

FAITH THAT OVERCOMES THE WORLD

By Bob Young

First, one must define biblical faith. Many will automatically think of Heb. 11:1, “faith is certainty about the things hoped for and conviction about things not seen.” In this context, the things hoped for (as explained in Hebrews 11) are the things God has promised. Certainty of hope and conviction of the unseen are not without foundation; God is faithful. Some would add Heb. 11:6: God exists and God rewards diligent seekers. When one reads these verses in context, one sees that the passage refers first to the faith of Old Testament persons.

Two authors, Paul and John, who wrote about two-thirds of the New Testament books help us grasp the nature of New Testament faith.

In 1 John 5:1-5, the faith that overcomes the world is defined as the belief that Jesus is the Son of God. This truth, John claims, can be known and is empirically supported (1 John 1:1-4). Reading between the lines in 1 John, faith centers around the question of what kind of God exists, and how he is revealed in Jesus. But faith goes beyond mere belief of that truth; the resulting actions bring communion with God (1:5-10) and assurance of eternal life (5:12-13).

For Paul, faith is response to the proclaimed word of truth—trust, or perhaps even better, faithfulness. The actions of faith, which Paul carefully distinguishes from works of law, are measures of faithfulness and evidence of faith (belief).

The common tie is that faith always acts consistently with that which is believed, and the result is faithful participation in God’s purpose. For both Paul and John, the basis of faith is what one knows and believes. Belief is readiness to act. Faith cannot exist without belief, but faith is not belief only (James 1:19). Faith is not merely “leaping blindly.” Because of the relationship of faith to knowledge, faith is not opinion, theory, or only belief. Because of the relationship between biblical faith and knowledge, understanding faith requires that we ask how one knows anything.

Knowledge comes through authority, reason, and experience. Knowledge is facts, information, or skills acquired through education, reasoning, or experience. Knowledge means that one can talk about something in a way consistent with reality. In the realm of spiritual knowledge, I would add that knowledge comes through discernment. One can know a number of truths in the physical realm through reasoning. While it would be acceptable to expand the word to include spiritual truths, I prefer to describe spiritual reasoning as discernment. In summary, we can know (we can learn) through authority/education, reasoning, discernment, and experience (including observation).

How do we know a spiritual truth? How is spiritual truth communicated to us? While we take in information empirically, the role of reasoning and discernment allows us to learn and know things that go beyond mere empirical inputs. We can learn to think spiritually, since spiritual truths are discerned spiritually (1 Cor. 2:11-16).

Spiritual knowledge that is gained by reason, discernment, or experience does not lose validity or verifiability. The primary method of God’s communication is his Word, God’s revelation in the Bible, but as I develop spiritually, I experience changes in belief, attitudes, and practices. I develop spiritual sensitivity. When I try to understand things that the Bible says nothing about, circumstances or events or choices in my life, I can identify the characteristic kind of thought and experience that has come from God in the past, spiritual insights if you will, and that guidance is testable against the realities of life and the insights of others. Thus, even in thinking about God’s guidance, knowledge and belief exist side by side supporting my faith. Clearly faith is more than merely accepting and believing truth. Faith always implies actions consistent with what is believed. Thus, action can never be separated from belief, and obedience can never be separated from faith. In biblical faith, the result is relationship with God.

In summary, the purpose of the Word of God (giving us knowledge and guiding us to belief) is to enable our relationship with God. God's word is the vehicle by which we know him as he reveals himself, by which we place our confidence in him and his promises, and by which we are convicted of spiritual reality. The word of God, and the faith that comes by hearing God's word, leads us to new places and new concepts, declaring that we are made to connect spiritually with God. We must never let our commitment to the Word replace our commitment to the spiritual world the Word reveals.

Two extremes are to be avoided. The traditional system we have known in churches of Christ distorts faith by limiting belief. Our tradition has often collapsed the Spirit into the Word, rejecting any significant role of the Spirit (even denying the Spirit's presence), and robbing us of spiritual vitality and life. On the other hand, equally a distortion of faith, is the more recent tendency of some to collapse the Word into the Spirit, or perhaps more accurately, to collapse authority (including God's Word), reason, discernment, and experience into the Spirit, so that all becomes mystical and mysterious, and everything that occurs is evidence of "the guidance of the Spirit" with no awareness of the role of God's Word and spiritual discernment. The first exalts knowledge and belief but lacks spiritual vitality, the second seeks spiritual vitality but ignores the place of knowledge and belief. The first leaves people content with doctrine and forms, usually with little sense of spiritual life. The second exalts spiritual sensibility but leaves people without the stability of knowing a secure faith relationship with God based on authority, discernment, and consistent experience.

May God bless us as we seek to understand and grow in biblical faith—the faith that overcomes the world!

Two helpful resources:

Leonard Allen and Danny Swick. *Participating in God's Life*.

Dallas Willard. *Knowing Christ Today*.