

## Is Faith a Gift?

Written by Steve's Son-in-law Benjamin Brown

Dear Steve,

Below are a list of a brief quotations from Church doctors, magisterial documents, and Sacred Scripture about the nature of faith and its relationship to reason, along with some commentary of my own. Because the quotes are so brief, you will have to go back to the original and examine the context to get the full sense of what is being said. I have only cited the portions that seem relevant to make the point that I am making.

- Augustine, *On Grace and Free Will*, paragraph 29:

“Now if faith is simply of free will, and is not given by God, why do we pray for those who will not believe, that they may believe?”

There is an issue of will, not of reason. We pray for them to have the grace to overcome their own sinfulness and blindness.

- You yourself already made this point. I quote if from Augustine here to give some authority to the idea and challenge you to think through what this means. Augustine understands that in any true act of faith, as in any truly good work, the grace of God comes first, enabling the person to believe and work. It is only through the gift of God's grace that faith is possible; there can be no true faith without God's giving the gift of faith to the person. In other words, nothing on the natural, human side of this cooperation, including reason, will avail for true faith to exist. Reason is an important part of the picture, but it is not sufficient on its own. Man needs God's grace, the gift of faith, in order to truly believe as he should. Augustine emphasizes the cooperation of free will (and reason), which is important and necessary. But his point against the Pelagians is that there is an absolute priority to God's grace such that there can be no meritoriously good act on the part of man without God's grace first healing man's faculties. Grace is always first; it is only in, with, through and because of grace that faith is possible. Later theologians (like Aquinas) will develop this idea and focus on the gift of faith. More below. If you skim through *On Grace and Free Will* you will see (I think) that I have accurately summarized Augustine's thought.

Ah, but it is not faith that God gave but the grace to believe – the grace to submit the will. My brother Bob believes but does not submit. He knows it is true but will not bend his will to obey. He has “faith” in its generic sense, but does not have the grace to obey.

By the way, Augustine cites numerous Sacred Scripture texts, among which are Jn. 15:5 1 Cor. 15:10, and 1 Cor. 4:7. But since it seems to me that these texts taken by themselves admit of an interpretation somewhat different than the one that Augustine gives them, I will not cite them in support of my position; I simply mention them here for your perusal if you should so desire.

- The Second Council of Orange, which dealt with the Semi-pelagian controversy in 529, and was subsequently approved by Pope Boniface II in 531 (cf. Denzinger 200a ff.), wrote

canon 5:

“If anyone says that just as the increase of faith so also the beginning of faith and the very desire of credulity, by which we believe in Him who justifies the impious, and by which we arrive at the regeneration of holy baptism is not through the gift of grace, that is through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit reforming our will from infidelity to faith, from impiety to piety, but is naturally in us, he is proved to be antagonistic to the doctrine of the Apostles. [Citation of Phil. 1:6, Phil. 1:29, and Eph. 2:8.] ... For those who say that faith, by which we believe in God, is natural, declare that all those who are alien to the Church of Christ are in a measure faithful [, which is heretical]” (Denzinger 178).

canon 7:

“If anyone affirms that without the illumination and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit ... through the strength of nature he can think anything good which pertains to the salvation of eternal life, as he should, or choose, or consent to salvation ... he is deceived by the heretical spirit. [Citation of Jn. 15:5 and 2 Cor. 3:5]” (Denzinger 180).

- Vatican Council I, *Dei Filius*:

“Faith, which is the beginning of human salvation, the catholic church professes to be a supernatural virtue, by means of which, with the grace of God inspiring and assisting us, we believe to be true what he has revealed, not because we perceive its intrinsic truth by the natural light of reason, but because of the authority of God himself” (chapter 3, Denzinger 1789).

“Although the assent of faith is by no means a blind movement of the mind, yet no one can accept the gospel preaching in the way necessary for achieving salvation without the inspiration and illumination of the Holy Spirit, who gives to all facility in accepting and believing the truth. And so faith itself ... is a gift of God, and its operation is a work belonging to the order of salvation, in that a person yields true obedience to God himself when he accepts and collaborates with his grace which he could have rejected” (chapter 3, Denzinger 1791).

“... those who by the heavenly gift of faith have embraced the catholic truth ...” (chapter 3, Denzinger 1794).

“Reason, if it is enlightened by faith, does indeed when it seeks persistently, piously, and soberly, achieve by God’s gift some understanding, and that most profitable, of the mysteries ...” (chapter 4, Denzinger 1796).

“Even though faith is above reason, there can never be any real disagreement between faith and reason” (chapter 4, Denzinger 1797).

“If anyone says that divine faith is not to be distinguished from natural knowledge about God and moral matters ... : let him be anathema” (canon 3.2, Denzinger 1811).

- Faith is something more than being able to prove that God exists or that murder is wrong. Faith goes beyond natural knowledge and must be distinguished from it.

“If anyone says that divine revelation cannot be made credible by external signs, and that therefore men and women ought to be moved to faith only by each one’s internal experience or private inspiration: let him be anathema” (canon 3.3, Denzinger 1812).

- Here we see the famous distinction of Vatican I in which reason supports faith and in which faith can be made credible by certain things knowable by reason, without it also being the case that reason or any external signs are the sure foundation for faith.

- I include this quotation as well because I want to make sure that you know that I’m not ignorant of the balance that has to be maintained between faith and reason and to give me the opportunity of saying, again, that the idea that your father expressed on Christmas Day is erroneous. As Janet said, he thinks that the historical and real events don’t much matter, so long as one really believes and places one’s faith in God, as if one’s faith makes something real and true, rather than the reality and truth coming first. Such a view is not only erroneous, but wrongheaded in such a fundamental way as to be stupid. (I hope that you are not offended on account of your father, whom I admire and hold dear.) However, it does not follow from the fact that I agree with you on this matter that I also think that history, reason, etc. are sufficient to ground faith. All the historical investigation in the world will not give a person one ounce of Christian faith.

Yes, we believe what is true and deny what is false. If such and such could be shown to be true, then I would assent to it, and I would assent to it because it is true. Thus, I believe what is true because it is true; by believing does not make it true. But the question that we have been discussing is not about the order of reality and belief, but about how one comes to faith and on what one’s faith is based as a free, personal act of assent. In other words, of course we believe because we think that what we are believing about the world is actually the case with the world, but the question that we were discussing, as I understood it, was about our access to the world. What makes me think that it is true that Jesus Christ died on a cross for our sins 2000 years ago? Why do I believe that Jesus Christ is true God and true man? How is it that I am able to believe that Mary was conceived without sin? Etc.

As I understand the teaching of the Church, we only really know the answers to the above questions through the grace of God who (1) reveals such things to us and (2) gives us the ability of mind and will through the infusion of the supernatural gift of faith to assent to their truth. This does not mean that there is not good reason to believe. Nor does it mean that the truth of the Catholic faith cannot be argued for. Nor does it mean that reason cannot lead someone to open himself, with the grace of God, to the Catholic faith. What it does mean is that reason alone is not sufficient for there to be true faith. No natural ability of man suffices for him to have faith; he needs the grace of God operating on him and in him in order for him to believe in a properly Christian way. We believe because something is true, but we are only able to come to acknowledge (i.e., believe) that truth because of the grace of God which infuses the supernatural gift of faith in us.

“If anyone says that the assent of the christian faith is not free, but is necessarily produced by arguments of human reason; or that the grace of God is necessary only for living faith which works by charity: let him be anathema” (canon 3.5, Denzinger 1814).

“If anyone says that the condition of the faithful and those who have not yet attained to the only true faith is alike, so that Catholics may have a just cause for calling in doubt, by suspending their assent, the faith which they have already received from the teaching of the church, until they have completed a scientific demonstration of the credibility and truth of their faith: let him be anathema” (canon 3.6, Denzinger 1815).

- The point that I want to draw out of this canon is that it clearly implies that faith can exist without “a scientific demonstration of the credibility of the faith” having been conducted. Faith can exist initially, and continues to exist throughout the lives of many people, without reason having been engaged to a significant degree. Most Christians, as you well know, haven’t conducted a careful investigation of the historical and scriptural foundation of the Church. Most Christians have no idea that God’s existence can be proved. In fact, both of these points apply to numerous saints! Think of St. Teresé of Liseaux, who had only a grade school education (and maybe some high school, I’m not sure), but whose faith and love have inspired a century of Christians. She did not have the historical knowledge that you or I have and left to her own devices, she would have faired rather poorly against many an atheist. But even with a thousand defeats on the debate circuit she would have persevered in faith nonetheless. Why? Because her faith did not rest on such a weak and fragile thing as human reason. To some extent her faith would have been lacking because of this lack on the part of reason, but I assure you that even with all the reason in the world, my faith would still be far more lacking than hers.

A couple months ago, one of my fellow students commented that the faith of John Sanders is foundationless because he does not think that the existence of God can be proved. Because he rejects the ability of natural reason to know that there is a God, this student argued, Sanders’ faith is without a solid foundation. I objected, along with most of the rest of the class, that Sanders’ faith is certainly imperfect because of the aforesaid deficiency, but that it is by no means foundationless. If it were, then the faith of my mother, for example, (and virtually every other Christian) would be foundationless as well, which it certainly is not. Proofs for God’s existence do not make faith; neither does faith depend upon them, though they support and cohere with faith. The same goes for historical evidence.

- Catechism of the Catholic Church

“Christian faith differs from our faith in any human person” (#150).

- As I said when we were talking a week and a half ago, my faith in Christ is different, stronger, more sure, and far deeper than any belief that I have about Abraham Lincoln or any other human being, or any trust that I put in a human authority. The reason for this is that Christian faith involves a personal adherence to God and a giving over of one’s whole self to him such. God, through faith, becomes present to me in very deep way through the gift of Himself (His grace) to me. As Augustine said, God is more present to us than we are to ourselves. Through the gift of faith we are intimately bound to God so that we are able to adhere to Him and trust in Him more strongly than to any created thing.

The word faith above is used differently than I have used it in our discussion. Faith in a person and their character or reliability and faith meaning belief in a fact. And, you are using it differently, it seems to me, than the Catechism is using it (in its present context). #150 deals with trust in the person himself which is made clear by the phraseology “entrust oneself wholly”, we are not to place our faith in a creature but in God. This is *very* different from saying that I can be equally sure of Abraham Lincoln’s presidency and Jesus’ crucifixion. The first is a matter of trusting in the veracity and reliability of a person (e.g., their character or reliability); the latter is a matter of historical fact.

Then we are using the word faith differently than I have been using it. Believing is a fundamental acceptance of truth whereas here faith is being used as a full assent of the will to God.

“*Faith is a gift of God, a supernatural virtue infused by him. ‘Before this faith can be exercised, man must have the grace of God’*” (#153).

- We already discussed this passage. However you understand the relationship between faith and reason, you cannot deny that Christian faith is a gift of God without which gift no such faith is possible. In fact, in order to be a Catholic, you are obliged to affirm that faith is fundamentally a gift of God infused by Him. This is not a matter of theological opinion, but of Church doctrine, as is made clear by *Dei Filius*, the dogmatic constitution on faith promulgated by Vatican Council I (see above).

I think we are using the word faith differently. I am referring to it in the sense of believing truth.

“What moves us to believe is not the fact that revealed truths appear as true and intelligible in the light of our natural reason: we believe ‘because of the authority of God himself who reveals them, who can neither deceive nor be deceived’” (#156).

I agreed with this. I said that historical fact states that Jesus was crucified and Lincoln was president and what makes the one more certain than the other – if we want to say it that way – is that the source of knowing the former is human reason and knowledge but also it has been passed on to us in what we believe to be the literal word of God. It is an inspired book and therefore certain (as long as we believe it is historically true which your professors are trying to cause you to doubt); whereas what we know about Lincoln is only through human knowledge and not in the inspired scriptures or declared infallibly by the Church.

“Faith is *certain*. It is more certain than all human knowledge because it is founded on the very word of God who cannot lie. To be sure, revealed truths can seem obscure to human reason and experience, but ‘the certainty that the divine light gives is greater than that which the light of natural reason gives’” (#157).

“... faith is above reason ...” (#159).

“Faith is an entirely free gift that God makes to man” (#162).

“[The theological virtues have the One and Triune God for their *origin*, motive, and object.... [They] are infused by God into the souls of the faithful to make them capable of acting as his children and of meriting eternal life.... There are three theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity” (#1812-1813)

- None of the above, of course, in any way undermines the deep and harmonious relationship between faith and reason. See #s 154-6, 158, 159, 166, 1814, et al.

- Sacred Scripture -- Most of these passages are used by various Church documents in support of the positions presented in the quotations above.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8).

This is usually understood in the context of faith in Christ versus works of the Law. Grace is certainly a gift of God as well as the favorable disposition he has exercised toward us. We cannot save ourselves from sin, only God can do this and he does it freely by his grace.

“For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake” (Phil. 1:29).

“... Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith ...” (Heb. 12:2).

“Jesus declared, “I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes” (Mt. 11:25).

This is not dealing with faith as you have been using it but with the revelation of truth which is to be believed.

“We walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7).

By what we know and believe, not by what we can necessarily see (e.g., Doubting Thomas did not believe until he “saw and felt” rather than believing the reliable witness).

“By the grace given to me I bid every one among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith which God has assigned him” (Rom. 12:3).

“And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6).

I don't see how this verse applies to our discussion of whether the ability to believe truth is a divine gift infused.

The point of all of the above is to see that faith is fundamentally a gift of God, bestowed upon us freely by God, even while it is a free act of human mind and will. Therefore, faith has a certain priority over reason; it is higher than reason and it transcends the abilities of reason even as it elevates reason to its own level, to a certain extent. Thus, it is appropriate to call the Church

a “community of faith” (even though this phrase can be abused); on the other hand, I think that it is highly misleading, if not erroneous, to call the Church a community of reason. The Church is certainly a community which is historically grounded, which looks to miracles and the like to support its faith and which defends the truth of the faith and gives reasons for its coherence; however, the gift of faith comes first and stands above reason. Faith (animated by love) is what makes us the People of God, not reason. To say otherwise is, I think, a failure to think with the mind of the Church. Even worse, I think that it is positively heretical, as I hope the above citations have shown.

Similarly, the Church can be called a community formed by grace, but not a community formed by nature. We are a people of grace; that is what sets us apart. We are a people of nature as well, to be sure, but so is every other group of people on earth. To call ourselves a people of nature would be tautological at best. So too with reason. We are most certainly a people of reason; in fact, we claim to be more a people of reason than any other community on earth precisely because of the deep interrelation of faith and reason. Our faith allows us to be more knowledgeable and reasonable than any other group because the fullness of faith informs and elevates reason in the fullest possible way. But it is not reason *per se* which distinguishes us from others; rather, our faith is what makes us unique and unites us as the People of God.

One last thing in the hopes of helping you to agree with me. After having thought about our conversation a little, and after talking to Cindy, I think that I see something that may be causing difficulty. Because of your evangelical background and the way that they treat faith, “faith” sounds a little too subjective, private, and unreasonable to you. When someone says that he’s a Christian because he has faith, this sounds like subjectivism to you, as if he were to say that he’s a Christian because he feels it’s what he should do or because he’s personally inspired by the Holy Spirit who has laid it on his heart to be a Christian.

I think you are right about this to a degree. We are often using the words differently. I would also take your comments a bit further. I also object to the view that believing makes it true, or that it is not important that the Christian faith is rooted in true history. I have heard one say “I can accept the Nicene Creed except for the phrase about Pontius Pilate – why do you have to make it history – why not just believe?”

But I do not mean such things when I say “faith” and neither did Augustine nor Aquinas nor Vatican I. Faith in those contexts is understood to be a free act of the person by which he assents to a truth which is present to his mind.

Yes, I understand that definition of faith and I have no problem with the Church’s comments and teaching. I adhere to it. But I have been using the word as a synonym for “believe” which is the fundamental meaning of the English word. It is also the meaning of its Greek ancestor *pistis* which is related to “believe” *pisteuo*.

We may also be using other words differently: *grace* and *faith*. I say we believe the truth and God gives us the grace for an act of our will to completely submit to that truth. Faith is believing, grace enables the will to act. You imply (or I infer from your comments) that that “grace” is the “gift of faith”.

Now, if faith is a gift, why doesn't everyone believe? If God only gives it to some, then we are submerging ourselves in Calvinism that says God damns those he does not chose. In my terms, God's grace is available to all men (or you might say the "gift of faith" is available to all men) but not all men appropriate it. Those who hear the "preacher" and believe appropriate the grace of God which enables them to receive the supernatural life of God.

It is not emotional or subjectivist or relativist. Rather, it is an objective reality which inheres in the person and regards an objective state of affairs. But this reality is in its roots a divine reality; it is given to, instilled in, infused in, and bestowed upon man by God and is possible only through the supernatural action of God. By faith, man adheres intellectually to God as Supreme Truth. By faith, man *knows* the Truth which is God. But man cannot do this without God's help, without his soul being elevated by God to an act of adherence to the Truth that surpasses what his natural faculties can do on their own. Viewed simply from the standpoint of what the mind and will of man do, faith in God and faith in one's parent look very much alike, but there is something deeper going on in Christian faith than what appears on the surface. The Church proclaims this to be the case because of what the Scriptures say about faith being from God (see above).

In your eagerness to defend the reasonableness, objectivity, and certainty of what the Church teaches, you have to be careful not to be overly influenced by those who do not know what faith really is. In the attempt to defend Catholicism, don't turn it into a mere body of knowledge like mathematics, physiology, or psychology. The faith is different because it is caused by God, not by reason, though reason must cooperate. Faith is an act of intellect which comes from God, mathematics is simply the product of the human intellect. But both are objective; in this we agree. But one is natural, the other supernatural; one from man, the other from God and man; one attainable by reason alone, the other not.

Steve, we agree on much, to be sure. But if you cannot grant that reason on its own is insufficient for faith in God, then we disagree on at least one point, and an absolutely fundamental point it is. In this day and age, in which subjectivism abounds, the reasonableness of faith and its close interrelation with reason is certainly something that we want to emphasize. To that extent, I am with you all the way. But we cannot let that emphasis distort the truth by turning faith into a merely natural act and denying God's special role in uniting us to himself through faith. Let me know, when you get a chance, what you think of all this and we can continue the discussion when the occasion presents itself. I myself have profited from talking to you. I have come to a greater appreciation of the fact that faith is a truly human act, necessarily integrated with reason, for which I thank you.

God Bless,  
Ben

**Romans 10:14** How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth.19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.20 Ever since the creation of the world his invisible



nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse;<sup>21</sup> for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened.<sup>22</sup> Claiming to be wise, they became fools,<sup>23</sup> and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles.

<sup>24</sup> Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves,<sup>25</sup> because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen

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<sup>1</sup>Catholic Biblical Association (Great Britain). (1997, c1994). *The Holy Bible : Revised Standard Version, Catholic edition, translated from the original tongues, being the version set forth A.D. 1611, Old and New Testament revised A.D. 1881-1885 and A.D. 1901 (Apocrypha revised A.D. 1894), compared with the most ancient authorities and revised A.D. 1952 (Apocrypha revised A.D. 1957)* (Ro 1:18-25). New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA.