



# “A New Look at ‘Faith’”

Text: Hebrews 11:1-3, 6

*a sermon by Kevin Scott Fleming*

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

I have told you before that one of the greatest theological minds and influences during my formative years was a person you would least likely suspect – Archie Bunker. What I like about Archie is that he all too often says out loud what we may be thinking, but are too timid – to refined – to say ourselves. Very often, these statements come at the climax of an argument with someone, with one of his favorite partners in debate being his son-in-law, Mike Stivic.

In one such argument, Archie and Mike are debating a question that is faith-based and theological. Mike, the atheist, is arguing with Archie that the point Archie is making doesn’t make any sense. At that point Archie says, “It ain’t supposed to make sense. It’s faith – faith – don’t you know that? Faith is something you believe that no one in their right mind would believe in.”

And there it is. Forty-seven years ago, when *All in the Family* first went on the air, those were the kinds of comments and questions the faith community was facing. And, for the most part, the faith community ignored the questions being asked, or offered the same stale answers we had been offering for centuries. We didn’t see how much the world had changed, nor were we all that interested in keeping up with those changes.

And the result? The mainline church – across the board – is in decline. People are not interested in faith and, when asked to describe their faith preference, are more likely than not to say “none.”

So, we are on an uphill climb. We need to think about how we talk about faith and now we live it. We need a new look at faith.

“Faith is something you believe that no one in their right mind would believe in.” That’s how faith was taught to Archie and a whole bunch of us right along with him. Faith, for many of us, was giving intellectual assent to a series of theological propositions – whether they made sense or not.

“You have to believe,” they told us and then they rattled off a list of things we were required to believe. These were doctrinal statements, among them:

- the inspiration and infallibility of scripture,
- the virgin birth of Jesus
- the substitutionary theory of the atonement
- the bodily resurrection of Jesus
- and the historical reality of Jesus’ miracles

We were taught that the theory of evolution was incompatible with the Christian faith. We were taught that Christ’s presence in the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper was not a physical presence and that the elements did not become another substance. We were taught, that in the Sacrament of Baptism, it didn’t matter how much water was used and it didn’t matter whether the one receiving baptism was an infant, child, teen, or adult.

The list went on and on. Faith was about subscribing to a particular set of beliefs. Accept the belief and you were in. Reject the belief and you were out. True faith was about correct thinking.

And so it was that faith – as defined by accepting a certain set of beliefs – began dividing the church and alienating the world. Some people were “in” and some people were “out.” Some people were “saved” and some people weren’t. You could relate to some Christians but not all. Jews were okay because Jesus was a Jew, but Muslims were not okay because no one bothered to learn anything about them.

When the church spoke of faith, it was preoccupied with correct thinking. Now, let’s be clear: there is absolutely nothing wrong with thinking. In fact, around here, we encourage it. God gave us a brain that is unique among all the creatures on this planet and I think and believe God wants us to use it. The gift of intellect and reason is a precious gift and must be cherished and utilized.

But, the question remains: is faith just about thinking and belief?

In the New Testament, the word we translate as *faith* is, in Greek, the word *pistis*. Like most of the words we translate, there are layers of meaning and in the process of translation, we are to make the judgment on what English word best expresses the meaning and intent of the original. Translation – no matter which translation you read – is the first step in interpretation.

That word *pistis* can be translated as faith or belief. “*Pistis* is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen.” “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth...I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord...I believe in the Holy Spirit.” “I have faith in God...I have faith in Jesus Christ...I have faith in the Holy Spirit.”

But that same word can also be translated as *trust*. “I trust in God...I trust in Jesus Christ...I trust in the Holy Spirit.” It immediately sounds different, doesn’t it? “I trust” implies more than intellectual assent. “Trust” implies relationship. “Trust” suggests a connection between two or more people. “Trust” implies confidence, reliance, even dependence. If *belief* comes from the head, *trust* comes from the heart.

The story is told of a man who had a young son. One of the things they shared, which will offend your sense of etiquette, is that after dinner and after the table was cleared, the man would hoist the boy onto the table and allow him to run the length of the table and jump into his father’s arms. This would happen nearly every night. One evening, dinner was over and the table was cleared and the man put his son on the table. As the boy ran down the table, there was a crack of thunder and the lights went out. In the dark, the father felt a weight fall quickly into his arms. “Weren’t you afraid?” The father asked the boy. “No,” said the boy. “I knew you would catch me.”

That’s trust. That’s confidence. That is the conviction that is the foundation of what we call *faith*. This is the first step toward the challenge of the words we read again from the Letter to the Hebrews:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

I am often asked what you *have* to believe in order to join the church. Technically, there are three questions a person must answer:

Do you renounce evil and its power in the world?

Do you turn to Jesus Christ and acknowledge him as your Lord and Savior?

Will you be Christ’s faithful disciples, obeying his word and showing his love?

That's really all there is to it.

Those are, in the first case, not doctrinal questions. They are not asked to determine the orthodoxy, or the correctness, of anyone's beliefs. They are not asked to settle any question of significant theological depth.

They are, instead, questions that are all about trust. Do you trust in goodness and light? Do you trust that the life Jesus Christ came to exemplify is authentic and true? Will you do you best to live your life in a relationship of trust with God and neighbor?

Then, welcome home. Welcome to the life of faith.

For now and evermore. Amen.



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