in a variety of paraphrase translations such as the Amplified bible or the message. For example, according to the ESV translation of Mk 8:38, Jesus spoke of those who were “ashamed” of him, and yet according to a more contemporary rendering of this verse, Jesus referred to those who had “a feeling of shame.”

Because of this, it’s actually easier to search for all the occurrences of the word *feeling* throughout all the various English translations. As it turns out, I wasn’t able to find a single occurrence of this word near the word faith in the ESV, NIV, NRSV, NASB, KJV, NKJV, and a host of other respected translations. Even when I searched for any version of the root word feel, and substituted alternatives for faith such as faithful, belief, believer, etc., I still couldn’t find a single passage in which faith and feelings were within 200 words of each other.

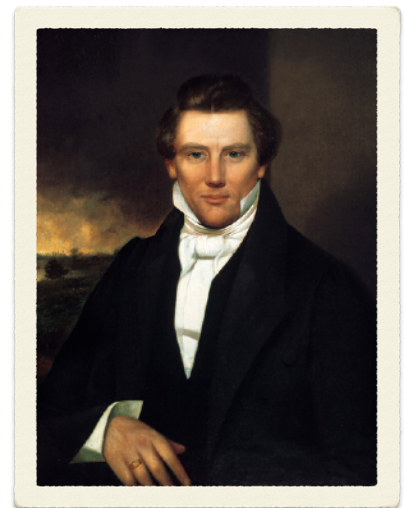
There were instances in some of the more contemporary translations in which variations of these words appeared in the same verse. So, for example, when Paul says in 1Th 3:6 (according to the ESV), “Now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love...” a paraphrase translation known as *The Message* renders this way, “Now that Timothy is back, bringing this terrific report on your *faith* and love, we *feel* a lot better.” That’s obviously a much looser rendering of the passage, but you see the point that in this version we do find the word *feel* in close proximity to the word *faith*.

However, even in these very loose translations, nowhere do we find the faith rests on a person’s internal feelings. The only passage I could find that comes close to this, in fact, is a rendering of a verse mentioned earlier from John 20:27. This is the scene in which Jesus appears to doubting Thomas, and according a translation by Richard Weymouth, Jesus says, “Bring your finger here and *feel* my hands; bring you hand and put it into my side; and do not be ready to disbelieve but to *believe*.”

In this passage, faith doesn’t end up coming as a result of some kind of internal gut-feeling. Rather, for Thomas, it came as the result of seeing Jesus with his eyes, hearing him with his ears, and touching him with his hands. In other words, Thomas responded to visible and tangible facts related to the external world, rather than to his own inner feelings.

As it turns out, there are a few Scriptural passages, outside of the Christian religion, which lend support to this idea that faith is sometimes confirmed by internal feelings. The most famous, of course, is the Mormon claim that true believers will experience a *burning in their bosom*. This idea is rooted in a revelation that Joseph Smith gave back in April 1829, and which can be found in a portion of the Mormon scriptures known as *Doctrine & Covenants*. In sections 6 & 9 of this revelation, God purportedly says this:

Cast your mind upon the night that you cried unto me in your heart, that you might know concerning the truth of these things; did I not speak peace to your mind concerning the matter? What greater witness can you have than from God?...Behold, I say unto you that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right, I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you: therefore, you shall *feel* that it is right. But if it be not right, you shall have no such feelings...²⁸

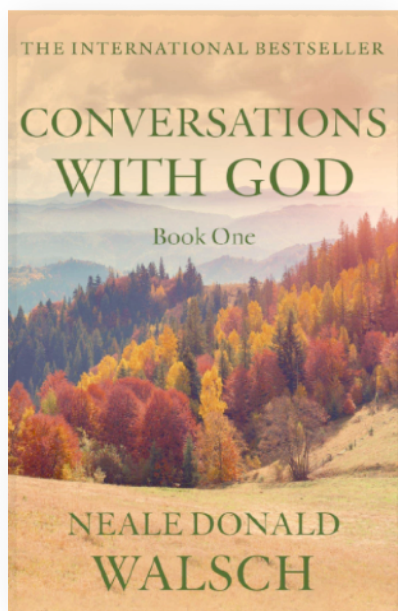


²⁸ *Doctrine & Covenants* (6:22-23): <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/dc-testament/dc/6?lang=eng>; and 9:8-9 <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/dc-testament/dc/9?lang=eng>

According to Joseph Smith, God confirms the truth of his own latter-day revelations through internal means, specifically, through an experience of peace, or through the burning one *feels* in his or her bosom. Now, it could be said that both of these ideas also appear in the Bible. In John 15, Jesus did promise to give his followers peace, and in Lk 24 the two disciples on the road to Emmaus did experience warm feelings in their hearts as the resurrected Jesus opened up the Scriptures to them. But it must be pointed out that experiences of this kind are never presented as the justification for belief itself. In fact, later in Luke 24, Jesus appeared to all the disciples saying, “Why do doubts arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” Again, Jesus increased faith and resolved doubts by external objective criteria.

Now there does happen to be a verse in the Koran that is somewhat similar to the Mormon doctrine of the burning in the bosom. According to one translation, the passage I’m referring to says this, “Believers are those who, when Allah is mentioned, feel a tremor in their hearts, and when His revelations are recited, find their faith strengthened.”²⁹ Also, when Muhammad requested external signs to confirm the inspired quality of his revelations, Allah simply instructed the prophet to say, “I am but a plain warner. Is it not enough that we have given them the Book that is recited to them?”³⁰

In 1995, a man by the name of Neale Donald Walsch, published a book titled *Conversations with God* in which he claimed that God had actually communicated with him directly. Here’s one of the “conversations” he recorded:



Neale: You cannot know God until you've stopped telling yourself that you already know God. You cannot hear God until you stop thinking that you've already heard God.

God: I cannot tell you My Truth until you stop telling Me yours.

Neale: But my truth about God comes from You.

God: Who said so?...

Neale: Leaders. Ministers. Rabbis. Priests. Books. The Bible, for heaven's sake!

God: Those are not authoritative sources...

Neale: Then what is?

God: Listen to your feelings. Listen to your Highest Thoughts. Listen to your experience. Whenever any one of these differ from what

²⁹ Q8:2, 1946, Ali edition

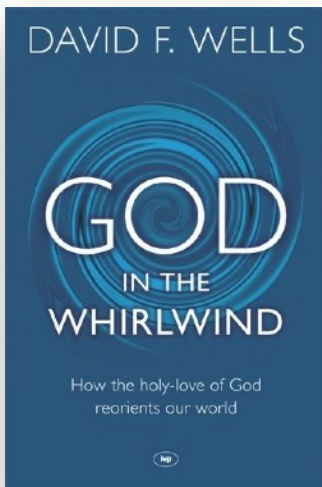
³⁰ Q29:50-51, 1974 Shakir edition

you've been told by your teachers, or read in your books, forget the words. Words are the least reliable purveyor of Truth.³¹

The irony of course is that this entire conversation was itself expressed through *words* and became part of a bestselling *book*. But the key point expressed in that conversation was this idea that we shouldn't trust anything we've been learned from external sources like books, but instead should trust our own internal feelings. But this was precisely the kind of thing Stephen Colbert parodied when he invented the word truthiness to describe those whose beliefs were founded, not on factual information found in books, but on internal feelings in the gut.

Back in 2006, when *truthiness* was voted word of the year by *Merriam-Websters*, CBS journalist Dick Meyer wrote a column in which he attempted to trace the origin of the some of the ideas that were being expressed by this new term. Here's what he wrote:

Truthiness actually has a long philosophic pedigree. It is called "emotivism," a term resurrected by a Scottish philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre [who] defines it this way: "Emotivism is the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and, more specifically, all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling..." In this view there is no difference between saying "the death penalty is wrong" and "I don't like the death penalty." Truth today is just what you feel. For deep and serious truth-tellers, truth is what they feel strongly...In today's civic climate, you can pick the facts and concepts you wish to be true...Indeed...personally picking what truth to believe in is assumed to be a basic right, the very thing individuals ought to do if they are making their own authentic choices.³²



In his book, *God in the Whirlwind*, David Wells noted that in our day, a "person's own interior reality is all that counts, and it is untouched by any obligation to community, or understanding from the past, or even by the intrusions of God from the outside."³³ He went on to say,

[T]he new therapeutic preoccupations of the Me Generation would, of course, seep into the church, although in less glaring and more sanitized versions. Looking back on this time, Wade Clark Roof said that one of the defining marks of the Boomer generation was its distinction between the inward and outward aspects of religion...Credence was given...to [that which] is internal. Not to church doctrine, which others had formulated. Not to church authority. Indeed, not to any external authority at all. Rather, it is in private intuitions that God is found.³⁴

³¹ Neale Donald Walsh, *Conversations With God, Book 1* (Penguin, New York, 1995) p. 8

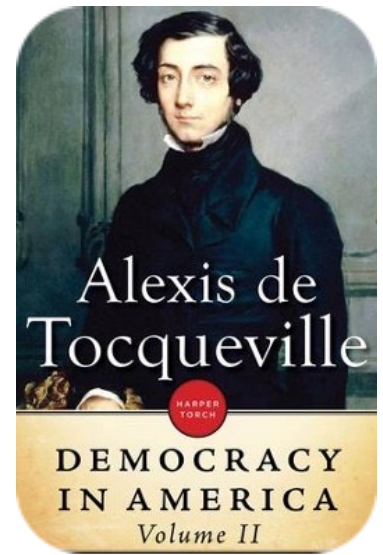
³² Dick Meyer, "The Truth of Truthiness," *CBSNews.com*: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-truth-of-truthiness/>

³³ David F. Wells, *God in the Whirlwind* (Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 2014), p. 26.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

According to Alexis de Tocqueville, this spirit has actually been with us for quite a long time. In his book *Democracy in America*, first published in back in 1835, de Tocqueville highlighted some of the traits that distinguished Americans from their European counterparts. Listen to his summary of the American democratic approach to intellectual pursuits:

To escape from imposed systems...to treat tradition as valuable for information only and to accept existing facts as no more than a useful sketch to show how things could be done differently and better; to seek by themselves and in themselves for the only reason for things, looking to results without getting entangled in the means toward them...such are the principal characteristics of what I would call the American philosophical method.³⁵



As a result of this approach, de Tocqueville says that Americans are “continually brought back to their own judgment as the most apparent and accessible test of truth.”³⁶ “Americans,” he says, “have needed no books to teach them philosophic method, having found it in themselves....Each man is forever thrown back on himself alone, and there is danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart.”³⁷

In their 1985 book *Habits of the Heart*, sociologist Robert Bellah and his colleagues traced the outlines of this American outlook, particularly as it related to views of religion and spirituality. And at one point they interviewed a nurse by the name of Sheila Larson who described her faith as “Sheilaism.” “I am not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice.” When asked to define her faith Sheila said: “It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other.”³⁸

In 1986, Robert Bellah elaborated on this point about Sheilaism in a lecture he gave at a church in Southern California:

The case of Sheila is not confined to people who haven't been to church in a long time. On the basis of our interviews, and a great deal of other data, I think we can say that many people sitting in the pews of Protestant and even Catholic churches are Sheilaists who feel that

³⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by George Lawrence (Harper & Row, New York, 1966; originally written in 1948), p. 429; see section 2.1.1, “Concerning The Philosophical Approach of The Americans.”

³⁶ Ibid., p. 430

³⁷ Ibid., p. 508

³⁸ Robert N. Bellah, et al, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York, Harper & Row, 1985), p. 221.

religion is essentially a private matter and that there is no particular constraint on them placed by the historic church, or even by the Bible and the tradition.³⁹

The point Bellah seemed to be making was that the kind of narcissistic spirituality that Sheila Larson personified so well, isn't something that's merely going on 'out there' in the world somewhere. Rather, he's saying that it's actually happening *everywhere*, including within the walls of Protestant and Catholic Churches.

As I've mentioned, my own street interviews were recorded at a variety of Evangelical Christian gatherings. These polls represent a random sampling of the views held by contemporary Christian believers from a wide spectrum of denominations and backgrounds. So if you've heard some of the clips I've aired on *The Humble Skeptic* podcast, then you're aware of the challenges we're currently facing. Sheilaism isn't merely something that's taking place within many of our churches — in our day it has quite possibly become the dominant form of Christianity itself.

The overwhelming majority of the Christians I interviewed seemed to think that faith is some kind of blind leap, which is a view that happens to be closer to the perspective of new atheists like Richard Dawkins than it is to the language of Scripture. And though in most translations of the Bible, I wasn't able to find *faith* within 200 words of *feelings* (or variations of those words) most of those I randomly polled thought that their faith rested upon, and was actually supported by, their own subjective feelings and intuitions. This isn't Christianity, but *Mormonism*. It wasn't Jesus but Joseph Smith who said, "If it is right, I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you: therefore, you shall *feel* that it is right. But if it be not right, you shall have no such feelings."⁴⁰

So how did this "Mormon" approach to faith and spirituality, with its emphasis on subjective religious experience and inner feelings become the dominant view in American Evangelical Protestantism? That's another question that I'll be seeking to explore on future episodes of my podcast — so stay tuned!

Conclusion

The great need of the hour is for Christians themselves to go back and to reexamine the true foundations of our faith. How did the earliest Christians attempt to persuade others to become fellow believers? How does the Old Testament promote and encourage faith? How did the ancient Israelites come to believe that Moses was an inspired prophet who really heard God speak with him at the site of the burning bush? Dust off your Bibles and start looking into these things. In fact, you might be surprised by what you discover!

³⁹ http://www.robertbellah.com/lectures_5.htm

⁴⁰ Doctrine & Covenants 9:8-9

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