

# MYTH 2

Faith Is Active



## HOLD FAST

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*Apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested...the righteousness of God **through faith** for all those who believe.*

Romans 3:21-22

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*For by grace you have been saved **through faith**; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.*

Ephesians 2:8-9

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MYTH  
*Faith Is Active*

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TRUTH  
**FAITH IS PASSIVE**

In 1885 Henry Flagler began his dream of building a railway line that would ultimately connect Jacksonville, Florida, to Key West. When the Florida East Coast Railway was completed in 1912, this marvel ran the length of the entire east coast of Florida. Flagler's dream connected the state in a way no one had imagined. Florida became an accessible vacation spot for the snowbirds up north, and lavish beach resorts, monstrous homes, and new towns popped up all along the railroad. The possibility for growth was endless. Many profited because of Flagler's ingenuity and determination.

In order to get the people and supplies to their destination, the tracks had to be laid. However, the tracks in and of themselves do not make the train move. The tracks safely lock the train in a direction. Without the tracks, there would be disaster and the destination would never be reached.

### Faith on Track

Faith is like railroad tracks. Faith is passive, doing nothing in and of itself. People make choices based on faith, and those choices

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result in action. To clearly understand faith, two ideas must be addressed. *First*, faith is based on evidence.<sup>1</sup> *Second*, choices involve motivation based on desires and fears, which lead to corresponding behavior. Consider the following illustrations.

First, it is a proven fact that seatbelts reduce injury and save lives during a car accident. One can either believe that evidence or not. However, because most people trust the evidence as being accurate, they buckle up. Proven facts are relied on. This then becomes a choice. Faith does not make someone put on a seat belt. Rather, by belief in evidence, a choice motivated by the fear of injury is the cause of buckling up.

Next, what is the reason for understanding  $2 + 2 = 4$ ? Why doesn't  $2 + 2 = 5$ ? We know because we were taught math when we were youngsters. It is a known fact. You have come to believe

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it to be true because every time you previously needed to know what  $2 + 2$  equaled, whether on school exams or in business transactions, it always came up 4, every time. Now, when you buy two items at two dollars each, did faith in the sum of  $2 + 2$  cause you to make the purchase? Of course not! You were

motivated to buy them because of a need or want. The purchase was your choice. *Faith does not cause action; faith is inactive. It is passive.*<sup>2</sup> However, choices are based on faith because faith is the confidence in the credibility of specific facts.

### Saving Faith Is Passive

In an attempt to make a distinction between “nonsaving” faith and “saving” faith, some begin by saying, “You can know all about Christ, but never really know Him.” Then they follow that up with,

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“You can believe in [know about] George Washington, but that does not save you.” The conclusion is that just knowing about Jesus never saves anyone. To that, I whole heartily agree. Knowing facts, historical or otherwise, cannot save anyone. The issue is what you do with those facts. That is what makes all the difference.

Known facts about seatbelts can ultimately lead to reduced injuries in car wrecks. Known facts concerning math can ultimately lead to better scores on school exams. In both cases those known facts are the objects of a person’s faith. Those particular facts cannot save a person “spiritually.” However, believing in seatbelts may save a person “physically,” and believing in mathematical facts may save a person from “failing” a test.

### The Ultimate Issue Is the Object of Faith

The ultimate issue of faith is the object of faith, not faith itself. Believing in physics or math does not lead to spiritual salvation, and neither does believing in George Washington. The only One who can save a person spiritually is Jesus Christ. Knowing Jesus and believing His claim to be the “only Way” to eternal life is the basis for God’s saving work.

Note the distinction between two different objects of faith: (1) a nonspiritual object and (2) a spiritual object. Acknowledging the evidence for seatbelts, a driver must either trust that evidence or dismiss it. This becomes the basis for using seatbelts. Based on the reliability of the facts, a driver is prompted by a fear of potential injury and chooses to buckle up. The choice is based on faith in the evidence, but faith does not buckle the belt. Faith is inactive and does not produce any action. The driver’s motive is the cause of a behavioral choice.

Likewise, knowing the evidence about Jesus and His claim, a person either trusts or dismisses it. In this case the issue is a spiritual one. Jesus is the object. The evidence of Jesus and His claim

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becomes the basis on which someone believes in Christ as the only true Savior. Faith, again, is passive *reliance on evidence* and does not produce any action on man's part. In this case God, however, acts in bringing about the new birth and creating spiritual life.

Do you catch the difference? In the seatbelt and math illustrations people believe in a set of facts and take action to avoid calamity or

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to achieve a certain result. At initial salvation, man believes or trusts in the facts about the Lord Jesus; and based on that belief God acts. Faith occurs in both cases. However, in the first case (seatbelts or math) a behavioral choice is based on faith, but in the second case God chooses to create spiritual life based on man's

faith. These two distinctions are critical to understanding saving faith.<sup>3</sup>

### But All Do Not Agree

Some, however, claim that faith is active by nature. John Piper says that "*faith produces obedience.*"<sup>4</sup> For Piper, faith is the cause of obedience. This is echoed by John MacArthur when he writes, "Thus the test of true faith is this: does it produce obedience? If not, it is not saving faith. Disobedience is unbelief. *Real faith obeys.*"<sup>5</sup> If what they claim is true—that faith is the cause of obedience—then faith cannot be passive and must be active. That is the reason MacArthur concludes, "True faith is *never seen as passive*—it is always obedient."<sup>6</sup>

If you agree with the conclusion of Piper and MacArthur, you will be unable to reconcile their position with the previous discussion in which faith is passive and does not in itself produce a change in behavior. Whether you are thinking of saving faith in Christ as the

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object or of nonsaving faith in a mathematical formula, faith is either active or passive. It is one or the other, but it cannot be both.

Why do Piper and MacArthur hold the view that faith is active? The answer is found in two different arenas. The first comes from a theological perspective, while the second comes from a biblical interpretation. *First*, the theological perspective is derived from a particular definition of saving faith, which will be addressed in *Myth 3: Faith Is a Tricky Word*.

Piper and MacArthur understand saving faith to be composed of three essential elements: (1) *notitia*—an intellectual element, understanding the truth, (2) *assensus*—an emotional element, affirming conviction

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of the truth, and (3) *fiducia*—a volitional element, committing to and obeying the truth.<sup>7</sup> Embracing this supposed definition of faith, particularly the third element, requires that saving faith be active and therefore the cause of obedience. The next myth addresses this three-aspect faith and reveals its error.

*Second*, the biblical interpretation that supposedly supports an active, obedience-producing faith comes primarily from Romans 1:5 and 16:26 which include the phrase “obedience of faith.” In Romans Paul clearly and emphatically taught that faith and works are diametrically opposite concepts. Imposing an improper interpretation requires “obedience of faith” to mean active faith, producing obedience. However, *to believe* the gospel and *to obey* the gospel are used synonymously. “Obedience of faith” is discussed further in *Appendix A*, which addresses the three major interpretive positions and shows that “obedience of faith” actually concerns the reception of the gospel message.

Piper’s and MacArthur’s interpretation of James 2 on faith and works is basic to their view. The faith-works relationship in James 2 is covered in detail in *Myth 11: Works Required*.

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### Don't Get Sidetracked!

Remember, faith is passive, never, ever doing anything. Yet it is the basis for everything you do. Embracing facts as true, we make choices. While faith is only the basis, our motivations are the cause.

TRUTH  
FAITH IS PASSIVE



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### Myth 2, NOTES

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1. Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings* (Hayesville: Schoettle Publishing Co., 1992), pp. 271-282; Robert N. Wilkin, *Confident in Christ* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), pp. 5-6.
2. See *Myth 6: Faith Is a Decision*.
3. Even though not affecting the understanding of saving faith presented, two additional issues must be considered. *First*, one must consider if the actual source of saving faith is from God. Philippians 1:29 and Ephesians 2:8 are used to support that position. Others, including this author, disagree [see Robert N. Wilkin, ed., *The Grace New Testament Commentary* (Denton, TX: GES, 2010), vol. 2, p. 898]. *Second*, it is best to understand that both saving faith and regeneration occur simultaneously [see Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1986), p. 326].
4. John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1991), p. 256 (italics added).
5. John F. MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), p. 47 (italics added).
6. *Ibid.*, p. 32 (italics added).
7. *Ibid.*, p. 173 (italics added).

