

Acts 2:22-24, 32-36; Rom 1:1-4; Rom 10:9; 1 Cor 15:1-8—THE THREE AXES OF FAITH: BELIEF

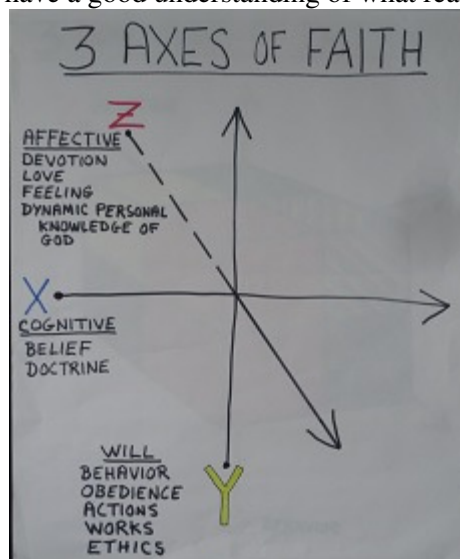
INTRO: What is true, saving faith? What does faith look like?

- Some people have the idea that if you simply say words like “I accept Jesus into my heart as my personal savior” you’re in. I don’t think that’s true—as we will see over these next 3 weeks.
- Others are like singer Edith Frost who says in one of her songs “I learned a lot of rules from the Bible, baby.” IOW, Christian faith amounts to a bunch of rules and rule-keeping. That’s also not true.

It is important for people who are not Christians to have an accurate understanding of what Christian faith is all about. If you’re not yet a believer, you need to know what you are getting into—or at least know what you are rejecting.

It is also important for those of us who call ourselves Christians to know what real Christian faith involves. WE need to know in order to assess “How am I doing?” Or, in a few cases, if we understand what Christian faith really is, we may be like a man I heard about in Kenya. He was an elder in his church and had been for something like 20 years. Yet one Sunday what the pastor was preaching got through to this man in such a way that he realized “I’ve never truly been born again at all.” And so that very day he received Christ as his Lord and savior—he became born again—even though he had been a pillar in the church for many years.

What I am planning on doing today and for the next 2 weeks is to look at what I call the 3 axes or 3 dimensions of faith, so that we can all have a good understanding of what real Christian faith is. **[DIAGRAM]**



All 3 axes are interrelated. However, to understand this well we need to look at each axis of Christian faith individually. Therefore, today I will concentrate on the X axis: the cognitive, doctrinal, belief component of Christian faith. Next week we will look at the Y axis: the behavioral component. Then on Aug. 11 we will look at the Z axis: the affective, devotional component of Christian faith. At the end of these 3 weeks, I hope that we will have a better understanding of what real, saving faith looks like.

O/S: Today, as we consider the X axis of faith, I would like to do 2 things: (1) Look at 4 brief passages in the Bible that go to the heart of doctrinal, belief component of the Christian faith; (2) Consider some of the implications of this for our lives.

I. Scriptural bases of the X axis of faith.

There are lots of passages that talk about what Christians believe. But let’s look at 4 short passages that summarize or hit the heart or bottom line of the Christian message:

Acts 2:22-24, 32-36 [READ] This passage tells us at least 3 important things:

- First, Jesus is unique in who he is and what he did. v.22—God himself attested to the uniqueness of Jesus by the signs that he did.
- Second, paradoxically, the most important thing that Jesus did was to die. His death is of crucial significance because it was for a special purpose and was part of a predetermined plan of God (v.23).

- Third, all of this—who Jesus is and the effectiveness of what he did—were verified by the greatest, most important fact of history: the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The resurrection proves that Jesus was not just a great teacher or miracle worker, but is himself the Lord God over all.

Note in **Acts 2:34-35** where it says **[READ]**. That is a quotation from **Ps 110:1**. Why is that important? In **Matt 22:41-45** when Jesus challenged the Pharisees to come to grips with who he really is Jesus himself quoted **Ps 110:1**, which was written by King David **[READ]**. Now in **Acts 2** Peter is explaining the meaning of **Ps 110:1** in light of the resurrection of Jesus. He is saying, “the resurrection proves that Jesus was not a mere man—even a great man—like King David was—b/c David died and was buried and we all know where his grave is. But Jesus did something that no one who is ONLY a man could do: he rose from the grave. Thus, Jesus himself is the Lord. He is God who had become a man. And he is reigning now as Lord of all.”

In fact, **Ps 110:1** became a key text in the NT (there are 21 quotations or allusions to it in most of the NT writings). The importance of this to the early Christian writers was profound, *especially given their own context of Jewish monotheism*. The Jews of that day, like Muslims today, were fiercely monotheistic. They considered it blasphemy to equate any man with God. However, *against their own upbringing and everything they had been taught to believe*, the evidence of Jesus’ life and the resurrection compelled those early Jews to conclude that **Ps 110:1** does not mean simply that the Messiah is given a position of honor *beside* the divine throne, where he sits inactively. Rather, Jesus is *on* the divine throne itself, exercising God’s own rule over all things.

Consequently, throughout the NT we see OT passages that refer to God being applied to Jesus. Just as in the OT God is referred to as “I AM,” as “Lord,” as “God,” as “First and Last,” as “Alpha and Omega,” as “Creator,” as “Giver of life,” so in the NT all those descriptions—and more—are said of Jesus.

The resurrection is the great fact of history that everyone—Christian or nonChristian—has to come to grips with. It puts Jesus in a category different from every other human being who has ever lived.

Rom 1:1-4 [READ] This passage tells us at least 4 important things:

- First, v.1 tells us that the gospel is God’s gospel. The gospel does not primarily deal with our needs—how can I live a better life, overcome my hang-ups, make sense of my existence—although it may include these. The gospel is God’s way of dealing with the issue of how a holy and just God, can justify and accept sinful people like us.
- Second, according to v.2 the gospel is implicit in the OT. When Paul wrote, “the Scriptures” were the OT. The entire Bible tells a consistent, unfolding story. What was begun or hinted at in the OT is explained and made manifest in the NT.
- Third, v.3 makes clear that subject matter of the gospel is about the Son in a way that it is not about the Father, or the Holy Spirit, or the believer. IOW, the gospel—what Christians believe—revolves around the person and work of Jesus: who he is and what he does.
- Fourth, v.4 points out that the central fact of the gospel is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. In **Rom 1:4** Paul says that the resurrection identified Jesus as the Son of God. The resurrection is central because it presupposes the reason for and significance of his death and because it stands as the new beginning of the human race. Thus, **Rom 6:4** tells us that through Christ’s resurrection we enter into newness of life.

Rom 10:9 [READ] Again, note that the bottom line of Christian belief comes down to who Jesus is—he is Lord—and the resurrection, since the resurrection verifies who Jesus is and verifies everything Jesus said and did. The resurrection validates Jesus in a way that the identity and teachings of no other religious leader or teacher in history—not Buddha, not Muhammad, not anyone—could be validated.

1 Cor 15:1-8 [READ] This passage is significant for at least 2 reasons:

- First, it makes explicit the special purpose of Christ’s death. V.3—He died for our sins. That, of course, is said again and again throughout the Bible. But we need to understand its importance. It means that, as we hinted at when we looked at **Rom 1**, mankind has a problem that we cannot solve on our own: namely, there is a perfect, creator God, whose standards are perfect love, righteousness, and holiness. Then there’s us, who have something wrong with our innermost being, our heart. That is called the power of indwelling sin. The problem for us is that, as the Bible says again and again, “the person who sins will die”—and not just temporal, physical death, but what the Bible calls the “second death” at the judgment: namely, eternal separation from God and from all that is good, forever.

Our problem is that we can't fix our own heart or change our nature by ourselves. We can't even meet our own standards, let alone God's. And we can't earn our way to get into heaven, because even the good things we do arise out of mixed motives. It would be easier to try to jump from here to the moon than to try to earn our way to heaven—because the problem is inside of us.

That's why, if God is going to accept and reconcile with us, he himself would have to pay the price that God demands for our sin. That's why he came to earth in the person of Jesus: to live the life we should have lived, to die the death we should have died, and to pay the price for our sin that otherwise we would have to pay. And only Jesus could do that, because he never sinned. Buddha couldn't do that and Muhammad couldn't do that—and they never claimed to—because they, like all of us, had their own sins to contend with. Jesus did for us what we could not do for ourselves. That's why, as **Acts 2** told us, Jesus' death was part of the predetermined plan of God. God announced that plan in advance in the OT. As Both **Rom 1** and **1 Cor 15** say, what Jesus did was **“according to the Scriptures.”** Why did God have this predetermined plan? Because he loves us.

- The second significant aspect of 1 Cor 15 is its emphasis on the resurrection. But there is an added fact that Paul gives us: he tells us that the resurrection was not done in secret. Jesus' post-resurrection appearances were public in front of witnesses. So when Paul says in v.6 that **“He appeared to more than 500 brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now,”** what he's saying is “It's not just me who's telling you this but there are more than 500 eyewitnesses. They were there. They saw Him. They are not stupid, gullible people any more than you are. So if you don't believe me, go ask them.”

PROP: So how can we summarize what these passages are telling us is the bottom line of Christian belief—the X axis of faith? I think we can summarize by saying: **“Jesus is Lord over all, and He proved it by his resurrection from the dead.”**

II. What are the implications of this?

- First, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the central, most important fact of history. It validates who Jesus is, it validates everything he said, and it validates what he did. The resurrection is the fact that everyone needs to come to grips with. If you are following any other religion or philosophy other than Christ and Christianity, there may be many good and even noble things in that religion or philosophy, but ultimately you are doomed—because the Bible makes clear—and Christ himself made clear—that when we die we do not go out of existence. Instead, we will all face the judgment of our lives, and will all spend eternity in either what the Bible calls the new earth or the lake of fire. And whether we can stand in the judgment, and where we will spend our eternity is based on our relationship, or lack of relationship, with Jesus Christ.
- Second, the resurrection shows that Christianity is fundamentally unlike any other religion. All other religions, in essence, are philosophies or ethical teachings with rules of conduct that one is to embrace. Although religions like Buddhism or Islam were founded by Buddha and Muhammad, who are revered by Buddhists and Muslims, such religions to a large degree stand apart from their founders. IOW, if it were shown that most of what was said about them is legendary—Buddhism and Islam would continue pretty much unimpaired, b/c they are primarily ethical teachings about what one has to do.

Not so with Christianity. Christianity is not so much about a teaching as it is about a person. Without Christ, there is no Christianity. The reason is that all other religions essentially are about what *you* have to do to achieve nirvana or get to heaven. Christianity alone says “there's nothing you can do”—its all about what Christ has done for you. And Christianity stands or falls on a historical fact: the resurrection of Jesus Christ. As Paul clearly said in **1 Cor 15:14: “If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain.”**

- Third, the resurrection gives us hope. In **1 Cor 15** Paul tells us that Christ is the “first fruits” of the resurrection. IOW, because he rose from the dead we can have confidence that, if we belong to him, he will likewise make us alive and raise us. This is not just “hope against hope” like what Natalie Wood said in “Miracle on 34th Street”: “I believe, I believe, I know it's silly but I believe.” No. Christ is trustworthy. And he proved it. He loves us so much he died for us, and he rose from the dead, and appeared in front of multiple eyewitnesses, not to just leave us on our own but to bring us with him.
- Indeed, the resurrection gives us far more than hope for “pie in the sky by and by after we die.”

As with those first disciples who were fearful and afraid because they saw their Jesus killed by a brutal state power, the resurrection tells *us* “you don't have to be afraid of anything anymore, not even death itself, because Jesus is here, now; he is with us; he is alive.

As with Peter, the resurrection tells *us* that we don't have to go through life feeling guilty anymore because of our failures and insufficiencies, even how we've failed God and those closest to us, because Jesus died for us and rose for us—indeed, he rose *because* we were failures.

As with Thomas, the resurrection tells *us* that we don't have to doubt anymore but can live lives with faith and hope and joy because our Lord lives.

And because of the resurrection we now have a reason to live—indeed, a reason to die. Life has meaning and purpose because we are part of this great plan and are connected to the Lord himself who knows us, is with us, and is leading us.

CONCL: The X axis of faith is all about Jesus: who he is—He is the Lord of all—and what he does. Who he is and what he does are validated by the most significant fact of history: the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. Think about the implications of this for your own life. If you have not yet considered the implications of the resurrection and have not yet become joined to Jesus through faith, then why not? The fact that Jesus is Lord of all and rose from the dead also have implications for how we live. We can't say "Jesus is the Lord" but then not do what he says, b/c then your life proves that he is *not* really your Lord. If you are a Christian but are living your life as if Jesus did *not* rise from the dead and is *not* alive and present right here, right now, then ask yourself why? But that brings into play the Y axis of faith, our actions, and we will deal with that next week.