

A Review of Scriptural Pistis

Bryan Stearns, 2026

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All emphasis is added.

Introduction

In 2023 I read Dr. Alvin Schmidt's book *Faith Misused*, from Concordia Publishing House, in which one of his primary points throughout the book is that the word "faith", or *pistis* in Greek, was not a religious term until Jesus adopted it in His teaching (and thus Christianity is *the* faith). He then mentions that, prior to Christ, Aristotle used the word "faiths" for rhetorical "modes of persuasion,"¹ though without much further detail. This sparked my desire to better learn the usage of the term prior to Christ, because that would necessarily be fundamental context for understanding Christ's use of the word.

The following summarizes the fruit of roughly two years of intermittent study of *pistis* in my spare time. Scripture's use of the term across Old and New Testaments is the highest authority and gold standard of its own context. I investigated Scripture's uses of the term alongside freely available Greek lexicons and investigated how these might hypothetically reconcile with non-Biblical contemporary or earlier uses that I could find. The various uses do not have to reconcile, since words can have very different senses depending on context, and language also often changes over time and across different sub-cultures, however the default assumption for any translator must be that a word does not fundamentally change meaning until context requires otherwise. (A key starting assumption for New Testament interpretation must be that the Jewish use of Greek in Jesus' day would have been colored from the ways in which the Septuagint applied those words to translate the words of the Hebrew Old Testament.)

The result of my research is that there are 3 main historical senses of *pistis*, including its verb form ("believe"):

1. Cognitive Assent (this is mainly limited to the transitive verb form)
2. Union for Following (this is the sense used for the Christian faith)
3. Evidence for Persuasion (this is found often in Greek literature and occasionally in Scripture)

This result affects how one reads the Scriptures in subtle but important ways. I believe it is key to recognize the distinctions among these, but also to acknowledge the common root that connects them.

Faith as Cognitive Assent

The first sense of faith is easily understood by English speakers today. It means essentially "**assent that a thing is true.**" There are several examples in Scripture where the word is used as a transitive verb in which a person "believes" a particular thing:

- ✦ "Jesus said to them, 'Do you **believe** that I am able to do this?'" (Mt 9:28)
- ✦ "You **believe** that God is one. You do well; the demons also **believe**, and shudder." (Jas 2:19)

¹ Alvin J. Schmidt, *Faith Misused: Why Christianity Is Not Just Another Religion* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2022), 52.

Though usually found only in such verbal uses, clearly the noun and not just the verb could also be understood in this way, since James in the chapter quoted above spends much ink persuading his hearers that this sense is not the sense meant by “the Christian faith”.

Faith as Loyalty for Following

This is the sense referred to when discussing “the Christian faith” as well as most uses of the term in both Old and New Testaments in Scripture, except where context shows otherwise.

Some have attempted to define the sense of the Christian faith as “trust”.² But while this can be understood helpfully, it seems to come short of the historical use of the word, and it risks being misunderstood as mere mental assent. (As the Roman Catholics misunderstood the Lutherans during the Reformation.) I propose that a better definition in modern English that unifies the Scriptural uses is “**loyalty of the heart through which one individual is willingly led by another to pursue faithful action**”. Note that “loyalty” can be described both in terms of the disposition of the loyal person’s heart as well as in terms of the mental/social bond that joins him to the will of the one he follows. This definition is informed by Scripture and external contemporary uses. In the context of the Roman Empire of Jesus’ day, *pistis* could be used to refer to how a conquered people could unconditionally give themselves over in loyalty to a conqueror in order to obtain benevolent treatment rather than punishment or destruction.³ More generally it could be used for household or community loyalty or trustworthiness within the bonds or covenants that bound people together (cf. the use in Gal 5:22).⁴ Consistent with this image, scholarship on Aristotle’s use of *pistis* finds that “the term primarily refers not to a propositional attitude but to the state in which one is guided by *logos* to act in a certain way,”⁵ where *logos* is “a communicative act by which members of a community persuade each other to act in certain ways.”⁶

By this sense, “faith” for a Christian is definitionally related to describing Christians as “belonging to the Way” (Acts 9:2). It is not merely the cognitive state of the one who has faith, but it is itself the means and bond by which the subject is persuaded to pursue the leader’s way. Jesus is the Word / *Logos* (Jn 1:1) of God who persuades and leads us in His Way.

Pistis in Aristotle’s context was used to refer to that which produces willing action as its result, not just cognitive agreement, and different words such as *hupolepsis* would be used if discrete cognitive assent was meant.⁷ The rhetorician leads an audience to action, such as to vote a certain way in politics or in a trial, through his use of *logos*. An analogy then to this use of *pistis* might be the bond of nerves and signals by which a brain leads a hand to willingly move according to the will of the brain. But it is key that the action is pursued voluntarily by aligned desire, not by compulsion or mere obligation.

There are echoes of this sense of *pistis* in the older English sense of “faith” and “belief”, from back when those words were selected to translate the Bible’s *pistis* into Middle English in the 1300s. (The English senses of the words have changed over the centuries, though our use of the words in our Bible translations largely have not.) As the 2nd edition of the Oxford English Dictionary put it:

² See <https://heidelblog.net/2022/11/is-faith-irrational/> for an example.

³ Zerbe, Gordon M. (2013) [Believers as Loyalists: The Anatomy of Paul's Language of Pistis](#). *Citizenship: Paul on Peace and Politics*, CMU Press. pp. 26-46.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Goldin, Owen. "[Pistis, Persuasion, and Logos in Aristotle](#)" *Elenchos*, 41, no. 1, 2020, 59. <https://doi.org/10.1515/elen-2020-0003>

⁶ Ibid. Owen explains that Aristotle also uses *logos* in this sense to describe when parts of one’s own mind persuade other parts to act in certain ways. There the context of parts within the mind shifts the sense of what an “act” looks like.

⁷ Goldin, "[Pistis, Persuasion, and Logos in Aristotle](#)", 53.

“*Belief* was the earlier word for what is now commonly called *faith*. The latter originally meant in Eng. (as in OFrench) “loyalty to a person to whom one is bound by promise or duty, or to one’s promise or duty itself,” as in “to keep faith, to break faith,” and the derivatives of *faithful*, *faithless*, in which there is no reference to “belief”; i.e. “faith” was = fidelity, fealty.”⁸

Note that “belief” could refer to both the bond of loyalty and to the promise or duty that substantiated the bond.

Scripture’s Usage: Shameless Hopeful Following

Pistis is used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew words *’ēmûn* and *’ēmûnâ*⁹ that mean “faithfulness”, “steadfastness”, “truth” (fidelity), or “office”.¹⁰ For example:

- ✦ “Their relatives in their villages were to come in every seven days from time to time to be with them; for the four chief gatekeepers who were Levites, were **in an office of trust** [*en pistei*], and were over the chambers and over the treasuries in the house of God. They spent the night around the house of God, because the watch was committed to them; and they were in charge of opening it morning by morning.” (1 Chr 9:25-27)
- ✦ “The men did the work **faithfully** [*en pistei*] with foremen over them to supervise . . .” (2 Chr 34:12)

In these examples, *pistis* describes the bond of loyalty by which one pursues a duty. Levites stay at their post because they are in a faith, or in a bond to serve in that post. Men do their work “in faith”, or within that state of willing devotion that leads to faithful behavior as a fruit.

What does a bond of *pistis* look like? Consider what the New Testament says about faith in Hebrews, where the author quotes Habakkuk 2:4:

- ✦ “‘But My righteous one shall live **by faith** [*ek pisteos*]; and if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him.’ But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have **faith** to the preserving of the soul. Now **faith** is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. . . . And without **faith** it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.” (Heb 10:38-11:1,6)

Here “faith” is simultaneously the opposite of shrinking back and that which comes to God with the assurance of reward. (The ensuing chapter then exemplifies faith through the famous Old Testament figures who followed and hoped in God despite the forces of the world that offered alternate hopes.) This bold assurance is the same image that Jesus uses to explain the Lord’s Prayer:

- ✦ “Suppose one of you has a friend, and goes to him at midnight and says to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him’; and from inside he answers and says, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been shut and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his [shamelessness / unembarrassed boldness]¹¹ he will get up and give him as much as he needs.” (Lk 11:5-8)

⁸ “belief, n.,” *The Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 782.

⁹ The word “amen” meaning “may it be” comes from the same root.

¹⁰ Though not every use of these Hebrew words is translated with *pistis*, which shows they are not fully interchangeable. For instance, “his hands were **steady**” (Ex 17:12), a physical steadiness, is translated with *stērizō* (“stabilized”).

¹¹ Greek word *anaideia*, sometimes translated as “persistence” or “impudence”.

The emphasis on hope in Hebrews as part of the definition corroborates and adds dimension to the idea that *pistis* evokes willing obedience rather than mere mental assent or mere compulsory obedience. If a person pursues the call of another because he wants to rather than from compulsion, it implies a personal hope connected to that desire to do so. If this hope were removed, obedience would either not be present or would not be from faith but from compulsion.

Abraham is the chief Biblical example of this faith (Rom 4:1-22, Gal 3:5-9, Heb 11:8-10, 17-19; Jas 2:21-23). He did not waver from clinging to God's promise. He was faithful even to the point of being willing to sacrifice his son Isaac. He conformed to both God's promise and command with the hope and trust that God would even restore his son. Jesus praises the example of faith in the centurion who shamelessly sought Jesus' help while confessing His authority over creation (Mt 8:8-10), as well as the Canaanite woman's shameless request with trust and submission (Mt 15:22-28), and the shameless love of the forgiven sinful woman who washed His feet under the gaze of the Jews (Lk 7:36-50) and of the unclean woman with the hemorrhage who trusted that a touch was sufficient for healing and professed her deed before a crowd (Lk 8:43-48). All these examples show a shameless hope in Jesus as a rewarder of those who seek Him and follow Him that dominates any motive to shrink back.

In accord with Christ's teaching, *pistis* might be helpfully summarized as a word for the default bond between an infant and his parents: the child conforms to and learns from the image of his parents, trusts them, seeks to please them, and looks to them as his source and hope for every good.

- ✙ "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like [little children / infants],¹² you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever then humbles himself as this [little child / infant], he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." (Mt 18:3-4)

The pictures of "hopeful assurance" and "faithfulness" by default seem like different senses to the English ear, since modern English lacks a corresponding word for the underlying state (except what remains in the phrase "good faith"). But understanding the unity behind these pictures shows the Scriptural usage to be more consistent, and it makes Scripture's use of various articles and prepositions ("the faith", "in faith", etc.) more sensible (though English translators often omit them).

The Christian Faith then is the bond that unites us to listen to and press toward Christ, the *Logos* of God, based on our hope of life with Him. This willing hopefulness is as Paul describes:

- ✙ "Not that I have already obtained [the resurrection] or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." (Phil 3:12-14)

This sense of faith is not defined by faithfulness in works, but by the clinging of the heart to its object, which must therefore pursue the fruit of faithfulness in works. So faith is not that which never stumbles in faithfulness, but it is that which, when it sees that it has stumbled, shamelessly returns again with repentance and renewed hope. This is the image of Peter whose faith did not die though he failed to be perfectly faithful while walking to Christ on the sea (though he did earn the label of "little-faith") (Mt 14:28-31), nor did his faith fail even when he denied Jesus three times, as Jesus said it would not (Lk 22:31-34). In both cases he repented and shamelessly returned to Christ. Faith is only absent where the mind refuses to be persuaded, which is to say, where there is no repentance.

¹² Greek word [*paidion*](#), here and later in the same passage.

The difference then with describing the Christian faith as “trust” in modern English is that trust generally describes a passive acceptance of the fidelity of someone else. By contrast, “faith” is “a living, busy, active, mighty thing”,¹³ the state of union that clings in fidelity to another.

Faith as Evidence for Persuasion

The third sense of *pistis* is to refer to an external means that secures the bond of *pistis* with someone else, such as a vow, legal evidence, or something a rhetorician can appeal to to make his argument sway a hearer. This sense is seen often in Greek texts outside of Scripture,¹⁴ and fits Aristotle’s use for “means of persuasion”, but it appears in Scripture as well, usually translated as “proof” or “evidence”. For example:

- ✦ “Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished **proof** [*pistis*] to all men by raising Him from the dead.” (Acts 17:30-31)

One can easily see a connection between this sense and the “loyalty” sense described previously, since the external proof effectively serves as the *logos* that persuades the witness and substantiates the bond. Aristotle defended using *pistis* to refer to external demonstrations when he said, “*Pistis* is clearly a sort of demonstration, since we are most fully persuaded when we consider a thing to have been demonstrated.”¹⁵ (Note that this statement is hard to make sense of if *pistis* refers merely to the trust of the individual rather than to the bond that evokes that trust.) However, I do distinguish this as its own sense of the word, because it refers more to the means of securing the bond than to the bond itself. The quotation from Aristotle would counter-argue that the means of securing the bond is itself part of the bond, since if the demonstration were invalidated then the bond would break. I argue to instead view this use as a shorthand for the means or *logos* that leads to faith. Either way, “He furnished this external thing as *pistis* to all men,” can effectively be understood as, “He furnished this external thing to secure the *pistis* of all men.” When a lawyer holds up evidence to a jury and says, “Here is your *pistis*,” he is saying, “Here is something that should convince you to align with my view.”

For us Christians, Christ’s resurrection is the ultimate “proof” that secures our faith in Him.

Conclusion

The three senses of the Greek word *pistis* presented here are all connected around the central sense of “loyalty of the heart”. Loyalty faith, in which a person is persuaded to align with another, in its most basic form requires mental assent. If the context is only of loyalty or persuasion to a statement of fact rather than to a job or to a lord, then loyalty becomes equivalent to “mental assent” or “trust”. Similarly, it makes sense that the word that refers to the loyalties of a person’s mind could also become used in the context of rhetoric to refer to the means by which a speaker could gain their alignment.

With respect to “the Christian faith”, saving faith is the deeper sense of the word here summarized as “loyalty faith”. This faith is a gift from being “born again” of the Holy Spirit (Jn 3:3), not the work of man or his own independent intellect, just as the faith of an infant is his by virtue of his birth, not by his own effort. We are

¹³ See (Luther, M. (1960). Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans. In E. T. Bachmann (Ed.), *Luther’s works: Vol. 35. Word and sacrament I* (pp. 365–380). Fortress Press.) at pp. 370-371.

¹⁴ See (Hay, D. (1989). *Pistis as “Ground for Faith” in Hellenized Judaism and Paul*. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 108(3), 461-476. [doi:10.2307/3267114](https://doi.org/10.2307/3267114)) for non-Biblical examples.

¹⁵ Rhetoric 1.1, 1355a4

saved by grace through faith alone, not by works, but living faith must bear fruit (Mt 7:15-21, Jas 2, 1 Jn 3). Or as Paul says in Galatians, “a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus . . . the Law is not of faith. . . . For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love.” (Gal 2:16, 3:12, 5:6)

Appreciating this broader picture of faith, in contrast to merely viewing faith as “trust”, cuts through many abuses that would claim that Christian “faith” means emotion, or fideism, or mere mental assent. For faith that is persuaded by and clings to and conforms to God’s *Logos* must by this definition be grounded in the persuasion of that real *Logos* and His resurrection from the dead, and must then bear the fruit of pursuing God’s will (Mt 7:21), even if it stumbles in its attempts to bear fruit. For “we all stumble in many ways” (Jas 3:2).

So we are saved by grace through faith alone, but living faith is never alone.

✚ “It is a trustworthy statement:

For if we died with Him, we will also live with Him;

If we endure, we will also reign with Him;

If we deny Him, He also will deny us;

If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.” (2 Tm 2:11-13)