

The Dynamics of Faith
Week Two: What Faith Is Not
St. Augustine's Episcopal Chapel Sunday School
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- I. Because faith is an act of the whole personality, faith is distorted and misunderstood when it is identified with some one part of the human personality. Faith involves mind, will, and emotion, but faith itself is not a matter of belief (mind), a matter of making/willing oneself to believe something (will), nor is it a matter of private feeling (emotion).
- II. We must sharply distinguish between faith (ultimate concern) and belief.
 - A. Beliefs are more or less probable. They are about some feature of the empirical world: beliefs about history, beliefs about science, etc.
 - B. Because there is an element of probability involved in beliefs, sometimes we end up believing something because we trust the relevant authorities (scientists, historians, etc.) when we ourselves are not in a position to determine for ourselves the truth of a relevant belief.
 - C. But even such trust is not faith. So, even believing something because the church or your pastor tells you to believe it is not faith (more on this in a moment).
 - D. Note how radical Tillich is on this point: "The Christian may believe the Biblical writers, but not unconditionally. He does not have faith in them. He should not even have faith in the Bible. For faith is more than trust in even the most sacred authority. It is participation in the subject of one's ultimate concern with one's whole being." (37-38).
 - E. Remember that for Tillich, ultimate concern, is a translation of the great commandment, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." (Deut. 6:5). The Bible is not God. The Bible is a faith document, a record of and witness to the revealing work of God in the people of Israel and the early church. But in every act of reception of God's revealing acts, those who receive/experience those acts remain ambiguous persons. We are not obliged to receive uncritically what the Bible says. That would be idolatry, bibliolatry, worship of the Bible and not the God of the Bible.
 - F. Because faith is about participation in God, being grasped by God, who is the ground of being, faith is not about some empirical or scientific state of affairs. So, you cannot be compelled by faith to reject something that you take to be true on good scientific grounds. After all, faith is not information, knowledge, or belief.
 - G. The "certitude of faith is 'existential,' meaning that the whole existence of man is involved" (40). For example, Christians are people who are claimed by faith that Jesus is the Christ, the one in and through whom we experience God's saving presence. We see in Jesus God's healing power and so we bet our lives on living in the way of Jesus and Jesus' kingdom. That's faith. But believing something more or less probable

about Jesus—that he was or was not “getting it on” with Mary Magdalene, or more challengingly, even that his corpse was physically resuscitated, is not a matter of faith. Reducing faith to “making oneself believe” something more or less improbable is, for Tillich, not faith. “Faith is not belief and it is not knowledge with a low degree of probability” (41).

- III. Faith is not “the will to believe.” That is the “voluntaristic distortion of the meaning of faith.”
- A. *Deciding* to believe that something, which is more or less likely to be true, is an act of the will.
 - B. As we’ll see later, for Tillich, the whole idea of making oneself believe something is deeply problematic.
 1. It can be an injury to the mind.
 2. It can become a work, and so a kind of works righteousness—making myself believe something. Is that really how we are saved, that is to say made whole and healed? But surely that is opposed to the fundamental idea that we are “saved by grace through faith,” and not by anything we do!
- IV. Finally, faith is not a matter of emotion or feeling. Surely, faith does not exclude feeling, but it is not essentially a matter of feeling.
- A. That would be a fine way to marginalize and domesticate ultimate concern. If faith is in no way something with cognitive implications, then it could pose no challenge to any other domain of human experience.
 - B. So, for example, a reductionist scientist could say, “Leave all talk about the nature of the universe to us; that’s not your business. Your business is with feeling.”
 - C. In the meanwhile, such a person’s real ultimate concern could be his reductive theory about what human life is about: for example, the claim that human life is itself arbitrary and determined by the “selfish gene.”
 - D. By domesticating faith as a matter of feeling, faith is not allowed to challenge the validity of such dubious ultimate concerns.