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***Holding Faith: A Practical Introduction to Christian Doctrine***

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**Our Starting Point: Faith Holds Christ**

A few words about faith are in order. This is because, if we believe theology matters, we are likely beginning the theological enterprise with a certain modicum of faith. Now, let me say from the outset that this faith can certainly include doubt. [A] seed of faith can be found even in skepticism—at very least in that version of skepticism that seeks to wonder and pays homage to mystery, and possibly even in skepticism that fights hard against belief.[[1]](#footnote-1) Jesus suggests we don’t need a lot of faith to begin seeking, to begin following, to begin acting. He said, specifically, that even if we had only a mustard-size seed’s worth of faith, we could move mountains.[[2]](#footnote-2) Apparently, a little bit of faith goes a long way toward contributing to the healing of a world that often seems impossibly broken.[[3]](#footnote-3) Just a little faith can “hold” us in place as participants contributing to the mending of the world.

Some of the claims of theology do look like they need to be swallowed with more than just a spoonful of faith, I’ll admit. Consider the Virgin Birth, the Second Coming, the resurrection of the body, the forgiveness of sins . . . these are all elements of the Apostles’ Creed[[4]](#footnote-4)35 most of us find to be difficult, if not impossible, to fathom. A dose of faith is necessary to get us started at imagining what these statements could possibly mean, and how they might actually matter. A little faith is even a necessary precursor to doubting some of the strange claims of the Christian faith, it seems to me. In order to doubt, we have to believe enough in what the Bible and the creeds say to bother wrestling with it at all, even to wind up rejecting it. A little faith lends itself to spiritual seeking, which ideally leads to greater understanding.

But what is it that we are to put our faith in, exactly? Surely, it is not the case that we should put our faith in doctrines (meaning “teachings of the church”). The purpose of doctrines is to direct us to the proper locus of our trust, by assisting us in helping to see the big picture of Scripture. Neither should we put our trust in the text of Scripture itself. All of Scripture is “profitable” for “equipping” us[[5]](#footnote-5), but it is not in Scripture that we put our trust. It is not our faith in Scripture that holds us, but our faith in God that does.[[6]](#footnote-6) “Have faith in God,”[[7]](#footnote-7) Jesus tells his disciples in the Gospel of Mark. “You believe

in God, believe also in me,” he says in the Gospel of John. Holding faith, Jesus suggests, is about laying claim to the hope that what God has promised will come to fruition. This includes Jesus’s own promises—to the disciples, and to us—that he has actually not abandoned us, even when the circumstances of our lives and this world seem to indicate otherwise. “Don’t be troubled,” he says. “I won’t leave you as orphans.”[[8]](#footnote-8) “When Igo to prepare a place for you, I will return and take you to be with me so that where I am you will be too.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Faith that holds refuses to give up on promises like this, even when it is colored by doubts or skepticism.

I love the biblical story of the man who holds tightly to faith, desperate for his son’s healing. “If you can do anything, help us! Show us compassion!” he says to Jesus. “If you can do anything?” Jesus exclaims. “All things are possible for the one who has faith.” “I have faith,” said the man, immediately, “help my lack of faith!”[[10]](#footnote-10) This father’s faith is interlocked with doubt, but he refuses to let go of it because he wants so badly for his son to be healed. It is this doubt-riddled faith that drives him to seek understanding; that leads him to seek Jesus; that strengthens him not to be bogged down by his skepticism, but to force out an affirmative, if honest answer to Jesus’s question.

Martin Luther argued, back in the sixteenth century, that what faith holds on to most directly is not even God’s promises, but Jesus Christ himself. “Faith takes hold of Christ and has Him present, enclosing Him as the ring encloses the gem,”[[11]](#footnote-11) Luther says. Faith unites us to the Christ in whom we participate, the Christ who makes us righteous, the Christ who is present to us and who shares with us everything he has. He is the content to which our faith clings; the one in whom we live and move and have our being; the Savior of the world and also of each and every one.

**Moving Forward on the Journey: We Hold Faith**

Our faith holds Christ, but we also hold faith. One of the million-dollar questions in theology is: Do we have the capacity, in and of ourselves, to generate faith? Theologians through the ages have generally agreed that human beings cannot achieve faith on their own. The big debate is whether or not they contribute anything at all. Thomas Aquinas thought that human beings were capable of making their way toward God; that God had instilled every human creature with this capacity. Calvin held that human beings had enough capacity that they could turn in the right direction, but (following his interpretation of Romans 1) he thought that soon thereafter they were liable to create idols rather than to worship the one true God. Wesley thought faith was out of range for human beings apart from God’s doing; at the same time, he thought human beings (assisted by prevenient grace) do have a part to play: they choose whether to accept, or to reject, God’s extended gift.

The theologian with whom I resonate most, on this, is Karl Barth. Barth lived from 1886 to 1968 and is part of the Reformed tradition, following John Calvin. Barth observed that human beings who believe they have the capacity to contribute something of their own to God’s work of salvation were apt to mistake their own agendas for the will of God. His idea was that even our faith is a gift of God. He describes faith, in fact, as a kind of surplus grace, explaining that “grace is so truly grace, and so truly free as grace, that it is capable of this (doubly undeserved) superfluity.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

The faith we hold is the faith that holds Christ, and the faith that holds Christ is surplus grace. It is a faith that will never let us go because it is an overflow of the unconditional love of God.

It is with the confidence that God’s got us—even when we doubt or are skeptical—that we forge ahead.

1. I’m thinking, here, that the thief who derides Christ, hanging with him on the cross, might even be included. This is what Barth argues, in a sermon on Luke 23:33 titled “The Criminals with Him.” See: Karl Barth, “The Criminals with Him,” in Deliverance to the Captives (Portsmith, NH: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1979),

   75–84. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Matt 17:20. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, in particular, Mark 11:23, where the disciples are told they would have been able to heal a child of demonic possession if they had had more faith. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Apostles’ Creed is the earliest known Creed of the Christian church, dating back to the second century CE. It is confessed around the world, and by Christians of many denominations, still today. It can be accessed at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apostles’\_Creed. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 2 Tim 3:16. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See also John 5:39. The Scriptures have authority because they “testify to” the work of God in Jesus Christ. The subject of the authority of Scripture will be considered in greater detail in ch. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Mark 11:22. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. John 14:1, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. John 14:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Mark 9:21-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Martin Luther, Lectures on Galatians , eds. Jaroslav Pelican and William Hansen,

    Luther’s Works, XXVI (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1963), 132 (Gal 2:16). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Barth, CD IV/2, §64.3, 245–46 (See also IV.1, §59.1, 201). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)