

LIFE'S BIGGEST DECISION



We sometimes use the word “faith” to mean no more than intellectual knowledge. A structural engineer looks at his calculations and says, “I have faith that this building can withstand 120 mph winds.” But that is not what the word means in the Bible. For the engineer, true faith would be demonstrated by staying in the building as a hurricane with 120 mph winds bears down upon the site.

TRUE FAITH

Intellectual belief acknowledges truth, but it doesn’t involve personal commitment. James, author of one of the letters in the New Testament, understood that this kind of belief isn’t what God had in mind. James wrote, “Do you still think it’s enough just to believe that there is one God? Well, even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror!” (James 2:19) In the first century, Greek words for “faith,” “trust,” and “belief” were considered to be synonyms, and writers used these words to communicate that a statement is intellectually true. But the authors of the New Testament found this terminology to be insufficient. Something else was needed to convey more than intellectual assent, so for the first time, they used terms like “trust

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in Christ,” “faith in Jesus,” and “believe in God.” To believe in Jesus, they were saying, is not just to know facts about him, but to surrender our hearts, our lives, and our purposes to him. To have faith in Jesus meant to radically yield to his leadership and authority. This

kind of *faith* is the first piece of the puzzle. It is the essential cornerstone of living a life that is fully alive.

The most fully alive life I have ever studied is that of a man named Paul, who lived in the first century. It’s no coincidence that the distinguishing feature of his life was his radical *faith* in Jesus Christ. Earlier in Paul’s life, he had vehemently opposed the Christian faith, trying to eradicate Jesus’ followers. Then one fateful day, he met Jesus face to face in a blinding light on a road to the city of Damascus. From that day forward, Paul made a 180-degree turn as he began to radically trust in Jesus. Much of the book of Acts in the New Testament is the drama of his life’s purpose lived out in thrilling events in that first century.

Paul would write to the Christians in Galatia, “I myself no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). In effect, he was saying, “I have radically yielded my life to someone else. That someone is Jesus.” He continued, “So I live my life in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” That’s the statement of a man who had authentic, life-changing *faith* in Jesus Christ. It was a faith essentially defined by placing himself under the absolute leadership and authority of Jesus Christ.

I mentioned that I know a handful of people who are fully alive in Christ. Every single one of those people has radically surrendered himself or herself to the leadership and authority of Jesus Christ. Again, the link between faith and being fully alive in Jesus Christ is no coincidence.

A study by the Barna Research Group shows a startling statistic. Of the Americans who responded to their survey, 80% intellectually acknowledged the Lordship of Jesus Christ, but only 7% showed any signs that they had actually surrendered their lives to him.¹ Those few, though, demonstrated a far higher satisfaction with life, far lower levels of stress, and far fewer life-crippling addictions. The survey concluded that the more deeply committed people are to Jesus, the more likely they are to experience self-confidence, peace, and fulfillment. It makes perfect sense. When we surrender our lives to the One who promises to make us fully alive, that promise is fulfilled, and we experience more joy, love, and purpose than ever before.

Philosophy professor and author Dallas Willard observed that we may be afraid of the cost of following Christ, but we actually pay a much higher price when we don’t follow him. Willard calls this choice “nondiscipleship.” In his book, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, he wrote, “Nondiscipleship costs abiding peace, a life penetrated throughout by love, faith that sees everything in the light of God’s overriding governance for good, hopefulness that stands firm in the most discouraging of circumstances, power to do what is right and withstand the forces of evil. In short, it costs exactly that abundance of life Jesus said he came to bring.... The correct perspective is to see

¹ George Barna E-Letter, August 26, 2002.

following Christ not only as the necessity it is, but as the fulfillment of the highest human possibilities and as life on the highest plane."²

LOYALTY EARNED

For some of us, when we hear the expression "following Christ" described in terms of "surrender to authority," the hair stands up on the back of our necks. We don't like to even think of the idea of submission and surrender. After all, we're Americans, and our nation was founded on the bedrock of individual liberty! And besides, some of us are born and bred Texans. We pride ourselves in being rugged individualists. No, for many of us the idea of being submissive rubs against the grain.

All of us, however, are under authority in one way or another. Children are under the authority of their parents. Students submit to their teachers and school administrators. Most of us are employed by companies, and we have bosses who exercise leadership over us. Even the most independent people among us are under the authority of the police, state and federal laws, and the IRS. We may not value—and we may even despise—that authority, but we are under it whether we like it or not.

I have learned that not all authority is the same. Under certain leaders we are stifled, while under others we flourish. Under some we chafe; under others we thrive. Under some authority our spirit is gradually extinguished, while under other authority we become fully alive. The critical difference lies in four key areas in the life of the leader:

competence, character, power, and compassion. No one has ever come close to matching Jesus' qualifications in these four areas.

The competence of Jesus

For fifteen years I worked for a major oil company. In my first assignment, I worked under the leadership of a man named Bob Keiser. I quickly realized that Bob had a brilliant mind. He understood the oil business exceptionally well. In fact, he eventually became president of the company and chairman of the board. Bob was not only bright; he also had excellent business instincts. In even the most difficult situations, his judgment was sound. For the two years I worked under Bob, I thrived. I loved going to work each day, and I nearly floated home each evening because I thoroughly enjoyed working for someone as competent as Bob.

Two years later, I was transferred to a department to work under a man who had been in the business for 30 years. Even with all his experience, this man had a hard time connecting the dots. In fact, he seemed to lack even the most basic common sense. Instead of looking forward to my work each day, my morale went south in a hurry. After only a few weeks in this new position, my wife, Marie, began to notice a change in my demeanor as I arrived home from work each evening. She asked, "Rick, what has happened at work?"

I replied, "I used to enjoy work so much because Bob was so capable, but now I work for a man who is totally inept! It's as simple as that." I had thrived under competent authority, but I chafed under the leadership of a man who was incompetent. It is painfully frustrating to work

² Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*, (Harper Collins Publishers, San Francisco), 1989, p. 16.