

Is Faith a Decision?

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Introduction

The Significance of the Topic

I presented a paper at this conference last year titled “Commands to Believe: An Objection to Passive Faith?” In it, I argued that the existence of commands to believer does not pose an obstacle to the passive faith view. The paper was well received, but the overwhelming majority of people that responded in exactly the same way: “Good paper, but useless, because there is no need to grant the premise.” The premise in question was twofold: first, that if faith is a decision, an act of the will, then faith is a work, and second, that faith must therefore be passive, not an act of the will but something experienced by the person apart from the exercise of the will.

Proving that premise was not within the scope of last year’s paper; however, it became obvious that in order for that paper to be of any use to anyone, the above premise had to be demonstrated first. Hence this paper.

Terminology

A few items of terminology need to be settled at the outset in order to avoid serious misunderstanding. First of all, faith and belief are regarded in this paper as entirely equivalent terms. The New Testament words πιστις (faith)¹ and πιστευω (to believe) are merely noun and verb forms of the same word: *belief* and *to believe* would be appropriate English analogues. We English speakers have been blessed with the additional noun *faith* only because our language has both Germanic and Latinate roots.²

Second, all faith is propositional and of one kind only. In other words, there is no distinction between *belief in* a person and *belief that* a certain proposition is true. The former is linguistic shorthand for a set of propositions defined by the circumstances in which it is uttered.³

¹ It is worth noting that a few of the occurrences of πιστις mean *faithfulness*, not *faith*. The legitimacy of that definition in a few cases notwithstanding, the context generally militates against the increasingly popular tendency to translate ο πιστις του Χριστου *the faithfulness of Christ* rather than *the faith of (i.e. faith in) Christ*.

² *Believe* comes from the Anglic roots of Old English, *faith* from Latin.

³ Generally, believing *in* a person means believing *that* the person is reliable, or is telling the truth, or will be successful in some given endeavor, or perhaps all of the above.

Therefore, every belief can be reduced to a proposition or a complex of propositions. Further, there are not many kinds of faith. *Saving faith* is merely faith in a saving proposition; *nonsaving faith* is faith in a proposition that does not save. These ideas have been ably defended in Gordon Clark's *Faith and Saving Faith*, so they will be assumed here.⁴

Third, we need to dispose of a common misconception as to the nature of faith. Within modern culture, people often suppose that faith is what fills the gap between one's beliefs and the evidence for them.⁵ In other words, when one cannot get all the way to his beliefs based on evidence alone, he takes "leap of faith" to bridge the gap between what he can prove with evidence and what he believes. This conception of faith as a leap into the subjective murk cannot be substantiated biblically. This idea requires that one differentiate between *faith* and *belief*, in itself an impossible distinction to maintain in the New Testament. Further, it generally takes an unduly restrictive view of what constitutes evidence. Notably absent from the list of "real" evidence is argument from (divine) authority. Finally, this "faith as a leap" view fails to understand that there are real reasons for believing, that when a person is convinced that something is true, he is convinced on evidence that is (by definition) sufficient to convince him. If he is not convinced, then he cannot honestly say he believes.

Lastly, we have to define two key terms describing the two competing views of faith with which this paper deals. *Decisional faith* will describe the notion that faith is an act of the will, that a person decides to believe as he decides to do anything else. *Passive faith* will describe the competing understanding of faith, that the will is not involved in believing, that the person is not acting, but being acted upon. On this view, faith is being persuaded or convinced of something. It is not a choice, but rather the natural and involuntary result of the mind considering sufficient evidence. This understanding of faith is entirely passive: the person who believes is not acting, but rather he is acted upon.

The Mission of this Paper

As mentioned in the beginning of this section, this paper is written to address a lack in my paper from last year. In brief, the primary mission of this paper is to answer the question, "Is faith a decision?" with a resounding "NO!" If this paper is successful, when I have finished you will see the same tensions that I saw, and perhaps favor the resolution I have favored.

However, this paper also has a secondary mission. I have shifted position because I believe my former understanding of the nature of faith was thoroughly untenable, at odds with Scripture and common sense, and the passive faith view is not. But the concept of passive faith as this paper will explain it is in some senses a "baby" idea – at least in my own understanding. As Dr. Lewis said of his paper on Monday night, this also is a work in progress. I have not yet explored all the ramifications of it, so the model may well have its little hiccups as we go along. It may even be entirely false (although I doubt it).

⁴ See also John Niemelä's excellent series of articles on James 2 for a discussion of how a one-kind-of-faith view makes sense in that passage.

⁵ Note also that

With that in mind, the secondary mission of the paper is to elicit critique and begin to determine whether this understanding of the nature of faith can really stand the test of Scripture. I trust in this gathering that there will be no lack of willingness to assist me in this fashion.

A Brief Argument

The tension inherent in a decisional soteriology is evident in the following statements:

- “Salvation is not of works – you can’t do anything to get it.”
- “The only thing you have to do is believe.”

Of course, a decisional approach is usually presented a little more smoothly, and if the evangelist has any finesse at all, he knows better than to say those two statements back to back. However, those two statements are a legitimate characterization of the approach. “Works” are things that we do. If a person receives eternal life by making a choice to do so, he is doing something: choosing. That is an act the person deliberately commits. *It is a work*. Only a long history of ignoring this contradiction prevents us from seeing this more clearly.

Argument from Normal Usage

It has pleased God to communicate to us using human words, ordered in accord with human grammar, arranged in human literary forms. Classical Hebrew is not a heavenly language used only in revelation from God, and some of the older philologists notwithstanding, there is no “Holy Spirit Greek” – God inspired the New Testament in *Koine*, the common language of the people. Narrative, poetry, biography, and epistle are not genres found only in Biblical literature.⁶ Generally speaking, we expect to find words and concepts used in their everyday senses in Scripture. Of course there are technical terms in the Scriptures, but they are relatively few, and amply defined in their contexts.⁷ But in general, the reader of Scripture expects the concepts employed in Scripture to be used in a manner at least closely related to their everyday senses unless the context requires a redefinition.

Now in everyday usage, belief is generally understood to be compelled by evidence rather than being a choice. When a man has been up until 4:00 a.m., and the alarm clock goes off at 7:00 a.m., the man does *not* want to believe that it is already time to get up. Yet he does believe it, quite apart from any conscious choice on his part. When that same man walks outside and sees the sun in the sky, he believes – again, quite apart from any act of the will – that it is day. He has been persuaded by overwhelming evidence. Now there are people in the world who will look up, see the sun, and in all honesty deny that it is day. We have a term for people like that: psychotic. Such people have lost contact with reality. A person who cannot be persuaded against his will is mentally ill.

⁶ We are all familiar with examples of narrative, poetry and biography. Expository letters are harder to come by in the modern world, but examples exist: Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet* and Christopher Hitchens’ *Letters to a Young Contrarian* are two published examples.

⁷ Most of the putative technical terms in Scripture would mean some very funny things if their alleged “technical” definition were ever applied consistently. For example, many people understand “saved” as a technical term referring to the reception of eternal life. This understanding works well in Eph. 2, but yields rather suspect results in Rom.10, Jas. 2, and Phil. 2.

Likewise, a person cannot simply choose to believe something because he wants to. To take another example, a businessman who discovers that his partner is keeping two sets of books, and that a lot of money seems to be missing, may want to believe that there is nothing wrong, that there is a perfectly reasonable, perfectly innocent explanation. But he's going to have a hard time believing any explanation his partner puts forward. The same phenomenon can be observed in a wife who thinks her husband was at a business meeting in Chicago on January 29-31, only to find a charge on his Visa bill for a room for two at the San Diego Hilton on those dates. In both of these cases, an eavesdropper is likely to hear the statement, "I really wish I could believe you, but I can't!"

Belief in everyday usage is passive: a person is acted upon by the evidence. He may want to believe, but the evidence is insufficient. He may want very much not to believe, but the evidence is overwhelming. In both cases, the evidence prevails over what the person wants. The person does not choose his belief.⁸

Now, in the shady business partner example above, the honest partner (if he is unwilling to face the facts) might say to his partner, "I've decided to believe your explanation." But let us consider what this statement actually signifies. It means that the honest partner is going to live as if his partner's explanation were valid, as if everything really is okay. But the bare fact that he has to *decide* to "believe" his partner indicates that he is not persuaded that his partner is telling the truth. *He does not believe his partner at all: he is just playing mind games with himself.*

This is the normal understanding of belief in everyday life. When we approach Scripture, we ought to expect the concept to be applied in the same way, unless there is something in Scripture that forces a modification. The question then arises as to whether there are passages that do force us to a decisional understanding of faith (or at least refute a passive understanding of faith). Some passages that are commonly adduced as counterexamples to passive faith will be discussed later in the paper.

Argument from Mental Act

Decisional faith, by definition, is a mental act that a person must commit through an exercise of the will. A person has to choose to commit the "act of faith" or he does not believe. This section will argue that a mental act is (in biblical terms) a work. Obviously, if this can be established, then the concept of decisional faith cannot work in Scripture, because Scripture defines faith in sharp contrast to works.

It is important to pause for a moment at this point and consider the nature of the argument. Everyone in the debate acknowledges that faith and works are mutually exclusive

⁸ The old saw, "A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still" applies to situations where the man is being convinced to do something, but not to situations where the man is being persuaded to believe something. A man who is pressured into buying a junky vacuum cleaner by a door-to-door salesman may begin by thinking the item is junk. After the salesman has made his pitch, the customer may still think the vacuum cleaner is junk, but may allow himself to be persuaded to buy one anyway, because he is not good at resisting high-pressure sales tactics. He has been persuaded to act in a certain manner, but his opinion has not changed. But if the salesman sets out to convince him that the vacuum cleaner really is high quality, and the salesman really succeeds, then the man is manifestly *not* of the same opinion still.

with respect to receiving eternal life. Rom.4:5, Eph.2:8-9, Titus 3:5 and many other Scriptures make clear statements to that effect. This is the foundation of the argument of this section.

But the Bible's definitions of faith and works may not coincide perfectly with ours. It is therefore a fair question whether one's definition of faith overlaps with the biblical definition of work. Consider the now infamous quote, "I did not have sex with that woman." The claim is that the definition of "what I did" does not overlap at all with the definition of "sex." Now when the prosecution began asking what the exact definitions of "what I did" and "sex" were, we discovered that in point of fact there was considerable overlap.

If this paper can demonstrate that the decisional understanding of faith causes overlap between the definition of *work* and that of *faith*, then clearly there is something wrong with the definitions of the terms under that understanding.

To what sorts of things does Scripture apply the word "work"? Of course the primary usage of the word is of overt physical acts. "Work" is also applied to teaching in 2Jn. 11 and 3Jn. 10. But is it also applied to purely mental acts?⁹ The answer is yes. In Gal.5:19-21, Paul lists the "works" of the flesh. These are human works, things that people do, and within them Paul includes certain mental acts: hatred, envy, jealousies and selfish ambitions. Of course all these things are often (although not always) manifested in the physical realm, but merely harboring them in the mind certainly qualifies as doing them.

There is another passage that does something similar. In Eph. 5, Paul lists a number of sins in vv. 3-4, including covetousness, which is certainly a mental act, and filthiness, which is not entirely mental, but certainly has a mental component. He tells them that those who practice these things have no inheritance in the kingdom, but rather God's wrath comes on believers because of these things. On that basis Paul urges them not to partake in those sins and the wrath that attends them (v. 7), because those sins no longer express the reality of who these Ephesian believers are (vv.8-10). Paul then reiterates the command: "and have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them...". Is Paul still referring to those sins he named back in vv. 3-4? Yes indeed – note how v.4 says that these sins are not even to be named among believers, and v. 12 says it is shameful even to speak of the "unfruitful works of darkness." Paul has not moved on to a new topic; he is still looking at the sins he discussed at the beginning – and he calls them "works of darkness." The genitive "darkness" describes the nature of these works; it does not state the doer. Paul's addressees may do these works – it is precisely to avoid that situation that Paul writes this admonition, urging his readers *not* to partake in these sins.

So in two passages Paul uses "work" of mental acts that people commit. We may conclude that the biblical concept of "work" allows for actual physical acts, including keeping the Law, just speaking, or even a mental act. This allows us to construct the following argument, which is fatal to decisional faith.

⁹ It is highly questionable whether Scripture draws a clear line between mental acts and physical acts as this paper has done. By treating them as essentially separable categories, this paper has adopted a worst-case scenario for its own argument. The closer the connection between mental and physical acts, the worse off a decisional faith advocate is going to be.

Set A

1. Mental act = a non-physical act of the will.
2. Envy, hatred selfish ambitions and jealousies are mental acts (they are non-physical, and one chooses them).
3. Paul uses $\epsilon\rho\gamma\alpha$ to describe envy, hatred, and jealousies.
4. “Not of $\epsilon\rho\gamma\alpha$ ” categorically excludes mental acts from being the condition of salvation.¹⁰

Set B

1. “Not of erga” categorically excludes mental acts from being the condition of salvation.
2. Decisional faith is a mental act.
3. Therefore, decisional faith is not a condition of salvation.

Set C

1. Decisional faith is not a condition of salvation.
2. Faith is the condition of salvation.
3. Therefore, the faith that is the condition of salvation is not decisional faith.

Set D (just for giggles)

1. There are not multiple types of faith in Scripture.
2. The faith that is the condition of salvation is not decisional faith.
3. Therefore, decisional faith does not exist.

Argument from Gift and Reward

As advocates of the free grace gospel, we are fond of saying that eternal life is a gift, not just a great deal. This section will consider whether eternal life can truly be a gift if it is acquired through decisional faith.

¹⁰ Note that this is only true if Paul’s usage of $\epsilon\rho\gamma\alpha$ in Eph.2:8-9, Rom.4:5, etc. includes mental acts within its range of meaning. However, Paul has clearly established that mental acts can fall within the range of meaning of $\epsilon\rho\gamma\alpha$. Absent some compelling contextual reason to contract the range of meaning, we have to conclude that mental acts are included.

Let us say that a someone hires an unskilled laborer to do a job for him. The boss knows nothing about the man's abilities, and he has other candidates with a proven ability to do the job. However, he also knows that this candidate needs the job desperately, which the other candidates do not. In other words, he has hired this candidate out of grace. The employer has contracted to pay \$10/hour. For every hour the laborer works, he agrees to pay \$10. At the end of two weeks, if the laborer has worked 80 hours, then the employer owes \$800. Now while his hiring the laborer certainly was grace, the \$800 is not. Having voluntarily taken on the obligation to pay at a given rate, he now must perform what he has promised – in this case, coughing up the \$800.

Now if a mere man is thus obligated to perform what he has promised, and if a promised return on an act performed becomes a debt because of that obligation, then how much more is the immutable God obligated to perform what He has promised, and once the reward is promised and the rewardable act performed, how is it not likewise a debt?

Now, if the condition of being regenerated is that a man perform a deliberate act of the will, how, exactly, does this differ from the above example? The decisional understanding of faith takes a gift and makes it into a good deal through their poor definition of faith.

Consider the semantics of the statement “If you do x, I will give you y as a gift.” Better still, “If you choose x, I will give you y as a gift.” Under normal circumstances, this is an eminently silly statement, because if one has to do something for y, it is not a gift at all. It may be a screaming bargain, if x is easy and y is valuable – but it can hardly be called free.

Do the semantics of this it work differently if the condition is involuntary? Yes. In that case, the statement would change to, “If you experience x, I will give you y as a gift.” This is completely intelligible. In sum, since eternal life is promised to all who believe the gospel message, if belief is a choice, then eternal life is not a gift, but a reward.

The Passive Faith View

Introduction

If Decisional Faith is not a tenable understanding of the biblical concept of faith, then we must have something with which to replace it. I propose in its place the concept of Passive Faith – a faith that (as the name implies) is entirely passive, that is, the person is not acting, but is acted upon.¹¹

¹¹ It will help to place passive faith within an overall soteriology. I am indebted to Steve Andrew for his paper in last year's conference, in which he presented the acronym PROPER as a mnemonic for six points of a distinctive free grace soteriology, as follows:

- Preeminent Grace
- Responsible Agency
- Ontological Freedom
- Passive Faith
- Eternal Security
- Rewards for Obedience

This section will introduce the basics of the passive faith view. The first three parts are arranged as a set of responses to common questions – a Passive Faith FAQ, so to speak. The latter two parts deal with the idea of passive faith seen in the Scriptures and common objections to passive faith, respectively.

What is Faith?

Faith is belief. It is being persuaded or convinced of something. It is not a choice, but rather the natural and involuntary result of the mind considering sufficient evidence. This understanding of faith is entirely passive: the person who believes is not acting, but rather he is acted upon.

The idea of passive faith stands in sharp contrast to the notion of active, or decisional, faith. A decisional faith view holds that faith is a mental act, a choice, a deliberate act of the will. It is important to understand that although some Reformed theologians have indicated a kind of passivity in faith, both Reformed theology and Arminianism are utterly devoted to a decisional faith. With Arminians, this is obvious: they believe that fallen man has the ability to choose good rather than evil, to choose God deliberately and consciously, and they believe that belief in the gospel is just such a choice. The Reformed notion of faith is a little more convoluted. Reformed doctrine holds that regeneration precedes faith, and this betrays their view of faith as an active view. Regeneration, they say, is totally passive – a fallen man is in entire rebellion against God, and God chooses, for reasons that have nothing whatever to do with that man, to regenerate him. That man is acted upon in regeneration; he does not act. If the Reformed view of faith were truly passive, then there would be no reason why faith could not precede regeneration, yet they are adamant that it does. This is because they view faith as an act of the will, a deliberate choice toward God, and therefore a choice that a totally depraved man could never make. For this reason, he must first be regenerated, and only then can he believe.¹²

The passive understanding of faith raises two particularly important further questions: since one does not choose to believe a given proposition, how does one believe? And how does one disbelieve?

How does one Believe?

Again, we begin with the understanding that faith is the natural and entirely involuntary result of the mind considering sufficient evidence.¹³ How, exactly, does this take place? Foremost, the Holy Spirit works. No one receives eternal life apart from being drawn by the Father.¹⁴

On the human side, although man does not choose to believe, he possesses the constitutional ability to believe.¹⁵ there are a number of precursors to belief. First, of course, one

¹² For a biblical refutation of the Reformed notion that regeneration precedes faith, see my article “Reverse-Engineered Outlining: A Method for Epistolary Exegesis” in *CTS Journal* 7:2

¹³ Capacity for belief is a natural adjunct to the possession of intellect.

¹⁴ Jn. 6:44. Note that a Calvinist interpretation has to assume the equivalence of the Father drawing people and the Father giving people to the Son, among other things.

¹⁵ My paper at this conference defended constitutional ability from 2Cor. 4:4 and Mt. 13:4, 19 // Mk. 4:4, 15 // Lu. 8:12. I will not repeat that defense here.

must hear the proposition to be believed.¹⁶ Second, one must understand the proposition. Clearly, one cannot believe a proposition if one does not understand the meaning of it.¹⁷ But merely hearing and understanding are not enough. Suppose this paper were a presentation of the notion that the earth is flat. The concept could be presented with great clarity, so that the entire audience heard and understood the paper's contention and arguments. But how many would spend even a tenth of a second considering the possibility that the proposition "the earth is flat" is really true? Obviously, the argument would be dismissed out of hand, and this brings us to the third precursor to belief: consideration. If someone is not willing to consider the possibility that the proposition is true, then he will be impervious to any argument, no matter how (objectively) telling it may be.

This brings us to an important point: there is no necessary correlation between the sufficiency of the evidence to prove a proposition (on rational, objective grounds) and the sufficiency of the evidence to convince a given person. Of course, the sufficiency of the evidence in the latter sense is an entirely subjective matter: what is sufficient to convince one person is quite different from what is sufficient to convince another. Moreover, the evidence that convinces one person may be utterly invalid on logical grounds, while the evidence that fails to convince another may be conclusive on the same logical grounds.

So once a person has heard the proposition to be believed, understood its meaning, and is willing to consider whether it is true, has he believed? He has not. He is only considering the idea; he is not yet convinced. What happens at this point is entirely involuntary – if the evidence he is considering is sufficient to convince him, then he believes, and if not, then he does not.

How does one not Believe?

This brings us to our last question: How does a person not believe? Depending on the circumstances, a person might be able to opt out of any of the preconditions for belief. Most of us have had the experience of attempting to share our faith with someone who, as soon as he realizes where the conversation is heading, ends the discussion and walks away. This person is refusing to hear the proposition. If the person hears, but does not immediately understand the meaning of the proposition, he can choose to expend the necessary time and energy to come to an understanding of the message, or he can choose to discard it out of hand as unintelligible.

But suppose the person has heard the proposition and objectively conclusive evidence for it and understood both. How is it that sometimes such people do not believe? Remember that there is no necessary correlation between sufficient evidence on objective grounds and evidence sufficient to convince a given person. He may understand the argument perfectly, but reject the conclusion out of hand for reasons that have nothing to do with the evidence presented. (I.e., he is committed to certain beliefs that entail a contradiction to the conclusion presented, and is essentially unwilling to consider the evidence against his view.

¹⁶ "And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard?" (Rom. 10:14b)

¹⁷ A frequent response to this statement is the objection "But I believe in the Trinity, and I certainly don't understand it." But surely such a person *does* understand the proposition "There is one God who eternally exists in three Persons." What he conceives of as his lack of understanding stems not from a failure to understand the proposition, but from an inability to reconcile the first half of the proposition to the second half. He understands the proposition; he just cannot explain why it is true.

Passive Faith in Scripture

Acts 28:24 is one of the key verses for this view. In this passage, Paul has presented his message to the Jewish community of Rome. Verse 28 describes the reaction of that community: “And some were persuaded by the things spoken, but others disbelieved.” Response to the gospel message is a binary issue: one believes it, or he does not. we can set up a two-box grid, and every person on earth fits into one of the two boxes. In a passage like John 3:18, the linguistics of this are simple because the same verb (πιστεῦω) is used positively and negatively:

Believes
Does not believe

The linguistic difficulty in Acts 28:24 is that two different verbs are used, one positive and one negative:

Some were persuaded	
	Others disbelieved

These verbs are essentially equivalent. The grid can be filled in, as below:

Some were persuaded	Some believed
Others were not persuaded	Others disbelieved

The two positive statements on the top row are equivalent, as are the two statements on the bottom row. Persuasion and belief are the same thing in this passage. Paul uses these same two verbs as equivalents when he writes, “For I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that day.”¹⁸

Common Objections

There are four extremely common objections to this view of faith. Each verse (or class of verses) is set forward as proof that passive faith is a fundamentally wrongheaded idea, because these passages make no sense if faith is passive. The objection is in bold, and the responses are given in plain text.

Commands to Believe

There are a number of times in the New Testament where someone is commanded to believe, or not believe, something. Why does God command people to believe if belief is not under their conscious control?

Keeping in mind that belief is a passive idea, the question can be restated, “What are the semantics of (semantically) passive imperatives?” The passive imperative “Be filled by/with the

¹⁸ 2Ti. 1:12

Holy Spirit”¹⁹ serves as a good example. As mentioned above, while belief itself is not under one’s conscious control, there are a number of preconditions that are under conscious control. A passive imperative is a command to remove resistance to the commanded event and allow it to happen.²⁰

The Active Voice

God conveyed the concept of belief with *pisteuw*, an active voice verb. If God used the active voice to describe this, why are we making it a passive idea?

There is a sharp distinction between grammatical voice and the semantics of the word being used. For example, “I die” is active voice, but except in the case of suicide, the person is not exercising volition with respect to his own death. See the chart below for a number of active voice verbs that convey passive ideas.²¹

Active Voice Verb (translation)	Semantic Equivalent for Passive Voice (translation)	Examples
Ποιέω (do)	Πάσχω (endure)	Matthew 17:20, Galatians 3:5
Εκβάλλω (cast out)	Εκπίπτω (fall out)	Acts 27:17,26,29
	Εξεληλύθεν (go out)	Luke 8:2
(none suggested ²²)	Αναβαίνω (go up, come up)	Matthew 17:27
Πείθω (persuade) ²³	Πιστεύω (believe)	Acts 28:24

For further discussion of this point, see my paper from last year’s conference.

“The Work of God”

In John 6:29 Jesus says to the crowd, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.” Does this not plainly state that faith is (in some sense) a work, and doesn’t that invalidate the argument that Rom. 4:5 and passages like it categorically refute decisional faith?

¹⁹ Eph.5:18

²⁰ For further discussion of this issue, see my paper from last year’s conference.

²¹ These examples from Nigel Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek. Vol. III: Syntax.* 53, except as noted.

²² Turner does not suggest a particular verb for this slot, although ἔλκω (draw, drag) would be appropriate.

²³ This is the disputed case, and is not listed in Turner. It is included here to show its suggested relationship to other verbs in this class.

Jesus' statement in 6:29 is a response to the question, "What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?" in v.28. The question presumes that the question is asking what the crowd can do *for* God, and Jesus is responding that all they can do *for* God at this point is believe. There are a few things wrong with this approach. First, if we read through the larger context, this crowd Jesus is addressing is not interested in spiritual things. Just 3 verses earlier, in v.26, Jesus points out that they followed Him looking for a repetition of the feeding of the 5000, not looking for spiritual truth. Further into the passage, Jesus begins an exposition of their unbelief. Opinions vary on exactly what is being said there, but in any case, the objection's interpretation of v. 29 assumes real spiritual interest, which this crowd does not have. Rather, I propose that they are asking what they must do in order to duplicate the "work of God" Jesus did the other day – multiplication of bread – and perhaps other miracles. In other words, "work of God" does not mean "work for God," but "work God does." Jesus responds, "This is the work God does, that you believe..." This response is entirely in line with a passive faith view: God persuades, and men are persuaded.

"Great Faith/Little Faith"

Under the passive faith model, faith is binary. Either you are persuaded, or you are not. If this is true, why does Scripture attach qualifiers like "great" and "little," which seem to imply degrees, to faith?

There are two different things that might be meant by "great faith." First, a person who has great faith might believe God for a great many things. We all have areas of strength and weakness in our faith – a man might find it easy to trust God for financial wellbeing, but worry about his children driving the freeway, while his wife may be the exact opposite. A person with "great faith" trusts God for many things, that is, he believes a great many truths about God. Second, "great faith" might refer to a belief that is very difficult to shake. We all have some beliefs that are embedded in the very core of our being, and others that are lightly held, from which we can easily be dislodged. If this is at issue, then a person with "great faith" may only believe one true thing about God – but *nothing* shakes that belief. Which of these ideas is uppermost in the mind of the author will be determined by the context.

"Dead Faith"

How does a passive faith model describe James' objection to "dead faith?" Doesn't his disapproval imply that there should be a living, active faith?

James' objection is to a useless (and therefore "dead") faith, and he desires that his readers have a fruitful faith, that is, he wants them to apply their beliefs to their lives. See John Niemelä's series on James 2 in *CTS Journal* for an excellent discussion of this passage.

Conclusion

Summary

The decisional faith view violates the normal usage of the concept of belief without strong contextual justification for doing so. It also makes faith a work and eternal life a reward

rather than a gift. Scripture emphatically rejects such an understanding of faith. In its place is passive faith: a resistible persuasion of propositions based on evidence. This passive understanding is in line with normal usage of the concept of belief. It is not a work, since while one can resist being persuaded, he cannot choose to be persuaded. The will is not active in faith. Furthermore, because faith is not an act by man, Salvation is not a reward, but a gift – as Scripture presents it.

Areas for Further Exploration

Obviously, there is much work to be done in examining the entire canon of Scripture, searching to see if this understanding of faith makes sense in all the verses where faith is discussed. Also, the concept of work needs fuller study to ensure that it is being applied properly in this study.

Appendix: Implications of Passive Faith

Theological

There are (at least) three important theological implications to the passive faith model. First of all, it preserves a rational basis for human responsibility, something Calvinism has yet to accomplish. Second, passive faith keeps faith and works distinct not only in name, but in actuality.

Third, by denying decisional faith, one of the premises that Arminianism and Calvinism have in common, it begins to form a legitimate third option. This third option is not a mediating position. A mediating position attempts to build on and strengthen the existing common ground, while compromising on the disagreements between two positions.

A third position, by contrast, differs from two competing positions by rejecting tenets that both the earlier schools of thought hold in common. A passive faith position does exactly that.²⁴

Practical

Dr. Radmacher alluded to the practical dangers of the notion that faith is a decision the other night. There are two situations that we as believers want to avoid. First, we tell a “prospective convert” that all he need do is decide to believe. So he “decides to believe,” but is still not convinced of the gospel. This person is being told that he is a believer – and yet he has never actually believed.

The other situation to avoid happened to me growing up. I knew that belief was something that one did, and I was plagued from early childhood into my teens with worry that somehow I had done it wrong, and would go to hell if I died. So I would get on my knees and try again.

Praise the Lord, I was eventually delivered from that awful fear.

When we are sharing the gospel with an unbeliever, and the person becomes convinced that the gospel is true, then he believes the gospel. He is born again! If we then tell him he has to make some sort of decision, we are confusing him and missing the point ourselves. Furthermore, if we share with someone who is not convinced, and then ask him to make some sort of decision to believe and he does, we have just encouraged him to play head games with himself, to live as if he believed, even though he is not really persuaded of the gospel. Either of these situations is a travesty, and we must do all we can to avoid them.

²⁴ Free grace soteriology (PROPER) also differs from both developed Calvinism and Arminianism with respect to the link between justification and sanctification, as Dillow pointed out in *The Reign of the Servant Kings*.