

## 5. One Faith

The word “faith” occurs many times in Scripture with various applications, and generally when we think of faith, we think of an attitude of trust and believing. The process of salvation is from beginning to end all of faith, and true Christians are people who have put their faith in Jesus for their salvation, and having been called to live a life of faith, trust God in all things, and look to Jesus, who is the author and finisher of faith, to see them through to the end of their earthly race (Jn 6:29; Mk. 11:22; Heb. 12:1,2).

Another use of faith in the New Testament is the phrase “the faith” in reference to the teachings of the church, for example, conversion to belief and acceptance of Jesus could be referred to as being “obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7); and as being “in the faith” (Acts 14:22; 16:5), such phrases indicate that the subjects had been saved by believing and responding to the teaching and preaching of the disciples of Jesus. When Paul wrote that, “faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17), he emphasised the necessity of the preaching of the word in bringing lost souls to salvation, and showed that there is an inseparable link between the word and a life of faith. Hebrews emphasises the same, noting that the Israelites who disobeyed God in the wilderness did so because the word they heard was not “mixed with faith” (Heb. 4:2). This intrinsic link between the word and faith is significant, and may go some way to explaining the use of the phrase “in the faith” to describe converts, because their salvation, and entrance into the life of faith began with acceptance of the gospel, and the ongoing walk of faith would require continuing obedience to the word of God if they were to be steadfast in the faith.

To be “in the faith” describes one who has shown acceptance of the gospel for salvation, and who is committed to continue living life in faithful obedience to the word of God, such people are of one faith, both in their acceptance of the word of God as truth, and in their commitment to live a life of faith in obedience to God and His word. The basis of “one faith” is “the faith” and this study will look at that in some more depth.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The following scriptures use faith as a noun in relation to New Testament belief, study of them will give further insight to the content of the faith as taught by the New Testament church:

- Acts: 6:7; 13:8; 14:22; 16:5; 24:24
- Romans: 1:5; 14:1
- 1 Corinthians 16:13
- 2 Corinthians 13:5
- Galatians 1:23
- Philippians 1:27
- Colossians 1:23; 2:5; 2:7
- 1 Thessalonians 3:10
- 1 Timothy: 1:2; 3:9; 3:13; 4:1; 5:8; 6:21
- 2 Timothy: 2:18; 3:8; 4:7
- Titus: 1:1; 1:4; 1:13; 3:15
- 1 Peter 5:9
- Jude: 1:3, 1:20

## **The Faith**

In the context of Ephesians 4:1-6, correct understanding of Paul's mention of "one faith" as a source of unity is important: Sometimes the word faith is used in an all-inclusive way, for instance, we might talk of "the Christian faith" as an all-embracing term which includes all denominations and variations of Christianity, whatever their doctrinal persuasion. In another way, faith can be used to describe people of any religious persuasion, and the phrase "people of faith" may be used to describe those who hold religious views of any sort. Paul was not using the term "one faith" in this all-inclusive way, he used it in an exclusive way, and it refers to those who hold exclusively to his teachings and that of the early church, as is recorded in the New Testament.

## ***Opposition to the Faith***

From the very early days of the church, there were those who opposed its doctrines, and sought to deny them, change them, and lead others away from them. Such people were familiar to Paul, he battled with them and warned about them, noting their rejection of the faith:

- Hymenaeus and Alexander, "whom concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck" (1Tim. 1:19,20).
- Some, "strayed concerning the faith" by professing "profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge" (1Tim. 6:20,21).
- Hymenaeus and Philetus, "strayed concerning the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past; and they overthrow the faith of some" (2Tim. 2:17,18).
- Jannes and Jambres, "men of corrupt minds, disapproved concerning the faith" (2Tim. 3:8).
- In the last days, "some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons" (1Tim. 4:1).

From the early days of the church, and during the time of Paul's ministry, it is evident that there was a defined and accepted body of doctrine and theology regarding the beliefs of those first followers of Jesus. That body of teaching was known as "the faith," adherence to the doctrines contained within was considered a mark of a true believer, an essential for spiritual growth, and for sound discipleship, and as a basis for fellowship. This comes out very clearly in Titus, where four times Paul mentions the faith in this respect, and in Colossians where three times Paul mentions the faith:

Paul, a bondservant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, according to the faith of God's elect and the acknowledgement of the truth which accords to godliness. (Titus 1:1)

To Titus, a true son in our common faith. (Titus 1:4; see also 1Tim. 1:2)

This testimony is true, therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith. (Titus 1:13)

All who are with me greet you. Greet those who love us in the faith (Titus 3:15).

If indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard (Col. 1:23; see 2:5).

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him, established in the faith, as you have been taught (Col. 2:6,7).

This body of teaching defined the beliefs, life and character of the early church, and formed the basis of the New Testament epistles. The epistles formulate and develop the teachings of the early church, and provide a sound base for the church throughout all subsequent generations. Any individual, church, or christian organisation which is not maintaining and teaching on that doctrinal basis, cannot therefore be included in the unity of those who are of one faith.

### ***Contents of the Faith***

Considering that adherence to the faith was so essential to the early church, we must surely take heed today of the exhortations that followers of the Lord Jesus must, “contend earnestly for the faith” (Jude. 3), and be prepared in the face of attacks against the faith, to be “steadfast in the faith” (1Pet. 5:9; 1Cor. 16:13). It is also necessary that believers recognise those things which are essential to the faith, and have a good understanding of the foundational teachings of the faith. There is a great need in our day for teaching of the essentials of Christian faith, many believers have not been grounded in the faith, and they have a very poor understanding of foundational doctrines. As a result they have no sound basis for Christian life and are easily swayed by false teachings. Elders are exhorted by Paul to hold and teach the mystery of the faith (1Tim. 3:8; 13), Paul testified toward the end of his life that he had “kept the faith” (2Tim. 4:7); how essential that in these last days, ministers continue in the same manner, and so do all possible to prevent some departing from the faith (1Tim. 4:1).

***The gospel:*** While it is impossible here for us to examine all that constitutes the faith (it would require study of the whole New Testament), scriptures show that there is a beginning to life in the faith (at conversion), at which point the believer is said to be in the faith, and from which point he is called to be rooted, to continue, and to be steadfast in the faith. Colossians brings together two scriptural principles on which being in the faith are based: (i), response to the preaching of the gospel (Col.1:23); and (ii), receiving Jesus as Lord (Col. 2:6,7). These two are linked because it is through the preaching of the gospel that the sinner is brought to repentance and belief in Jesus, brought into a right understanding of Jesus, and (as we saw in the previous study) accepts Him as Lord. The saved person is reconciled to God and enters into relationship with God through Jesus.

We must acknowledge the central place of the gospel in bringing the sinner to faith, and understand how important it is that the true gospel is preached in the world. False gospels lead to a

false salvation, they do not ground and establish the hearer in the faith, they build an unstable foundation, and those who accept them are likely to drift away from the true faith, and be tossed about by every wind of doctrine (Eph. 4:14; Heb. 2:1). Paul's exhortation to, "examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith" (2Cor. 13:5), shows that it is possible to believe oneself saved when the opposite is true. Paul's advised self-test for the evidence of salvation is knowing that, "Jesus Christ is in you." Those who have responded to false gospels are likely to be deluded into believing they are saved, but they will have no real relationship with Jesus, and will not be in the faith. It is a very serious matter before God, and explains why the judgment on those who preach false gospels is so severe - "let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:8,9).

***Foundational truths:*** The gospel is a presentation of basic foundational truths essential for salvation. At its most basic it is a simple presentation of historic facts about Jesus (i.e. his birth, death and resurrection), along with teaching on the spiritual application of those facts (i.e. that He came to die for our sins, and offers eternal life), and it includes teaching on the true character of Jesus (i.e. He is the Messiah and Lord); see Rom. 1:1-4; 1Cor. 15:1-4. This gospel should be faithfully preached by the church and at the forefront of its evangelism.

There are other foundational doctrines which the church should be teaching to new converts, these are helpfully mentioned in Hebrews as: repentance from dead works; faith toward God; baptisms; laying on of hands; resurrection of the dead; eternal judgment. The author of Hebrews sees these six matters as elementary principles upon which the believer should build, and from which to go on to spiritual maturity. He likens them to the milk which a baby feeds on before going on to solid food. There is a correct order in natural life which illustrates the spiritual life, and just as a baby having partaken of milk is prepared for solid food, so the believer having become acquainted with elementary spiritual truths, is then prepared for the deeper things of the kingdom of God.

In asking what is the content of the faith which the early church taught, and for which the saints ever since have been called to uphold and contend for, we must see that at its heart is the true gospel, and the elementary doctrines of the New Testament. All other teaching is based on these. If we do not have a good grasp of these most basic truths, then we cannot move on in the faith, we will not be steadfast in the faith, and we will not be able to help others walk in the faith.

## **Separation**

I am convinced that in these last days, when many are departing from the faith, there is great need for those who are in the faith to separate from those who are not. Scripture is very clear that false doctrines will abound in the last days, and that many will be led astray from truth by them. Scripture is also very clear on how to respond to those who promote false doctrine:

Now I urge you brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you have learned, and avoid them. (Rom. 16:17)

If we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed ... If anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed. (Gal. 1:8,9)

Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God ... If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house, nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds. (2Jn. 9-11)

True disciples of Jesus will unite in their desire to stand fast in the faith, they will maintain and preach the true gospel, they will understand the importance of teaching sound foundational doctrines. They will seek to build themselves and one another up in their most holy faith, they will encourage one another in contending for the faith, they will understand the necessity of testing the spirits, and they will separate from those who are found to promote false doctrines. They will be united in the one true faith.

Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave be strong. (1Cor. 16:13)