

Exercises in the Creed: What is faith?

Recently, we've looked at the text of the Apostles' Creed and at Luther's explanations in the Small and Large Catechisms. We'll now dig a bit deeper.

We often think "faith" is something like "believing there's a G/god," sort of like "believing in Santa Claus." You often hear it said of a person, "He believes in God." But what does this mean? The Large Catechism explains the First Commandment this way:

¹⁻⁴ That is: Thou shalt have [and worship] Me alone as thy God. What is the force of this, and how is it to be understood? What does it mean to have a god? or, what is God? Answer: A god means that from which we are to expect all good and to which we are to take refuge in all distress, so that to have a God is nothing else than to trust and believe Him from the [whole] heart; as I have often said that the confidence and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol.

If your faith and trust be right, then is your god also true; and, on the other hand, if your trust be false and wrong, then you have not the true God; for these two belong together, faith and God. That now, I say, upon which you set your heart and put your trust is properly your god.

Therefore it is the intent of this commandment to require true faith and trust of the heart which settles upon the only true God, and clings to Him alone. That is as much as to say: "See to it that you let Me alone be your God, and never seek another," *i.e.*: Whatever you lack of good things, expect it of Me, and look to Me for it, and whenever you suffer misfortune and distress, creep and cling to Me. I, yes, I, will give you enough and help you out of every need; only let not your heart cleave to or rest in any other.

- Does everyone have a G/god or gods?
- Who is commanded (by the First Commandment) to worship the one true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Does "faith" in any other god or gods save?
- Is *faith* simply knowing book facts about God, or if not, what else is it? Does it assume, though, (at least in those old enough to think about such things) knowledge of facts about God? Why, and how do we know these?

Let's see what the Bible has to say, and if it refines any of our answers. We know Paul says a great deal about faith. "By grace you have been saved, through faith," he says (Eph 2:8). Also, for example, Romans 1:16–17; 3:21–31; 4:1–5:5; 10:5–17. Not only Paul's letters, but also the Gospel of John speaks a great deal about faith—including where the true faith comes from, and what it believes. Read John 3:14–18, 36; 5:24, 43–44; 6:26–29, 40; 11:25–27; 20:19–31.

Is faith just "believing in [a] G/god?" believing that things "will work out in the end?" No! faith is trust in God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and specifically in what Jesus Christ has done to reconcile us to God by his death for our sins—something to which his resurrection forever testifies, and gives us hope of our own resurrection. When the events of life "try your faith," where is faith restored?

The Augsburg Confession speaks very precisely of this when it says: "It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, **when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us.** For God will regard and reckon **this faith** as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:21–26 and 4:5."

This true faith is exercised and strengthened principally in confessing our sins and being forgiven. More on this work of the Holy Spirit in the Church next time.