

Not All Have Faith
(2 Thessalonians 3:2)
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The title of this paper can be somewhat misleading because in a sense every person, believer or unbeliever, lives by faith. But that only begs the question: “Is there a different sort of faith that is possessed by believers in Christ?”

In the previous chapter (2:13-14), Paul has made some straight forward statements regarding the salvation of the Thessalonians: “*God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation,*” he said. You experienced this salvation, he emphasized, at the moment “*[God] called you [into it] through our gospel.*” But the mechanics of apprehension came “*through sanctification of the Spirit and belief in the truth.*”

This assurance by Paul would have brought great comfort and encouragement to them, particularly in light of their current afflictions. This is made clear by the benediction that follows: “*Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God the Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word*” (2:16-17).

As he is writing, Paul himself is also in the midst of affliction and suffering at Corinth, even though God had promised that He would not allow anyone “*to attack you in order to harm you*” (see Acts 18:9-17). This would, of course, provide good opportunity for him to invite the Thessalonians to join with him through their prayers (3:1a). The word had been magnified and the Lord glorified through them in the midst of their afflictions; and Paul desired for the same to occur with him (3:1b).

Those who oppose the ministry of the word, Paul says, are “*perverse and evil men*” (3:2a). But why do they oppose the ministry of the word? “*For not all have faith,*” he said (3:2b).

In the Greek text there is a definite article with the noun faith. Faith, as well as such nouns as love, joy, peace, etc., is an abstract noun, one that conveys a quality of thought, but that is apart from concrete reality. When an article is used with an abstract noun it normally heightens the qualitative nature of that noun i.e., something that is being stressed beyond the normal quality of that noun (Wallace, p.226). For example in 1 Cor. 13:2 Paul says, “*If I have all [the] faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.*” In verse four he says, “*[the] Love is patient . . .*” This grammatical point helps us to better understand Paul’s use of faith in 3:2.

Faith is first mentioned in the context in 2:13. Remember, he had said to them that their experience of salvation had come through their “belief in the truth.” The verb *pisteuō* is used there. Its noun form *pistis* is normally translated as faith. To have faith in something or someone means to believe in something or someone. There is no distinction between people when it comes to believing. The key is in *what* people believe. That is, its value is found in its object!

To compound the problem, our English word *believe* just doesn't quite capture the biblical meaning of the term. Our English term can be understood to mean that a person admits or acknowledges that something is true or real. This nuance of faith is often referred to as mental assent to factual information. But faith can also carry the nuance of trust and confidence. And it is the latter sense that defines the meaning of biblical faith – that which is used in relation to salvation and the living out of the word of God in one’s life.

Mental assent to truth does not change either the essence of the person or their behavior. On the other hand, trust and confidence in truth results in obedience to it. Thus, faith and works become the two sides of one coin. That is why we see the two tied together in passages like Eph. 2:8-10: *“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them”*; and James 2:14-26: *“What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but has no works? Can that faith save him? . . . Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. . . But are you unwilling to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? . . . For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead.”*

The faith of the believer is different from the faith of the unbeliever – in its capacity, in what that person can or cannot believe. Why? It is as simple as old man/new man. The person we are as believers is not the same person we were as unbelievers. In Col. 3:1ff. Paul exhorts his readers to godly living. The reason is given in verses nine and ten: *“. . . seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.”*

Notice that the new man is the new person who has been created by God. Recall that in Eph. 2:10 we were said to have been *“created in Christ Jesus.”* To this we can add 2 Cor. 5:17: *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”*

Among the new things that have come is included a new capacity or ability to believe. This ability is also related to a new heart and new spirit brought about by regeneration. With these come new mental abilities: we can know God and understand His word.

Since the unbeliever – the old man – cannot understand the significance of God’s word – the spiritual implications communicated through it – it is to him nothing more than any other piece of literature. He does not understand it – nor does he accept any personal relevance of it to his personal life. He can study it, memorize it, talk and write about it; but although he himself does not and cannot understand this, he simply doesn’t get it! And he cannot (and because of his sinful condition will not), choose to put his trust and confidence in that which he cannot understand – it is contrary to his nature!.

Clearly, then, faith for the believer is a capacity to believe granted as a gift from God through the act of regeneration. When a person is begotten by God, he is made alive spiritually and at that moment the gospel message of Christ is understood and becomes compelling to him and he believes it (see 1 John 5:1; Phil 1:29; 1 Cor. 2:6-8; Acts 16:13-15).

When Paul said to the Thessalonians, *“not all have faith,”* he meant that those who lacked it were unbelievers; and as unbelievers they were in natural opposition to the things of God.

The implications of this are far-reaching – even reaching into the lives of believers. First, the capacity or ability to trust in the things of God does not mean that a believer will choose to do so. If he does not know the word of God, he cannot put his trust in it. He may know the word of God at the level of acknowledging it to be God’s word, but never put his trust in it so as to express that trust in obedient behavior. By default, that same ability which God has given to trust in Him and His word will be placed in something other than God and His word e.g. the philosophies of this world.

And then there are those we might refer to as *cultural Christians*. Cultural Christians are people who have either been raised from childhood in the church or who

have embraced Christianity as their religion of choice but are not trusting in Jesus Christ alone for the forgiveness of their sins and eternal life. They may tell you that they believe in Christ. They may say that Jesus died for their sins. But they have never gone from acknowledgment of Him to trust in Him.

It is normal to expect that believers in Christ will have a heart for God that is manifest in a desire to know Him and to live obediently to Him. Anything other than that is abnormal. It would be fair to assume, then, that those who stand in opposition to or have no regard for God and His word are either unsaved, or they choose to live as those who are unsaved – as those who do not have faith.