



Faith and Facts

Greg Koukl

Can you give a good definition of biblical faith? How does it relate to science?

I don't like the word 'faith.' Not because faith isn't valuable, but because it's often deeply misunderstood. 'Faith' in this twisted sense is what you use when all reason is against you. It's religious wishful thinking, in which one squeezes out spiritual hope by intense acts of sheer will. People of 'faith' believe the impossible. People of 'faith' believe that which is contrary to fact. People of 'faith' believe that which is contrary to evidence. People of 'faith' ignore reality.

Some suggest we cannot find facts to support our faith, nor is it preferable to try. This is silly. We're enjoined to have faith in part because we have evidence that Jesus rose from the dead.

I think part of the confusion is because Christians are often told to ignore circumstances, meaning that we're not to get overwhelmed or discouraged by them because God is bigger than our troubles. 'Have faith in God,' we're told. I think that's good counsel as far as it goes, but sometimes it breeds misunderstanding, implying that faith is a blind leap that has no relationship to fact.

Some suggest we cannot find facts to support our faith, nor is it preferable to try. Faith is not the kind of thing that has anything to do with facts, they say. If we have evidence to prove what we believe, then that takes away from real faith.

Somehow these people think that genuine faith is eviscerated by knowledge and evidence. We've made a virtue out of believing against the evidence, as if that's what God has in mind for us.

This is all wrong.

Think about it for a moment. J.P. Moreland has suggested that if this is really the Christian view of faith, the best thing that could happen to Christianity is for the bones of Jesus to be discovered. Finding His bones would prove He didn't rise from the dead. When Christians continue to believe that He did, then, they would be demonstrating the most laudable faith, believing something that all the evidence proved was false.

This is silly. We're enjoined to have faith in part because we have evidence that Jesus rose from the dead. If we're encouraged to believe because of the resurrection, then that proves this other view of faith is false. It may be the view Christians hold in many cases, but it is not the view of the Bible. It is not the view of Christianity.

Frankly, if religion is merely an exercise in wishful thinking for me, I wouldn't wish up Christianity. It's far too inconvenient. Indeed, it seems that's part of the reason people hold many of the ludicrous religious views they do. They're appealing. They wish God was impersonal, because an impersonal God can't make the kind of demands on them that a holy God can. An impersonal divine force doesn't cramp their style on Saturday night. Eastern religions are high on individual liberty and low on individual responsibility. That's appealing.

Biblical faith isn't believing against the evidence. Instead, faith is a kind of knowing that results in action.

No, biblical faith isn't believing against the evidence. Instead, faith is a kind of knowing that results in action. Let me explain what I mean.

If we want to exercise biblical faith--Christian faith--then we ought first to find out how the Bible defines faith. The clearest definition comes from Hebrews 11:1. This verse says, 'Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.' Now, there's something very important in these words. We see the word 'hope,' we see the word 'assurance,' and we see the word 'conviction'--that is, confidence. Now, what gives us confidence?

If you buy a lottery ticket, do you hope you'll win the lottery? Yes, of course you do. Do you have any assurance you'll win the lottery? Absolutely not. You have no way of knowing that your ticket is any better than the millions of other lottery tickets out there competing for the same pot.

But what if you had x-ray vision, and you could see through the grey scratch-off coating on the lottery tickets you buy at the supermarket? You'd know if you had a £100, £200 or a £1,000 winner, wouldn't you? In that case, would you merely hope you'd win? No, you'd have assurance, wouldn't you? You'd have assurance of those things you previously only hoped for. It would be hope with conviction, not a mere hope, but a hope buttressed by facts and evidence.

That's why the Christian faith cares about the evidence, friends. For the biblical Christian, the facts matter. You can't have assurance for something you don't know you're going to get. You can only hope for it.

This is why the resurrection of Jesus is so important. It gives assurance to the hope. Because of a Christian view of faith, Paul is able to say in 1 Corinthians 15 that when it comes to the resurrection, if we have only hope, but no assurance--if Jesus didn't indeed rise from the dead in time/space history--then we are of most men to be pitied. That's what he says: We are of most men to be pitied.

This confidence Paul is talking about is not a confidence in a mere 'faith' resurrection, a mythical resurrection, a story-telling resurrection. Instead, it's a belief in a real resurrection. If the real resurrection didn't happen, then we're in trouble.

The Bible knows nothing of a bold leap-in-the-dark faith, a hope-against-hope faith, a faith with no evidence. Rather, if the evidence doesn't correspond to the hope, then the faith is in vain, as even Paul has said.

So, faith is knowing, and that knowledge is based on evidence leading to confidence or conviction. But biblical faith is more than that. There's another element. Faith is not just knowing. Faith is also acting. Biblical faith is a confidence so strong that it results in action.

You're willing to act based on that belief, that faith.

Many of you know that my engineer, Bobby the Bouncer, got married today. Bobby has believed in marriage for a long time, but Bobby never exercised faith in marriage until he walked down the aisle and said 'I do' to Jennifer. That's when he put his life on the line for what he believed to be true. He exercised faith.

Friends, Christianity is not denying reality. Biblical Christians don't deny reality, they discover reality. And once they've discovered it, they act on what they've learned.

It's the same way with biblical faith. It's not just intellectual assent. It's not just acknowledging that certain facts about Jesus, the Bible, the resurrection, or whatever, happen to be true. It's taking your life and putting it on the line based on your confidence in those facts.

Consider a guy who pushes a wheelbarrow across Niagara Falls on a tightrope every day. You've seen him do it so many times it doesn't even occur to you he won't make it. You believe with all your heart he can do it.

One day he comes up to you and asks, 'Do you believe I can push this wheelbarrow across the tightrope without falling?' And you say, 'Of course I do. I've seen you do it hundreds of times.' 'All right,' he says, 'get in the wheelbarrow.'

Well, now we're talking about a whole different kind of thing, aren't we? The first is an intellectual belief, an acknowledgment of certain facts. The second is active faith, converting your knowledge to action. When you climb into the wheelbarrow, your belief in facts is converted into active trust.

Faith is knowledge in action. It is active trust in the truth. You go to the airport. You say, 'This plane goes to New York. I believe it. I'll get on the plane. I'll invest myself in the things I believe to be true.' That is biblical faith.

So, when someone asks me the question, 'Are faith and science compatible?', I'm going to immediately ask for a clarification. 'What do you mean by faith?' If you think faith is mere fantasy and science is complete fact, well then, fantasy

conflicts with fact, doesn't it? If faith is a blind leap in the dark, if faith has no concern for the facts, you're in trouble.

If, however, your faith is an intelligent trust in what can't be seen that's inferred from evidence that can be seen--if your faith is a commitment to reality, to acting on what you have good reason to believe is true - well then, there doesn't need to be any conflict at all.

Friends, Christianity is not denying reality. Some people think it is. I'm sympathetic to them because some Christians act as if faith is a kind of sanctified denial. But that isn't what biblical Christianity is about. Biblical Christians don't deny reality, they discover reality. And once they've discovered it, they act on what they've learned.

Indeed, if Christianity is true, in the deepest sense of the word, then it must fit the facts of the real world. So, when we discover the facts of the real world, they can only support Christianity--if Christianity is true--given that you've interpreted the facts of the world correctly and you've interpreted the scriptural teaching correctly.

Christianity does comport with the facts. If science and religion both have truth as their ultimate goal, then there's no inherent conflict between the two.