

Title: Facets Of Faith

By: Lesly F. Massey, Ph.D.

Text: Hebrews 11:1-16

This the first in a three part series on faith. The New Testament contains about five hundred references to faith, and we all understand that it is a foundational concept in our relationship to God. In various English translations, the noun *pistis* is rendered faith, belief, fidelity, trust, commitment, and assurance. Some of the better known texts are:

- Mark 11:23 “If had the faith of a mustard seed you could move mountains”
- Eph 2:8 “By grace you are saved through faith and that not of yourselves”
- James 2:26 “Faith without works is dead”
- John 3:16 “For God so love the world that He gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in Him...”
- Rom. 1:16 “Gospel of JC it is the power of God to everyone who believes”
- I John 5:4 “This is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith”
- James 1:2 “The trial of your faith works patience”
- II Tim 2:4 “I have fought good fight ...finished the course... kept the faith”

I appreciate that it’s typically not appropriate, or valid, to use a word to define itself. Yet in terms of describing and defining what being a Christian is all about, the matters of our faith are at the core and we have trouble avoiding the use of “faith” and “belief” in trying to define them. Faith is in various ways the platform upon which Christian doctrine is constructed, and it defines our conception and connection to God and how we live our lives. You can see why we speak of a specific religious discipline as a “faith.” I suspect that many of us have become so accustomed to talking about faith that we give little thought to what it means and what we personally mean when we use the word. It all runs together like the many creeks and tributaries of the Mississippi River flowing toward the Gulf of Mexico.

Hebrews 11 is essentially a list of men and women of previous generations who believed in God and were able to withstand hardship and do incredible things because of their faith. This writer defines faith as something that stretches beyond the bounds of “what is” to “what might be,” beyond known to unknown, from earth to heaven, from the heart of a humble human to the heart of God. Such a concept is not easy to define. Marcus Borg explains in his book *The Heart of Christianity*, that faith (believing) is hard to define because has several dimensions, like height, width, depth, time, color, or like the various aspects to human health (physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, social). So for a moment consider that our faith has six dimensions:

- (1) Assent (a mind thing). This has to do with accepting a particular proposition, concept or assertion that cannot necessarily be proved. It is conviction that a particular claim is true, such our traditional credo “I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God.” There not be proof, in the scientific or philosophical sense, but the personal existential evidences are sufficient.
- (2) Commitment (an action thing in terms of life-style). This is putting into practice the principles and methods attached to our beliefs. To carry out, to follow principles of faith with dedication and loyalty. The way of life that identifies a person as a believer.
- (3) Vision (a spiritual thing). Human perception, what an individual sees as “a God thing,” is not provable but pertains to the involvement of God in ways we describe as apart from the laws of nature (the scientific principles of the cosmos). It has to do with connecting divine purpose and presence within physical world.
- (4) Trust (a reliance thing). This has to do with attitude, confidence, optimism, to walk into darkness, to sail into dense fog, believing that God is there, providing a measure of protection from evil and that in the unknown He will open a path. It is simply “the courage to be” in the words of philosopher Soren Kirkegaard, like floating on the surface of the ocean trusting in the buoyancy of God.
- (5) Intrigue (a studious thing). This dimension of faith pertains to our intellectual capacity and desire to learn, to ask questions, seeking understanding. It is like the song lyrics “Getting to know you, getting to know all about you.”

(6) Passion (an emotional thing). This pertains to the enthusiasm, excitement, and zeal that accompany faith- the factor that urges us to share our faith with other, to tell the story of Jesus, to take the Good News to the whole world.

Throughout church history, most Christians have embraced most of these, but some only to a shallow degree. Mental assent is commonly followed by and expressed by a life of rituals and church going, but often with little depth. Sometimes Christians say all the formulas, attend church, take communion, and say their prayers, but still struggle to deal with the issues of life with confidence and maturity, and cannot quite grasp the illusive butterfly of joy that the deeper level of faith can provide. Many Christians have sufficient trust, confidence and conviction, even emotion, with regards to their beliefs. But they have no interest in wrestling with the complex philosophical or theological issues that challenge those beliefs.

Many of you may have read the book called *The Shack*, published in 2007 by William P. Young. It is one of the most fascinating little books I have ever read— a novel, totally fiction, but with a powerful message. It has had its critics too, for various reasons. The main character is Mack, who has a wife and three kids. They have a happy life. One day Mack takes the kids on an outing. Two are in a canoe and it capsizes. While he swims out to rescue them, the third named Missy is abducted by a serial killer. A long manhunt leads to a shack in the deep woods of Oregon. There they find only a bloodstained dress. That ordeal is followed by four years of grief, anger, guilt, and self-loathing, until Mack he receives a written invitation to return to that shack to talk things over. The invitation is signed Papa (the family's name for God). So Mack reluctantly goes back to the shack and spends a day there in an encounter with God. He wrestles with all the great theological issues that have been debated for centuries, but the process restores his faith.

On the back of the book jacket, the author Young provides some personal background. He was raised in Papua New Guinea with missionary parents. He never reveals details, but he describes his upbringing as incredibly painful with great personal loss. But he writes to help others learn what he has learned about faith and restoring a broken relationship with God. He writes: *These facts don't tell you about the pain of trying to adjust to different cultures, of life losses that were almost too staggering to bear, of walking down railroad tracks at night in the middle of winter screaming into the windstorm, of living with an underlying volume of shame so deep and loud that it constantly threatened any sense of sanity, of dreams not only destroyed but obliterated by personal failure, of hope so tenuous that only the trigger seemed to offer a solution. These few facts also do not speak to the potency of love and forgiveness, the arduous road of reconciliation, the surprises of grace and community, of transformational healing and the unexpected emergence of joy.*

The issue is this. We all come into this world with wide eyed wonder, like sponges soaking up everything we see and hear. We are handed information which may or may not be valid. We have experiences, good and bad. In that process we have doubts and questions, and we wonder who we are and what life is all about. But most of us somehow discover that we are not alone. We develop a belief, maybe fuzzy and hard to describe, that a relationship with God, by faith, helps answer our questions, and adds meaning, purpose, strength, courage, confidence. So we cling to that, and try to live by it. And we don't just mean believing there is a God, but believing into God, desiring a connection with God. Because only that makes sense out of confusion, and life itself; only that gives us reason for doing what is right when it is so easy to do wrong; only that helps us endure pain and heartache and keep going to overcome failure and hardship; only that gives us a sense of confidence when we venture into unknown, especially when we are faced with our mortality and see that the end is coming.

Faith is far more than just saying "Yes, I believe this or that," and much more than adhering strictly to a set of rules and regulations. The truly hard part of faith operates out there on the fringes of uncertainty, doubt and confusion. It is an agent of hope that buoys us up when we are floundering in an ocean of distress. It is a beacon of light shining through darkness leading us forward. It is, as the song goes, the wind beneath our wings.

That is why we cling to faith. That is why we believe. *Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.*

