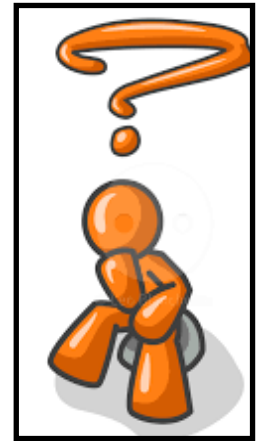


What About ... the Idea that Hebrews 11:1 Defines Faith

By Dave DeWitt

Very common among Christians is to use **Hebrews 11:1** as a definition of faith:

***Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for,
the conviction of things not seen.***



Hebrews 11 tells us what faith **does**. It is not a definition of what faith **is**.

If this is a definition of faith, then faith is not connected to truth. If this is a definition of faith, it says any stupid faith in anything (like Santa Claus or idols) gives me the assurance that my conviction (that Santa will come down my chimney, or idols will answer my prayers) is true. Faith in the Bible is always in the truth. Clearly, the author of Hebrews is not talking about stupid faith.

What True Faith Does

The author of Hebrews is talking about what true faith does, not giving a definition of faith. For example:

Hebrews 11:4, *By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous...* Abel's better sacrifice showed he was righteous. It was what his faith did.

Hebrews 11:7, *By faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark.*

Building the ark did not create Noah's faith. Building the ark was what Noah's faith did. His faith was his understanding that God's warning about things not yet seen was true.

Hebrews 11:29, *By faith they [the Israelites] passed through the Red Sea as though they were passing through dry land; and the Egyptians, when they attempted it, were drowned.*

Passing through the Red Sea showed the faith of the Israelites, it did not create their faith in God. The Egyptians drowned because they did not have the faith in God the Israelites did.

The misunderstanding of using Hebrews 11:1 as a definition comes from thinking the word always means a definition, but it doesn't. For example, I might say, "My hobby is flying airplanes." That does not define the word "hobby." "My car is what gets me to work." That is not a definition of my car.

There is an old Christian song entitled, "Happiness is the Lord." Is that a definition of happiness? The song includes the statements, "Happiness is a new creation," "Happiness is to be forgiven," and "Happiness is to know the Savior." So, which one is a definition of happiness?

The "to be" verb is used repeatedly throughout the Bible where it does not define something.

Romans 2:24, *The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles.*

Does that mean what is blasphemed among the Gentiles is a definition of the name of God?

Romans 3:8, *Their condemnation is just.* Is justice a definition of condemnation?

The NASB translates

1 Corinthians 13:4, *Love is patient, love is kind, does not brag and is not arrogant...*

Patience and kindness are not a definition of love, but they are what love does, just as bragging and arrogance are what love does not do.

Conclusion

Hebrews 11:1 is a result of, not a definition of, true faith. Faith in God results in the assurance of things hoped for. Faith in God results in the conviction of things not seen.