

## What Is Saving Faith According to John's Gospel? John Hepp, Jr.

*In this paper "John" by itself does not refer to the human author but to the Gospel by that name. Bible quotations are from the New International Version but with Christ changed to its equivalent Messiah.*

Many Scriptures show that faith is absolutely essential to obtaining eternal life. "For it is by grace you have been saved—through faith..." (Eph. 2:8). Faith focuses on what is somehow invisible and/or future: "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (Heb. 11:1). But is just any faith in God or Christ sufficient? Probably no serious Bible teacher believes that.<sup>1</sup> Most of us assume that there is such a thing as inadequate or misplaced faith, which does not save. Can "saving faith" be distinguished from "non-saving faith"? We will consider how the Gospel of John helps answer that question. For example, it shows that saving faith (a) assents to truth but is more than assent, (b) is not just momentary but persistent.

To begin, it should be noted that John does not use the Greek noun for *faith*. But it uses the verb for *believe* (*pisteuo*) 98 times.<sup>2</sup> That is far more than any other Bible book. An alternate title for this study could be "Believing According to the Gospel of John." In this paper *faith* and *believing* are treated as synonymous.

In several ways John's perspectives are different from the other Gospels. It was probably written later than the others and presupposes their existence. John supplements them but does not replace them. We should not conclude that John or any other Gospel is superior to the rest. All of them were written long after Pentecost, when Messiah bestowed the Spirit. They are all Messiah's teaching through that Spirit, as He promised (see John 16:12–15). His new *ekklesia* (assembly, church) is their context; God is their author. They cannot basically disagree.

Doctrinal conclusions should be based on careful analysis of all the evidence. Any conclusion is faulty that cannot be harmonized with it all. In this paper I try to present John's evidence about faith in the categories listed below. Of course, the aspects listed under each category are my own choices. If you disagree, make sure you have solid textual and/or doctrinal reasons for doing so.

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|---|-----------------|
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Under each category B-E I aim to give each aspect at least at its first occurrence, with later references listed at the same place. Elsewhere in those lists the word "see" refers back to that first

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<sup>1</sup> Some are so intent on not "contaminating" God's grace that they hesitate to analyze faith. But at least they specify exactly what must be believed. Most would distinguish faith from religious excitement.

<sup>2</sup> Why does John use only the verb (believe) and not the noun (faith)? Perhaps in order to emphasize faith's activity. It is not a commodity to buy or sell—or trust in. As the equivalents show, it is an active response to God.

occurrence; “cf.” refers to a closely-related aspect. A question mark after a reference indicates doubt whether the reference is appropriate in that category.

### A. Ways John Links “Believe” to Its Object

Believing is not just a hopeful attitude. It is always directed toward an object—that is, facts or a person or thing that is believed. But after the verb “believe” John does not always state that object. For example, “they could not believe, because...” (12:39). This happens about thirty times (see also 1:7, 51; 3:12, 18b). When John does indicate an object of faith, it uses one of the forms in the following table. These are different forms of Greek syntax with the verb *pisteuo*. (To further analyze the objects of faith, see section C.)

<b>Greek Forms to Link “Believe” (<i>Pisteuo</i>) with Its Object in John’s Gospel</b>			
<b>Forms Indicating the Object of the Verb</b>	<b>Frequency &amp; Meaning of the Form</b>	<b>Some Verses Where This Form Indicates Saving Faith</b>	<b>Some Verses Where This Form Indicates Non-Saving Faith</b>
<b>Form 1</b> The particle <i>hoti</i> plus a noun clause	11 times tells what facts are believed	8:24; 11:27; 13:19; 14:10; 16:27, 30; 17:8; 20:31 give examples of facts true of Messiah	9:18 indicates facts unrelated to Messiah. 11:42? 17:21?
<b>Form 2</b> The preposition <i>eis</i> plus an object in accusative case	35 times gives Messiah (or once, God) as object of faith	1:12—“believed in his name” 3:16—“believes in him” 12:37	2:23? 8:30 (see v. 31) 12:42?
<b>Form 3</b> No preposition (except in 3:15, which has <i>en</i> ) plus an object in dative case	20 times gives object of faith (Messiah, His words or works, Scriptures, others)	2:22; 3:15; 4:21?; 4:50?; 5:24, 38, 46, 47; 6:30; 8:45, 46; 10:37, 38(2); 12:38; 14:11	8:31

#### Observations & Conclusions Re Ways John Links “Believe” to Its Object

1. The references in the last column show my doubts that any of these forms always refers to saving faith.
2. Form 1 uses *hoti* to introduce the content of what is believed. That object consists of specific facts, often but not always facts essential to saving faith. In other words, form 1 sometimes—but not always—has to do with faith in Messiah.

3. Form 2 uses the preposition *eis* plus the accusative case to introduce the person believed in. That person is once God, otherwise Messiah.<sup>3</sup> It often attributes eternal life or its equivalent to those who so believe (1:12; 3:16, 36; 6:40; 7:38, 39; 12:46; 14:12). Therefore, some consider it a technical expression for saving faith. But not all who so believed in John 8:30 got saved. Jesus warned them in the next verse (8:31) that they had to “hold to” (continue in) His teaching. Saving faith perseveres.
4. Form 3 normally uses only the dative case to introduce the object of faith. That object is not facts (as with form 1) but entities. These are usually Messiah or His word or works, but can also be such things as Moses or the Scriptures.<sup>4</sup>

### B. Equivalents to Believing

Under this category are listed other terms or figures that John pairs with “believe” and/or possibly uses as equivalents to believing. The Bible often refers to such equivalent actions. By describing various aspects of believing, they help to define it. Some are inferred from negative statements. For example, look at 3:36 in the list. In that verse “does not obey” is given as the opposite of “believe.” Therefore, we infer that “obey” is equivalent to believing. Nearly every item in the following list is labeled “a,” “b,” or “c.” Each label indicates a reason for identifying that item as equivalent to believing:

- a. It is used in parallel with faith—as a different aspect of faith rather than a completely distinct action.
  - b. It gives results identical to those faith gives.
  - c. Its results are equivalent to eternal life.
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|-----|----------|---|
| a   | 1:11     | His own did not receive Him (1:12; 13:20)   |
| a   | 1:12     | receive = believe on His name (see 1:11)  |
| a   | 3:11–12  | receive our witness (cf. 5:24)  |
| a   | 3:19–21? | comes to the light (cf. 12:35–36; cf. 12:46)  |
| a   | 3:36     | (as the opposite of believe) does not obey (cf. 8:51–52)  |
| c   | 4:14     | drink of the water Jesus gives  |
| c   | 5:24     | whoever hears My word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life <sup>5</sup> (cf. 8:43; cf. 8:47; cf. 8:51–52; 10:3–5, 16, 27; 12:48) |
| c   | 6:27     | eat the food that endures to eternal life (6:51)  |
| a,c | 6:35, 45 | come to Jesus   |
| c   | 6:53–58  | eat His flesh and drink His blood   |

<sup>3</sup> Form 2 introduces “him” or “me,” referring to Messiah (26 times); Messiah’s “name” (3 times); the Son (1 time); other designations for the Son (4 times: 6:29; 9:35; 12:11, 36).

<sup>4</sup> Form 3 has as object 10 times a pronoun referring to Messiah (“him” 2 times, “me” 8 times). Scripture is the object 2 times. Several objects are found once each: “him who sent me” (5:24); “the one he sent” (5:38); “Moses” (5:46); “what he [Moses] wrote” (5:47); “what I say” (5:47); “the miracles” (10:38); “this [claim by Jesus]” (11:26); “our message [the message to Israel]” (12:38).

<sup>5</sup> Only those can hear whom God draws (8:43, 47; cf. 10:4–5, 27). Thus, hearing and believing are two sides of the same saving response.

- c 8:12 follow Him (10:4–5, 27–28; 12:26; 21:19)
- b 8:31–32 hold to His teaching (=abide/continue in His word)
- b 8:41 love Me (14:15, 21, 23–24; 16:27)
- b 8:43 unable to hear what God says (cf. 5:24; 8:47)
- b 8:47 He who belongs to God hears what God says (see 8:43)
- c 8:51–52 If anyone keeps My word, he will never see death (14:15; 15:10; 17:6)
- c 10:3–5, 16, 27 know/listen to His voice (see 5:24; cf. 12:48)
- c 10:4–5, 27–28 follow Him (see 8:12)
- c 10:9–10 enters (the sheep fold)
- c 12:24, 25? die, hate life (psuche) in this world
- c 12:26 Whoever serves Me must follow Me (see 8:12)
- b 12:35–36? walk in light, believe in light (12:46; cf. 3:19–21)
- b 12:40 see, understand, turn
- b 12:46 I have come...as a light, so that no one who believes in Me should stay in darkness (see 12:35–36)
- a 12:48 (as opposite of believe) reject Him and not receive His sayings (cf. 10:3–5, 16, 27)
- a 13:20 he who accepts whomever I send accepts Me (see 1:11)
- c 14:7 If you had known Me, you would know the Father (16:3; 17:3)
- b 14:15, 21, 23–24? love Him (will keep His word) (see 8:41)
- 15:4–7? Remain in Me and I in you
- b 15:10 If one obeys His commands, will remain in His love (see 8:51–52)
- c 16:3 will persecute believers because they have not known the Father or Messiah (see 14:7)
- a 16:27 The Father loves you because you have loved Me and believed that I came from God (see 8:41)
- c 17:3 to know God and Messiah is eternal life (see 14:7)
- a 17:6–8 obeyed Your word (see 8:51–52)
- 21:19, 22? follow Me (see 8:12; but here said to Peter)

#### Observations & Conclusions Re Equivalents to Believing

1. There are many equivalents to believing. The most common are hearing and keeping His word/words/commands.
2. Although John does not use the terms “repent” or “repentance,” belief includes that concept. This is seen in the nature of some of the equivalents, such as, coming to the light, walking in the light, following Him, continuing in His word, keeping His word (commandments), obeying. These indicate a moral aspect to belief, not just a “change of mind.”
3. The persistence of saving faith is emphasized by the equivalent “remaining”/“abiding” in Him (8:31).

**C. Content of Believing**

Under this category are listed indications of the person, thing, or teaching to be believed, whether implicitly or explicitly. Notice that some are starred (\*) as being the most essential in evangelism.

- 1:1 Jesus is God's Word—that is, His thought uttered so that we can understand it. (Cf. 7:16–18; 12:49–50)
- 1:4 Jesus is the life that is the light of men. (1:9; 8:12; 9:5; 12:35–36, 46)  
Perhaps Jesus' being the ladder to heaven illustrates the same truth. (1:51)
- 1:9 This light was coming into the world to enlighten every man. (see 1:4)
- 1:12 Jesus' name = all that He is? (3:18)
- 1:18 "The one and only God" has made God known.
- 1:29, 36 Jesus is the Lamb of God.
- 1:32–33 Jesus is Spirit-endowed and baptizes in the Spirit. (cf. 7:37–39)
- 1:41–42 \*Jesus is Messiah (Christ—King).  
Also 1:45, 49; 3:28; 4:25–26, 29; 7:26–27, 31, 41–42; 9:22; 11:27; 12:14–15, 42; 18:33, 36–39; 19:3, 12, 15, 19, 21, 22; 20:31.
- 2:9 Jesus converted the water into "good wine."
- 3:15–16 Believe in Him. (9:35–38)
- 3:18 \*Believe in the name of God's one and only Son. (see 1:12)
- 4:42 Jesus is the Savior of the world.
- 5:9, 10, 16, 18 He did His Father's work on the Sabbath. (7:22–23)
- 5:17, 19 He did only what His Father did or told Him to do.
- 5:17–18 "Calling God His own Father [made] Himself equal with God." (The Son should get the same honor as the Father.)
- 6:11–13 Jesus fed 5000+.
- 6:35, 41, 48, 50, 51 Jesus is the bread (of life) from heaven.
- 7:16–18 Jesus' teaching is not His own but of Him who sent Him. (12:49–50; 14:24; 17:7–8)
- 7:37–39 Jesus would give the Spirit to "drink." (see 1:32–33)
- 8:12 Jesus is "the light of the world." (see 1:4)
- 8:24, 28, 58 Believe that "I am." (13:19)
- 9:5 "the light of the world" (see 1:4)
- 9:35–38 Believe in the Son of Man. (see 3:15–16)
- 10:38 Believe His works, to know and understand that the Father is in Him and He in the Father. (14:10–11, 20; 17:10)
- 11:42 Believe that the Father sent Him. (16:27; 17:8, 21, 25)
- 12:35–36 You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk....(see 1:4)
- 12:44? Whoever believes in Him believes in the One who sent Him. (13:20; 15:21, 23)
- 12:45? Whoever sees Him sees the One who sent Him. (14:9)
- 12:46 I have come as a light. (see 1:4)
- 12:49–50 (see 7:16–18)
- 13:20 (see 12:44)
- 14:10–11, 20 Believe [trust My word] that I am in the Father and the Father in Me. (see 10:38)
- 14:24 These words...are not My own; they belong to the Father (see 7:16–18)

- 15:21, 23 (see 12:44)  
 16:27 (see 11:42)  
 17:7–8 I gave them the words You gave Me and they accepted them. (see 7:16–18)  
 17:10 All I have is Yours, and all You have is Mine. (cf. 10:38)  
 19:7 Jesus is the Son of God.

#### Observations & Conclusions Re Content of Believing

1. New believers rarely know much that is listed here. Little of it is included in the evangelistic sermons summarized in Acts.
2. How much is essential? I have starred two passages that give the same specific teaching, stated two ways. This same teaching is often repeated in the sermons in Acts:
  - 1:41–42 (and often) Jesus is Messiah (that is, Christ = King).
  - 3:18 (see 1:12) Believe in the name of God's one and only Son.
3. Since we are commanded to make disciples (learners), we expect them to quickly learn and accept the other truths.

#### D. Mechanics of Believing

Under this category are listed indications of how believing begins and develops.

- 1:6–8 John the Baptist was sent to bear witness, so that all might believe. (1:15, 26–27, 29–34; 3:27–36; 5:33–36; 10:41–42)  
 1:14 The Word became flesh...we beheld His glory.  
 1:18 He made known the God no one can see.  
 1:41 Andrew found his brother Simon and witnessed. (1:45; 4:28–30, 39–42; 17:20; 19:35; 21:24)  
 1:43 Jesus found Philip.  
 1:50 because I said I saw you under the fig tree  
 2:11 By the first sign He manifested His glory.  
 2:22 A prediction that His disciples remembered after His resurrection, then believed the Scripture and the word He spoke.  
 2:23–24 At the Passover many believed in His name, beholding His signs, but He didn't entrust Himself to them. (3:2; 4:45)  
 4:50, 55 The man believed (the word).  
 5:36 His works bear witness (10:37–38; 14:11; 12:37; 14:11)  
 5:37–39 The Scriptures bear witness. (5:45–47; 8:19)  
 5:44 Can't believe if they seek glory from men rather than God. (12:42–43)  
 5:45–47 If you believed Moses, would believe Me (see 5:37–39)  
 6:44, 65 No one can come unless the Father draws him. (cf. 12:32)  
 6:45 All who hear and learn from the Father come. (8:44, He who is of God hears God's words; cf. 3:21)  
 7:17 If willing to do God's will, will know if the Son's doctrine is from God.  
 8:30 As He spoke, many believed. (cf. 8:45–48)  
 8:37 My word has no place in you.

- 8:45 Because I speak the truth, you don't believe Me. (see 8:30)  
 10:3, 14, 16 His sheep hear the voice of their shepherd and follow him.  
 12:32 If lifted up, will draw (see 6:44)  
 12:39–40 They couldn't believe because God hardened them.  
 12:42–43 Many rulers believed but didn't confess Him. (see 5:44)  
 16:8–9 The Holy Spirit will convict in regard to sin because men do not believe in Me.  
 17:21, 23 He prays for unity so that the world may believe.  
 19:35–37 Scripture fulfilled  
 20:29 Blessed those who didn't see yet believed.  
 20:30–31 These signs written that you might believe.

#### Mechanics of Believing for the Twelve:

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|---|--|
| 1:50 Do you believe because I told you I saw you?                                   | 17:2, 6; 18:9 The Father gave them all to the Son, and they kept the Father's word.                                |
| 2:11 After Jesus "revealed His glory" at Cana, His disciples believed.              | 17:25 They know that You have sent Me.   |
| 2:22 After His resurrection, they believed because they remembered this prediction. | 17:26 Jesus made and makes the Father known in order that the Father's love and the Son may be in them.            |
| 13:19; 14:29 telling you now so that you will believe                               | 20:8, 29 "The other disciple" saw the evidence of Jesus' resurrection and believed. Thomas saw Jesus and believed. |
| 14:1 Believe [Trust] in God...also in Me.   | 20:25 Unless I see...and place my finger...I will not believe.   |
| 16:30–31 They claimed to believe that He came from God. He asked, Do you believe?   |  |

#### Observations & Conclusions Re Mechanics of Believing

1. Believing is a response to witness (often verbal), such as, that of John the Baptist, the apostles, Jesus Himself, Jesus' works, the Scriptures.
2. The agreement between Scripture and its fulfillment is convincing.
3. Obstacles to believing include seeking glory from men and being unwilling to do God's will.
4. For anyone to believe, the Father must draw him (through the Holy Spirit). Those who are not His sheep will not follow Him.
5. Judging from the growth of faith in the disciples, it is a process (not once for all).

#### E. Effects of Believing

Under this category are listed various results from believing. Those marked \* are results of equivalents of believing.

- 1:12 He gave the right to become God's children. (1:13, born of God, 3:5, 6, 8—born of the Spirit. Believing is in vv. 11–12, 15–18.)  
 3:3, 5 see/enter the kingdom of God  
 3:15–16 have eternal life (3:36; 4:14\*; 5:24; 6:27\*, 40, 47, 51\*, 54\*, 63, 68; 10:10\*, 28\*; 11:25–26; 12:25\*, 50; 17:2–3; 20:31)  
 3:17 be saved  
 3:18 not be judged (unbelievers are already judged, 3:19–21)

- 6:35 not hunger nor thirst
- 6:39, 40, 46, 47 Jesus will raise him up on the last day. (11:25)
- 6:56 abides (remains) in Him
- 7:38–39 receives the Holy Spirit; rivers of living water
- 8:12\* not walk in darkness but have light (12:46)
- 8:31\* truly be His disciples, know the truth, be made free by truth
- 8:42\* If God were your Father, you would love Me.
- 8:51–53\* will never see death (11:26)
- 10:3–4\*, 9–10\*, 15\*, 27–29\* are protected and cared for by the Shepherd (17:12\*)
- 10:14–15\* know the Shepherd as the Shepherd knows the Father
- 10:27–28\* No one can snatch them out of Jesus' hand or the Father's hand.
- 12:36 become sons of light
- 12:40\* heal them
- 12:44 Who believes in Me believes in the One who sent Me (result or cause?). (13:20\*; 14:7\*, 9\*)
- 13:10\* "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet."
- 14:12 Believer will do the same works as Messiah and greater ones.
- 14:15\* Whoever loves Him will keep His commands.
- 14:21–23\* Whoever loves Him will be loved by the Father and the Son, who will disclose Himself. They will come and make their abode.
- 14:26ff; etc. MUCH MORE ABOUT THE HOLY SPIRIT
- 15:4–5\*, 8\*, 16\* Whoever remains in Him bears fruit. (16:7–15??)
- 15:19\* Because one is chosen, the world hates him. (persecutes, 16:1–3\*, 33\*; 17:14\*)
- 17:18\* He has sent them into the world. (20:21)

#### Observations & Conclusions Re Effects of Believing

1. Believing achieves marvelous results: becoming God's Son, becoming free, being cared for by the Shepherd, bearing fruit, doing mighty works, receiving the Holy Spirit, being raised from death, entering the kingdom, inheriting eternal life.
2. Possibly the Lord emphasized some of these results in order to give assurance to those that saw them. (See 8:31, 42; 14:15.) If so, assurance related to the moment of first believing is reinforced rather than erased.
3. Believers have a mission to the world but are hated by it.