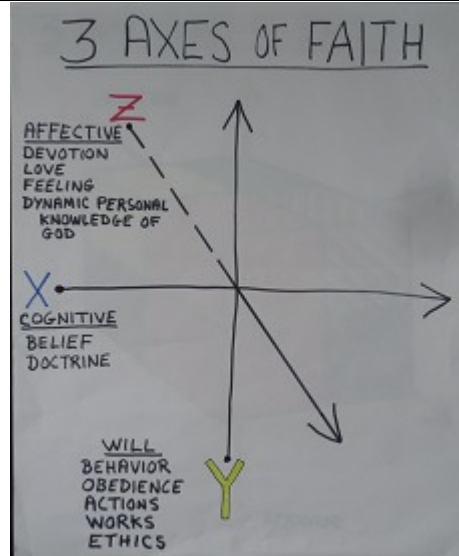


John 15:4-11; John 15:12-15; John 17:3; John 21:15-17—THE THREE AXES OF FAITH: DEVOTION

INTRO: For the last two weeks we have been considering the question: “What is the nature of true, saving faith?” What does real Christian faith look like? This is important for both nonbelievers and believers to know. Nonbelievers need to know what they might be getting into or what they are rejecting. Believers need to be able to assess their own lives and faith-walks to see “am I really in the faith” and to determine where they are weak and where they are strong.

Our template is that there are three basic axes or dimensions of real Christian faith [CHART]:



a cognitive aspect—what we believe; a behavioral aspect—what we do; and an affective aspect—where does our heart lie/what are we devoted to. So far we have seen that real faith involves belief in who Jesus is and what he does—Jesus is Lord of all. However, real faith is not just mental acknowledgement of certain doctrines. Real faith transforms our lives and changes our behavior because how we live proves what we believe.

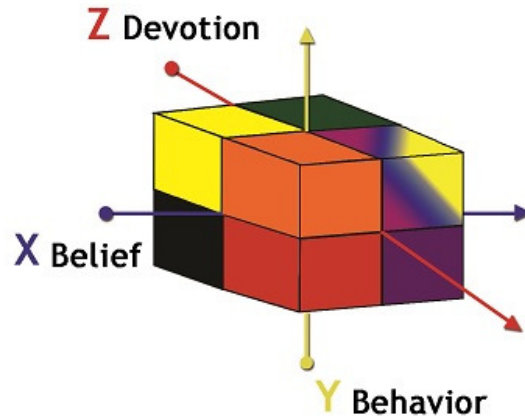
As we will see this week, right belief in Jesus (the X axis)—even combined with right action (the Y axis)—while necessary, is not sufficient. Jesus says real faith includes our affections: devotion to God. We are not only to *believe* God and *obey* God but *love* God—trust him and have a dynamic interpersonal relationship with him. That is the Z axis. It’s sort of like the difference between being someone’s employee and being their lover.

We can see this in two “negative” examples in the Bible:

- **Matt 7:21-23 [READ]** Note that these people called Jesus “Lord.” They had the X axis of belief. Note also that they did lots of things “*in his name*”—and Jesus did not dispute that. They had the Y axis of action. But Jesus didn’t “know” them which, as we will see, means that they were not in real, loving, intimate, personal relationship with him. That depends largely on the Z axis.
- **Acts 8:9, 13, 18-21 [READ]** Simon believed and was baptized and quit his lifestyle of practicing magic. Yet his heart was not right before God.

We can see the interaction of the 3 dimensions of faith in the following diagram [CUBE CHART]:

3 DIMENSIONS OF FAITH



This is why Jesus talks about the “narrow way that leads to life” because only 1/8 of the compartments make it—because real Christian faith involves the head (X axis), the hands (Y axis), and the heart (Z axis).

O/S: I want to follow the same basic format today as I have followed the last two weeks, namely, as we consider the Z axis of faith, I will: (1) Look at 4 brief passages in the Bible that go to the heart of the devotional component of the Christian faith; and (2) Consider some of the implications of this for our lives.

I. Scriptural bases of the Z axis of faith.

As was true with the X and Y axes of faith, lots of passages implicate the Z axis of love and devotion. But I want to focus on just 4, all drawn from the Gospel of John, since John is sometimes called the “apostle of love.”

John 15:4-11. [READ] Notice what Jesus is saying here:

- In vv.4-6 he talks about “abiding” (living, remaining, dwelling, staying) *in him*. His language is more intimate even than a marriage relationship because he talks about the vine and the branches. A vine and branches are intimately connected to each other. They are one plant. It is that kind of closeness that Jesus calls for in our relationship with him.
- In vv.9-11 he talks about abiding in his love so that our joy may be full. Love and joy are the height of human relationships. Can you imagine experiencing and feeling, giving and sharing, love and joy *all the time*? That’s hard for us to imagine—but that’s what he has for us and that’s the nature of the relationship he wants with us. True Christian faith is not merely belief. It’s not merely right actions. It’s a dynamic, abiding, intimate and personal relationship with Jesus based in love.
- But notice how, as we see on the chart, all three axes or dimensions of faith are intimately connected and interrelated. In v.7 Jesus talks about his words abiding in us (that brings in the X axis of belief). In vv.8-9 he talks about our bearing much fruit and keeping his commands (that brings in the Y axis of behavior). And in vv.4-6 and 9-11 he talks about “abiding,” oneness, love and joy (that’s the Z axis).

John 15:12-15. [READ]

- Back in v.5 Jesus had used the example of the vine and branches to express the intimate relationship he wants with us. Here in v.15 Jesus uses another example: the difference between a master and slave and the relationship between two close friends. This is pure Z axis. And the closeness of the relationship he calls us to is seen in v.13 where he says, **“Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.”** Jesus, of course, did that for us. So how can we *not* trust him with our lives?
- But note again that all 3 axes of faith are connected. Vv.12, 14 and 15 all talk about Jesus’ commands and what he has made known to us. That implicates the X axis of belief and doctrine. Vv.12 and 14 talk about doing what he has told us to do and especially loving one another. That is the Y axis of behavior and obedience, with its most important application being: how we treat other people.

John 17:3. [READ] You may be surprised to know that this verse is the only explicit definition of “eternal life” in the Bible. You may think that “knowing” God and Jesus Christ means simply “head knowledge.” But that is not correct. While the belief, doctrine, or knowledge component is certainly involved, in the Bible to “know” someone typically entails an intimate, personal, interactive relationship. To “know” the only true God and Jesus Christ is not just to know “about” them. Unbelievers or, according to **Jas 2**, even demons, can know a lot about them. But to truly know someone is to be in a relationship of fellowship and trust with them. That’s why in **Matt 7**, even though people called Jesus “Lord” and did things in his name, Jesus said **“I never knew you.”** Because he is Lord of all Jesus of course knew all about those people—but they were not in *relationship* with him.

It’s kind of like in Genesis where it says **“And Adam knew his wife.”** That doesn’t just mean he knew who she was or even that he knew a lot about her—but that he was intimate with her. The church is called the bride and wife of Christ—because Christ likewise wants a personal, loving, intimate relationship with us.

John 21:15-17. [READ] Note that, after the resurrection when Jesus was seeking to restore fellowship with Peter after Peter’s great denial of Jesus, Jesus focuses on that which matters most: **“Do you love me?”** That’s the great question that confronts each one of us as well. Notice that Jesus asks that question 3X. And after Peter’s 3 assurances that he does love Jesus, Jesus says, **“Tend my sheep.”** In effect, Jesus is telling Peter that Peter’s new role and authority stem not so much from his belief (the X axis) or his zeal (the Y axis), but from his love for Jesus (the Z axis). The same is true for us. If we truly love Jesus, we *will* know or learn about him and know or learn what he says (the X axis) and will do what he tells us to do (the Y axis).

It’s like any loving relationship: H & W; boyfriend/girlfriend; or even close family or friends. If you truly love someone, you want to know more and more about them—what makes them tick, what do they like and don’t like. And then, you want to do things that you know please them.

PROP: All of these passages are telling us that: Love and devotion to Christ are *central* to true, saving faith.

II. Implications of the Z axis of faith.

There are 2 main implications of the Z axis of love/devotion/a dynamic interpersonal knowledge of God that I would like to highlight.

- First, some people may think that love and devotion are simply “feelings” that you cannot control: either you have them or you don’t. That is not correct. God can change our feelings. They *can* be controlled. After all, Jesus commanded us in **Matt 5:44** to **“love our enemies.”** In that same verse he tells us the beginning of how to do that, by praying *for* them, not against them. Martin Luther King preached a powerful sermon on “Loving Your Enemies” which you can google, and I highly recommend it.

Whether it is loving our enemies or any change in attitude that we need to make—a change in attitude toward Jesus, toward others, or toward ourselves—one great help is the fact, as we have seen, the 3 axes of faith are all interrelated. Consequently, if you know your attitude or feelings are wrong, you can ask “Can I justify this theologically?” That brings in the X axis and is the starting point for changing your thinking, as Paul says in **Rom 12:2**, **“be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”** Or, if you know that some feeling or attitude is wrong, you can start changing your behavior. As **Rom 12:1** says, **“present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice.”** That’s the Y axis. IOW, as we change our thinking and our actions to conform to Christ, our feelings will change too.

- Second, we need to see the huge—indeed, overwhelming—connection between love for God and love for people. In **Matt 22** Jesus was asked, “What is the greatest commandment?” And what did he say? But then he immediately said that the 2nd greatest commandment is like it. And what is that? Yes. “Love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself.” And then he said, “on these 2 commands the entire Bible is based.”

But I want you to see something very important. Turn to **1 John 4:20 [READ]**. What is John saying here? He’s saying, “How we do the 2nd command—loving our neighbor—is the proof and the test for whether we are really doing the 1st command, loving God.” Why is that the case? I think it is because every human being has been created in the IOG. And how we treat God’s image shows what we really think of him.

This idea that how we treat people shows what we really think of God is kind of like when they lowered the paralyzed man through the roof for Jesus to heal. Jesus told the man, “Your sins are forgiven.” And the Pharisees said, “Who does he think he is, forgiving sins. Only God can do that.” So

Jesus said, “What’s easier to say: ‘Your sins are forgiven’ or to tell this paralyzed man ‘rise, take up your bed and walk.’?” Obviously, it’s easier to say “your sins are forgiven,” because how do you know. Sin and forgiveness are spiritual concepts, not physical, visible ones. It’s harder to say “rise, take up your bed and walk” because the guy can’t do that—he’s paralyzed. So Jesus said, “To prove to you that I DO have the authority to forgive sins, I say to you ‘rise, take up your bed and walk’”—and the man did. That was the outward, visible sign of Christ’s inward, spiritual power. Likewise, our demonstrating love for others is the outward, visible sign of our inward, spiritual state and our love for God.

As Christians we HAVE to see that love and devotion to Christ—as demonstrated by the love we show to others—is CENTRAL to our faith. How central is love?

1. So central is love that according to **1 John 4:8** “**the one who does not love does not know God.**”
2. So central is love that it is directly linked with the forgiveness of our sins in **Luke 7**.
3. So central is love that in **1 Tim 1:5** Paul says that the “goal” of Christian teaching is “**love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.**”
4. So central is love that **Rom 13** says the entire law is fulfilled in the statement, “**you shall love your neighbor as yourself.**”
5. So central is love that on the night before He died, in **John 13:34** Jesus gave His disciples a “new commandment.” The “new commandment” was “**love one another, even as I have loved you.**”
6. So central is love that in **John 13:35** Jesus said that “**love for one another**” is the *one sign* by which “**all men will know that you are My disciples.**”
7. So central is love that in **1 Cor 12-13** Paul calls it the “**more excellent way,**” greater than faith and hope.
8. So central is love that Peter says in **1 Pet 4:8** that “**Fervent love for one another**” is to be shown “**above all**” else.
9. So central is love that it is the first of the “**fruit of the Spirit**” listed in **Gal 5**, and summarizes all of the “fruit of the Spirit.”
10. So central is love that **Jas 2:8** calls it “**the royal law.**” This royal law of love is very practical. Jesus summarized it in **Matt 7:12** by saying “**In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.**”

CONCL: Love and devotion to Christ are *central* to true, saving faith. But love and devotion to Christ CANNOT be had or shown absent demonstrating love and devotion to people. The 3 axes or dimensions of Christian faith are all intimately connected and interrelated.

Our faith and belief are in Jesus Christ who is Lord of all, who has done for us what we could not do for ourselves, and who is now actively reigning in us. But our faith does not make us passive, but eager and active builders of the kingdom as we perceive his leading and respond in obedient acts of service and love. And because of all he has done for us and is doing in us and through us, our love and devotion to him grows—and THAT is proven by how we love others who all bear his image.

That is what true Christian faith means. It is holistic and affects all aspects of our lives: our head, our hands, and our heart. To the extent that we are faithful, people will see it and will be drawn by the beauty of Christ that they see in us.