

The “Mechanics” of Christian Faith

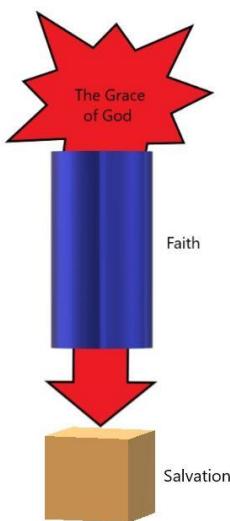
- Or how biblical faith leads to obedience

Let us start with the this well-known text from the letter of Paul to the Ephesians, which shows us the relationship between God’s grace, our faith, and the gift of salvation.

Ephesians 2, 8-9: “By grace you have been saved, through faith; and it is not of yourselves, but it is the gift of God.”

As we see here, *faith* is the *instrumental means* through which God *grace* brings us *salvation*, salvation being the gift of God.

The following illustration show how this works:



Now, salvation is not just the forgiveness of sins in our past. Salvation is also in the present and in the future. As Christians we *have been saved, are being saved, and will be saved*. This means salvation is not just the removal of punishment for our sins – we are not just saved from Hell. We are in the process of being saved *from our sins* as well, meaning becoming free from our sinful attitudes and behaviour. By God’s spirit we are sanctified – made holy – and increasingly able to deal with and get rid of our sins and sinful habits or attitudes. Salvation is therefore *a process*.

Now the question is, how does faith help us to be saved from our sins, *how does that work*, to become more holy human beings? That is what I want to focus on now.

In traditional Reformed theology the biblical concept of “*faith*” often is portrayed as having three parts: *notitia, assensus, fiducia*.

Notitia is *information* (about God/spiritual truths).

Assensus is *mental assent* (to the knowledge about God/spiritual truths).

Fiducia is *trust* (in God/spiritual truths)

I want to propose a slightly different definition of Biblical faith, also consisting of three parts:

1. Understanding (of God/spiritual truths)
2. Agreement (with God/spiritual truths)
3. Trust (in God/spiritual truths)

Faith is *Understanding* and *Trust*

The author of Hebrews describes what "faith" is in Hebrews 11:

"Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible."

Confidence and assurance about God and the unseen world means *trust* in God and the unseen world. But faith also functions as *understanding* the facts about the invisible world and God.

The rest of Hebrews 11 consists of stories about how the heroes of faith trusted in God – and because of that trust – acted in accordance with that trust. One example suffices: Abraham trusted God, when God had told him to sacrifice Isaac. In fact, scripture tells us, he trusted God that much, that he figured, that God could raise Isaac from the dead – so that He would be able to fulfill the promise He had given to Abraham (to make Abraham the father of a great people)!

Faith is *Agreement*

So what do I mean with "Agreement" – the middle part of faith? Agreement is more than just mental assent. Mental assent is an activity of the mind – agreement is an activity of the heart. If we by faith *understand* a spiritual truth, that alone is not enough to create the desire within us to act in accordance with that spiritual truth. The apostle James warns his readers in his letter that even the demons have faith – in the sense of *understanding* – they believe that God exists. But demons do not heartily agree with the spiritual reality of God – actually the opposite: they are in complete and utter rebellion against God. Demons only have the first part of faith – understanding. But because they do not agree with God – they also do not desire to do God's will. And that is exactly what faith-agreement does in the human being exercising it: *agreement creates the desire to act in accordance with the knowledge of God*.

The apostle Paul talks about that part of faith – agreement, when He says in Romans 6: *"I desire to do good, but I do not do it."* He describes the reality, that a Christian has the desire to do good. This desire is a result of "agreeing" with God.

So by faith we understand – which leads to knowledge (about God). By faith we agree – which leads to the desire (to follow God). But this alone is not always enough for us to act in accordance with our faith. Why not? Because our hearts are filled with *all kinds of desires*. And these desires are often in conflict with each other. What we desperately need is the third part of faith – *trust*. Only *trust* enables us to make the right decision – to obey God and do His will.

Let us see how this plays out with an example:

In a certain controversial business situation John's boss tells John, a christian, to deal with it by telling a lie. John knows, by faith, that telling a lie is wrong. He also agrees with God about that – and therefore he has the desire not to lie, but tell the truth. But his heart is filled with other desires – and not necessarily bad desires. For example: he wants to keep his job, to support himself and his family. And he is afraid that by opposing his boss he might lose his job! So what to do? Telling the lie and being disobedient to God – or telling the truth and risk losing his job? Here "trust" comes in: John trusts God – he trusts, that God will take care of him, that even if he would lose his job over this, God will not abandon him – and provide other opportunities to support him and his family in case he would be fired. Because of that trust – John decides to follow God and his commands and tell the truth.

To summarize, this is how "faith" works:

Faith is *understanding*, which leads to: *knowledge* about the spiritual world.

Faith is *agreement*, which leads to: the *desire* to act in accordance with that knowledge.

Faith is *trust*, which leads to: *obedience*, to act, to do works in accordance with our good desires.

All of this can be illustrated as follows:

