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Justification Is by Faith, Not Faithfulness

by Wayne A. Brindle

During the past few decades, something interesting yet discouraging has been happening in the discussion of soteriology among professing evangelicals. Theologians and Bible scholars who support Lordship Salvation and either Reformed or Catholic theology have been changing the meaning of one of the most significant terms of the discussion. What does it mean biblically to be “saved by faith” or to “have faith in Christ” or even to “believe in Christ?” The answer to this question seems very clear in the epistles of Paul or the Gospel of John, and throughout the Book of Acts. But in recent years opponents of the free grace of God have decided that “faith” cannot mean simply “faith” or “belief.” It must include some kind of obedient activity and be thought of as “faithfulness” or “fidelity” or, even more recently, “allegiance.”¹

This seems to me a little bit like debating with someone the merits of home schooling, and having your opponent say, “Home schools are bad, because, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘school,’ it’s a ‘group of people gambling together,’ and we certainly don’t want our children to do that, whether at home or in public.” What would your response be? Mine would be (to quote David Letterman) “What?” But sure enough, when I whip out my handy copy of the *OED*, there it is among the definitions: an infrequent British usage—a school is “a group of people gambling together.” So where does our debate go from here? Answer: It will be “tough slogging.” Our opponent has illegitimately changed the meaning of one of the most significant terms of the debate.

One of the most egregious examples of this is the recent book by Michael W. Bates, titled *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King*.² It is strongly endorsed by Scot McKnight, and the phrase in the subtitle, “the Gospel of Jesus the

King,” should remind you of McKnight’s 2011 book, *The King Jesus Gospel*, in which he argued that “saving faith” is actually “embodied, enacted allegiance” and “covenantal loyalty.” Same false teaching, different channel.

When Bob Wilkin debated Bates on the Moody Radio Network earlier this year (2017), Bates made about a dozen biblical and historical assertions that were either totally misguided and have no solid evidence to support them, or contain some biblical truth that was misapplied by Bates for erroneous conclusions. I won’t cite Bates’s book in this paper, but I will refer from time to time to some statements that Bates made during the debate. Most of his errors centered on the discussion of the meaning of the Greek word *pistis* (faith) as used in the New Testament and in ancient and contemporary Greco-Roman literature.

So I propose to discuss this question: Biblically speaking, is justification (or salvation) by faith or by faithfulness (= fidelity, loyalty, or allegiance)?

To arrive at a suitable answer, we will have to discuss the following sub-questions:

1. What does the Greek word *pistis* in the New Testament mean? And does it mean this all of the time, almost all of the time, most of the time, or some of the time?

2. What do the words “faithfulness,” “loyalty,” and “fidelity” mean when applied to believers in the NT? How often and in what contexts does *pistis* have this meaning? Are words like “faithfulness” and “fidelity” ever used to translate *pistis* in a soteriological passage in the NT? How often do our major translations render *pistis* as “faith” and how often as “faithfulness” or something else?

3. What can Greco-Roman texts (outside the NT) tell us about the proper definition of *pistis* in the NT? How important is the evidence provided by these texts?

4. When the Gospel of John says that the one who comes to Jesus must “believe in Him” and “believe His word” and “believe that He is the Messiah,” what does it (and Jesus) mean by “believe”? John uses the verb *pisteuo* about 100 times, but the noun *pistis* not at all. Since they are cognates, do they have the same meaning when used to refer to salvation by believing in Christ?

I. The Meaning of *Pistis* according to Greek Lexicons and NT Usage

BDAG, considered the best Greek lexicon for NT scholarly study, gives three basic categories of meanings for *pistis* in the NT and early Christian literature: (1) “that which evokes trust and faith,” such as “faithfulness” and “fidelity” (BDAG cites six NT passages with this specific meaning); (2) “believing on the basis of the reliability of the one trusted,” meaning “trust” or “confidence” or “faith” (more than 180 NT passages are cited with this meaning, almost all of which refer to faith in God, Christ, the Gospel, or God’s promises—this is by far the dominant meaning of *pistis* in the NT according to BDAG); and (3) “that which is believed”—the body of faith or belief (thirteen passages are cited with this meaning).

The newer lexicon by Louw and Nida³ lists the basic idea of *Pistis* as “to believe in, to have confidence in, to have faith in, to trust; faith and trust.” It also includes the meaning, “the state of being someone in whom complete confidence can be placed—‘trustworthiness, dependability, faithfulness,’” but cites only one passage—the universally-agreed-to Romans 3:3 referring to “the faithfulness of God,” which of course cannot be understood as a salvific statement.

One would think that with this amount of evidence and scholarly opinion available for the dominant meaning of *pistis* in the NT, scholars who hold a contrary opinion would need to

produce strong arguments and evidence for every context in which they attempted to translate *pistis* another way. But they have not been able to do so. Yet they persist in injecting misleading assertions. For example, in his recent debate, Bates asserted that *pistis* regularly means “faithfulness” or “reliability” or “commitment,” and cited Matthew 23:23, Romans 3:3, Titus 2:10, Galatians 5:22, and 2 Thessalonians 1:4. Then he said, “And the list could go on and on and on.” But no, it couldn’t. In fact, Bates’s list was already twice too long. More will be said about that below.

Craig Blomberg notes that exegetes often come to biblical texts with a given set of theological presuppositions that “drive exegesis, so that if there is an available meaning for a word that better serves the researcher’s own theological paradigm, that person favors the more obscure definition over the common definition.”⁴ While any occurrence of *pistis* in the NT can theoretically have any of the meanings given in the lexicons, the burden of proof is on the interpreter to demonstrate how the specific context makes the common definition unlikely. There are very few instances where Bates or others can show this for *pistis*.

Sometimes interpreters suggest that the first definition given in a lexicon must be the preferred or most important one. Bates implied that since “faithfulness” is the first meaning given for *pistis* in BDAG, it must be taken as the most basic and pervasive meaning. But this is not the case at all. In BDAG, the first listing is generally the meaning that is most similar to the meaning used in ancient or classical Greek. For an example of this, look at the word *ekklesia*. Three basic meanings are given in BDAG: (1) a legislative body/assembly; (2) a gathering of people; and (3) a congregation/church. One NT occurrence is cited for the first listing (Acts 19:39); two are given for the second listing (Acts 19:32, 40); and about 110 for the third (mainly translated as “church”). So if you meet the word *ekklesia* in the Greek text and wonder which

meaning is most likely (if all fit the context), which would you choose? Not BDAG's first listing (legislative body), but the third (church). The order of presentation in BDAG has nothing to do with the "most likely" or "preferred" meaning in any particular passage.

Any exegete who looks at the lexical data on *pistis* and chooses to translate the several hundred references to salvation by faith in God or Christ as "faithfulness" or "allegiance" has taken a dangerous detour in his hermeneutical journey.

II. *Pistis* as Faithfulness and Loyalty in the NT

Bates claimed that a "large number" of uses of *pistis* in the NT cannot mean "faith" or "trust," but have to mean "faithfulness" or "fidelity," and that about 20% of its occurrences are rendered in contemporary translations as "faithfulness" or "trustworthiness." Both of these statements are blatantly false.

First, of the five passages specifically listed by Bates, only three are translated by the majority of recent versions as "faithfulness" or "fidelity" (or a similar term): Romans 3:3, Galatians 5:22, and Titus 2:10. The Romans passage speaks of the "faithfulness of God" (as I noted earlier). The Galatians passage speaks of *pistis* as a fruit of the Holy Spirit, among which "faithfulness" makes good sense (although the KJV has "faith" and most Christians of previous generations memorized the verse that way without thinking that it was odd). Titus 2:10 says that slaves should "show all good fidelity" or "faithfulness," which makes good sense of the statement; however, many good recent translations have "showing all good faith," which also makes sense in the context.

In Bates's fourth passage, Matthew 23:23, Jesus tells the scribes and Pharisees that they have neglected justice, mercy, and *pistis*; only about half of the best recent translations use the

word “faithfulness” or the equivalent here. And only one major contemporary translation uses something other than “faith” in 2 Thessalonians 1:4; thus Bates’s use of this passage is totally counter-productive to his argument.

It’s no exaggeration, then, to say that major contemporary English versions translate *pistis* as “faithfulness” or “fidelity” in only three or four NT verses. Yet Bates says that 20% of the total occurrences are rendered in contemporary translations as “faithfulness” or “trustworthiness.” How many occurrences of *pistis* are there in the NT? The answer is 243. So in reality, recent translations use “faithfulness” (or the equivalent) for *pistis* only 1.2% of the time.

To get an understanding of how far from the truth Bates’s claims on this subject have gone, let’s take a quick look at what are probably the top ten recent Bible translations, and how they translate the word *pistis*. I will list how many times, out of 243 total occurrences, each version translates *pistis* as “faith”: ESV = 238, NASB = 237, NKJV = 237, HCSB = 233, RSV = 237, NRSV = 232, NET = 228, NIV = 226, LEB = 237, NLT = 207 (228). The percentages for these translations range from 98% of the total (ESV) to 93% (NIV).⁵ The NLT, strictly considered, is at 85%, but including the translations of *pistis* as “believe” and “trust,” in reality it represents 94%. The average percentage of translation of *pistis* by “faith” among these top ten versions is 96%. Clearly there is no way one can rationally claim that *pistis* in the NT regularly means “faithfulness,” not “faith.” It does so in a very few contexts, but that’s all. The context must drive the translation and interpretation in every occurrence. And NT translators have consistently rendered *pistis* as “faith” throughout the NT in almost every instance.

Let’s now take a closer look at how each of these top ten English Bibles translates the word *pistis*.

ESV

Faith – 238 [98% of total]

Faithfulness – 3 (Matt. 23:23; Rom. 3:3; Gal. 5:22)
Belief – 1 (2 Thess. 2:13)
Assurance – 1 (Acts 17:31)
Total - 243

NASB

Faith – 237 [97.5% of total]
The one who has faith – 1 (Rom. 3:26)
Faithfulness – 3 (Matt. 23:23; Rom. 3:3; Gal. 5:22)
Pledge – 1 (1 Tim. 5:12)
Proof – 1 (Acts 17:31)
Total – 243

NKJV

Faith – 237 [97% of total]
Belief – 1 (2 Thess. 2:13)
Assurance – 1 (Acts 17:31)
Those who believe – 1 (Heb. 10:39)
The faith – 1 (1 Tim. 1:2)
Faithfulness – 2 (Rom. 3:3; Gal. 5:22)
Fidelity – 1 (Titus 2:10)
Total – 244

HCSB

Faith – 233 [96% of total]
Belief – 1 (2 Thess. 2:13)
Conviction – 3 (Rom. 14:22-23)
Those who have faith – 1 (Gal. 3:7) [lit. “who are of faith”]
Proof – 1 (Acts 17:31)
Pledge – 1 (1 Tim. 5:12)
Faithfulness – 3 (Rom. 3:3; Titus 2:10; Rev. 2:19)
Total – 243

RSV

Faith – 237 [97.5% of total]
Belief – 1 (2 Thess. 2:13)
Assurance – 1 (Acts 17:31)
Pledge – 1 (1 Tim. 5:12)
Faithfulness – 2 (Rom. 3:3; Gal. 5:22)
Fidelity – 1 (Titus 2:10)
Total – 243

NRSV

Faith – 232 [95.5% of total]

Belief – 1 (2 Thess. 2:13)
Believe/believing – 5 (Gal. 3:2, 5, 7, 9; James 2:1)
Assurance – 1 (Acts 17:31)
Pledge – 1 (1 Tim. 5:12)
Fidelity – 1 (Titus 2:10)
Faithfulness – 2 (Rom. 3:3; Gal. 5:22)
Total – 243

LEB (Lexham English Bible)

Faith – 237 [97.5% of total]
Ones who have faith – 1 (Gal. 3:7)
Proof – 1 (Acts 17:31)
Pledge – 1 (1 Tim. 5:12)
Faithfulness – 3 (Matt. 23:23; Rom. 3:3; Gal. 5:22)
Total - 243

NET

Faith – 228 [94% of total]
Proof – 1 (Acts 17:31)
Pledge – 1 (1 Tim. 5:12)
Faithfulness – 13 (Matt. 23:23; Rom. 3:3, 22, 26; Gal. 2:16, 20; 3:22; 5:22; Eph. 3:12; Phil. 3:9;
1 Tim. 4:12; 6:11; 2 Tim. 2:22)
Total – 243

NIV-2011

Faith – 226 [93% of total]
Belief – 1 (2 Thess. 2:13)
The faith – 1 (1 Cor. 16:13)
Believe/believing/those who believe – 6 (Rom. 14:22; Gal. 3:5, 7; 6:10; James 1:6; 2:1)
Proof – 1 (Acts 17:31)
Pledge – 1 (1 Tim. 5:12)
Be trusted – 1 (Titus 2:10)
Faithfulness – 4 (Matt. 23:23; Rom. 3:3; Gal. 5:22; Rev. 13:10)
Faithful – 2 (1 Tim. 2:7; Rev. 14:12 – “who remain faithful” – lit. “who keep their faith”)
Total - 243

NLT

Faith – 207 [85% of total]
Believe/believer – 14 (Acts 13:8; Rom. 1:5; 3:25, 26; 11:20; 14:22, 23; 16:26; 2 Cor. 5:7; Gal.
3:2, 5, 22; 2 Thess. 3:2; Titus 3:15)
Trust/trusted/trusting in – 7 (Rom. 9:32; 1 Cor. 2:5; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 3:17; Col. 2:12; 2 Tim. 3:15;
1 Pet. 1:9)
[Faith + Believe + Trust = 228 = 94% of total]
Way of faith – 3 (Gal. 3:23, 25)
Proved – 1 (Acts 17:31)

Convictions – 1 (Rom. 14:23)

Converted – 1 (Acts 6:7)

Faithfulness – 4 (Gal. 5:22; Eph. 6:23; 2 Thess. 1:4; 2 Tim. 2:22)

Faithful - 5 (Phil. 2:17; 1 Thess. 1:3; 2 Tim. 4:7; Heb. 10:39; Rev. 13:10)

Total – 243

The average percentage of occurrences of *pistis* that are translated as “faith” (not “faithfulness”) among these top ten translations is 95%. If we were to include only the seven versions among these top ten that follow a “formal” mode of translation (representing the Greek words, not just the thoughts), the average percentage would go up to 97%.

I repeat: The claims that a “large number” of uses of *pistis* in the NT have to mean “faithfulness” or “fidelity,” and that about 20% of its occurrences are rendered in contemporary translations as “faithfulness” or “trustworthiness,” are blatantly false. To make this claim about the major translations is a slap in the face to hundreds of competent Greek scholars who, as members of translation teams, have carefully considered the issues involved and have decided that the authors of all but three or four occurrences meant for us to understand *pistis* as “faith” or “trust.”

III. The Meaning of *Pistis* in Greco-Roman Literature and the LXX

Bates says that we need to look at Greco-Roman texts (that is, outside the NT) in order to define NT words because there are many words that occur in the NT only a few times. The only way we can discover what those words mean is by looking outside the NT. He says Bible translators do this all the time to accrue lexical data.

That is certainly true, but the word *pistis* is not one of the words that occurs only a few times in the NT. It appears 243 times, from Matthew to Revelation, in so many different contexts that scholars and translators have never had a problem translating it.

Bates notes that the literature of the ancient Greco-Roman world has many examples of the “loyalty” meaning of *pistis*. One example he’s especially fond of is 1 Maccabees 10:27, in which King Demetrius says, “Continue still to keep *pistis* (loyalty) with us and we will repay you with good for what you do for us.” Many more examples are possible. However, BDAG gives almost as many examples of *pistis* in this literature with the meaning “faith” or “trust” as it does with “loyalty” or “faithfulness.” The examples with the meaning “loyalty” tend to be mostly from texts that pre-date the NT (from classical Greek and the LXX), but the examples cited with the meaning “faith” tend to be mostly from Josephus, Philo, and the time period of the NT. This probably indicates that the predominant meaning of *pistis* gradually changed from ancient Greek to NT Greek, which may explain why its use in the NT reflects almost entirely the “faith/trust” emphasis.

In the LXX, which was composed from about 250 B.C. to 130 B.C., the word *pistis* appears 59 times. It carries the meaning “faithfulness” or “fidelity” in less than half (44%) of these occurrences. Eight times (14%) it definitely has the meaning “faith,” another eight times (14%) the meaning could go either way, and seventeen times (29%) the term has to be translated in a different way entirely (sometimes as “truth”). The use of *pistis* in the LXX illustrates the change of meaning that was going on in early Koine Greek, and by the time of its NT usage the focus on the concept of “faith” or “trust” was almost complete.

IV. The Meaning of *Pisteuō* in the Gospel of John

The Greek word *pisteuō* is the verbal cognate of *pistis*. Sometimes a verbal cognate means virtually the same thing as its noun, and sometimes it doesn’t. We still have to look carefully at the contexts in which *pisteuō* is used.

To start with, BDAG demonstrates that the dominant meanings of *pisteuō* are (1) “to consider something to be true and therefore worthy of one’s trust,” translated as “believe”; and (2) “to entrust oneself to an entity in complete confidence,” translated as “believe in” or “trust.” There is virtually no occurrence of the “faithfulness” idea among the NT uses of *pisteuō*.

The verb is used about 100 times in the Gospel of John, in these contexts:

Believe in His name – 1:12; 2:23; 3:18 – (3 times)
Believe in Him (Jesus) – 2:11; 3:15, 16; 3:18*; 4:39; 6:29, 35; 7:5, 31, 38, 39, 48; 8:30; 9:35, 36, 38; 10:42; 11:25, 26, 45, 48; 12:11, 37, 42, 44, 46; 14:1, 12; 16:9; 17:20 – (32 times)
Believe what Jesus says – 2:22; 3:12; 4:50, 53; 5:47; 6:30; 8:31, 46; 10:25, 26, 37, 38; 11:26, 27 – (14 times)
Believe in the Son – 3:36; 6:40 – (2 times)
Believe in the light – 12:36 – (once)
Believe me – 4:21; 5:46; 8:45 – (3 times)
Believe (because of His word) – 4:41 – (once)
Believe (that He is the Savior of the world) – 4:42 – (once)
Believe (in Christ in some way) – 4:42, 48; 6:36, 47, 64; 11:15, 40; 12:39; 14:29; 19:35 – (12 times)
Believe God (who sent Jesus) – 5:24; 12:44 – (2 times)
Believe Moses’ writings – 5:47 – (once)
Believe that Jesus is the Holy One of God, the Messiah – 6:69; 8:24; 11:27; 13:19; 20:31 – (5 times)
Believe that God sent Jesus – 11:42; 17:8, 21 – (3 times)
Believe that Jesus is in the Father – 14:10, 11 – (2 times)
Believe that Jesus came from God – 16:27, 30, 31 – (3 times)
Believe that Jesus rose from the dead – 20:8, 25, 27, 29 – (4 times)
Believe through Him – 1:7 – (once)

I take it that the dominant meanings of *pisteuō* in John are (1) being convinced that what Jesus and the Father say is true, and (2) trusting personally in Jesus for eternal life. One fascinating passage that illustrates this is John 11:26, which uses the verb twice, with two different objects: “everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” In the first use, Jesus invites Martha to believe (or, trust) “in Him” (for salvation), and in the second use, he asks Martha whether she believes (has the conviction or is convinced of the truth of) what He just told her. These are the ways that *pisteuō* is used throughout the Gospel of John, and there is no hint of the idea of “faithfulness” or “loyalty” in these occurrences at all.

Bates rejects this analysis of *pisteuō* in John, saying instead that Jesus was in the process

of being enthroned as a King. When Jesus was said to be “lifted up,” it involved not only Jesus being lifted up on the cross, but also being lifted up into kingly glory. His crucifixion was his enthronement, the means by which Jesus became King of Heaven and Earth. Thus, the belief statements that we find in the gospel of John must include the idea that Jesus is King. Jesus was in the process of coming to be enthroned as King through his suffering on the cross. Bates is actually saying that everywhere in John, to believe in Jesus must mean to submit to him as King.

However, John does not give any hint that he has an intention related to Jesus as king in either his extended prologue in John 1, the interaction with John the Baptist, or Nicodemus, or an extended Upper Room Discourse as Jesus gives His final talk to the disciples, or in Jesus’ High Priestly prayer in John 17, or in John’s purpose statements in John 20:30-31. John does not even mention the issue of king or kingdom in 1, 2, 3 John, but there again, he states that the issue is faith in Jesus as the Son of God for salvation (1 John 5:13-15). A simple search for king or kingdom in John’s gospel shows that most of the occurrences of the words come from non-believers in a derogatory way. I cannot find any positive statement in the Gospel of John that would lead me to take Bates’ position. Further, in Acts 1, at the ascension, when Jesus would have had the perfect opportunity to address such a concept in answering the disciples’ question about the kingdom, He instead turns them away from the concept toward being eye-witness testifiers of His resurrection.

In addition, Bates’ argument disagrees with the other gospels. In Luke 19:11-27 Jesus gives a parable that comes near the end of His earthly life, after His offer of the kingdom has been rejected, just one verse before the statement that He was going up to Jerusalem for the final time (Luke 19:28). In the parable, which is obviously referring to Himself and Israel, He says that the nobleman “went to a distant country to receive a kingdom for himself and then return”

(19:12). In verse 15 it says, “when he returned, after receiving the kingdom.” Jesus does not arrive here as the King until His second coming when He will sit on the throne of David—an earthly throne, not a throne in heaven.

And when the NT talks about Jesus being exalted, it is not a reference to the cross, but to the resurrection—Romans 1:4. Where would you would go to try to prove that Jesus was exalted to kingship when they put Him on the cross? I do not see that anywhere in Scripture. Bates gets it from Romans 1:3-4, but only by arbitrarily combining Christ’s being “born of the seed of David according to the flesh” (his human nature) with His being “declared to be the Son of God with power” by His resurrection. His crucifixion is not even in view there. This problem is first and primarily a problem of hermeneutics. Bates’s methodology is being driven by faulty presuppositions.

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¹ This goes beyond mere Lordship Salvation, which asserts that one must “believe in Christ” AND “follow Him as Lord” in order to be saved; rather, this “allegiance” view says that having faith in Christ “means” to be faithful and loyal to Him.

² *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

³ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 375–376.

⁴ Craig L. Blomberg with Jennifer Markley, *A Handbook of New Testament Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), p. 138.

⁵ In the case of the NIV, the lower percentage is due to the fact that in six occurrences of *pistis*, the NIV translates it verbally as “believe” or “believing” or “those who believe” (the same idea as “faith”—not “faithfulness”); if these were added in, the NIV’s percentage would be 95.5%.