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Godfrey J. Ellis

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A RESTORATION OF PAUL'S UNDERSTANDING OF FAITH AS A RELATIONSHIP OF ACTION

Godfrey J. Ellis

Review of Brent J. Schmidt, *Relational Faith: The Transformation and Restoration of Pistis as Knowledge, Trust, Confidence, and Covenantal Faithfulness* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2022). 356 pages, \$21.95 (softcover).

Abstract: Brent Schmidt builds on his earlier book on relational grace by tackling the topic of relational faith. For those interested in historical trends in religious thought, this book provides intimate details of Greek and Latin terms and the gradual corruption of the original Pauline concept of faith by Augustine and other early and influential thinkers and theologians. Leading the reader through the conceptual reworking of the idea of faith by examining both well-known and lesser-known reformers, but somewhat skirting the faith-works debate, Schmidt ends up nevertheless convincingly demonstrating two facts. First, that faith as concrete action, not just as abstract belief, is a distinguishing doctrinal foundation that is consistently preached by leaders of the Church today. Second, Joseph Smith's concept of faith as a covenantal relationship built on mutual trust was not a latter-day invention. Instead, it is a restoration of the concept of faith as originally understood by members of the church at the time of Paul.

Faith is an eternal principle. It will not disappear at death. In fact, it existed before the creation of the world, and it will exist after the final resurrection. But what, exactly, is it?

We know that faith is the instigator and motivator of all behavior. Without faith, we would do nothing – from the faith involved in planting a springtime seed to the faith exercised in switching on a lightbulb or popping a slice of bread into a toaster, we act only because we have faith in an outcome. It is the expectation or hope of that anticipated outcome that prompts any behavior. So, it is an action word.

Theologically, faith must be centered on Jesus Christ. Joseph Smith called faith in Christ, “the first principle in revealed religion, and the foundation of all righteousness.”¹ Because faith is so critical to our very lives and beliefs, it is essential that we understand what faith is, how it functions, and how we can use it to act, rather than relegating it to merely being a hope or belief that acts upon us. Still, many members are ignorant of what faith (*pistis*) once was and how it worked at the time in which the apostle Paul was writing his epistles. Paul clearly had something in mind when he used that term and Brent Schmidt contends that Paul’s specific understanding of faith was largely lost to the world through corruption and distortion during the Dark Ages.

Accordingly, after writing his first book, *Relational Grace*,² Schmidt began to also challenge what he saw as an unsustainable distortion in the understanding of faith. That errant understanding, which Schmidt asserts is now prevalent in mainstream Christianity, was restored through Joseph Smith. In his latest book, *Relational Faith*,³ Schmidt develops the idea that faith (*pistis*), like charity (*charis*), was originally built on a reciprocal and action-based two-way relationship. As he informs the reader, “Since *pistis* is also a divine gift, like *charis*, I hypothesized that *pistis* — biblical faith — might also have the same active, relational, covenantal, and reciprocal obligations that all gifts had in the first-century Mediterranean world” (p. 3). He found evidence that this was the case and spends a considerable amount of time going over the linguistic details of the word. He shows how the term has been distorted, only to be reinstated in Restoration teachings.

Because faith is so central in our lives, Schmidt believes it is essential that Church members understand the historical evolution of faith more completely. With that understanding, they can more fully appreciate the restoration of Pauline *pistis*, understand how LDS faith differs from the faith of most other mainline Christians, and further reconcile the muddy faith/works debate. This book, therefore, has an important contribution to make to Latter-day Saint literature. It is a valiant and valuable attempt

1. “Appendix 1: First Theological Lecture on Faith, circa January–May 1835,” p. [1], *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/appendix-1-first-theological-lecture-on-faith-circa-january-may-1835/1>.

2. Brent J. Schmidt, *Relational Grace: The Reciprocal and Binding Covenant of Charis* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015).

3. Brent J. Schmidt, *Relational Faith: The Transformation and Restoration of Pistis as Knowledge, Trust, Confidence, and Covenantal Faithfulness* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2022).

to address what he asserts is the true meaning of the word, faith, and how that meaning has evolved – i.e., been corrupted – over time.

In great detail, Schmidt asserts that, “a careful study of ancient Greek and Roman literature ... [reveals that] in the ancient Mediterranean world, the relational associations of *pistis* included persuasion, knowledge, patron-client relationships, commitments, trust, covenants, and reciprocity. ... Faith entailed ... actively making choices, and forming a trusting, covenantal relationship with [Christ and his Father]” (p. 289). Faith, therefore, requires *behavior* on the part of man, as well as God, to create a two-way, reciprocal trust. This concept of reciprocity is a worldwide one. The British might say, “tit for tat.” Americans might say, “You scratch my back, and I’ll scratch yours.” The Latin is, “quid pro quo.” A Chinese saying is, “a drop of help, a well of repaying.” One is reminded of King Benjamin’s teaching: “And behold, all that he requires of you is to keep his commandments; and he has promised you that if ye would keep his commandments ... he doth bless you and prosper you” (Mosiah 2:22).

Schmidt’s thesis that faith is based on reciprocal or relational behavior is very well articulated in an excellent “Forward” by John Welch as well as in the author’s equally excellent “Introduction” and “Conclusion.” This material is of great importance and relevance. It answers multiple questions. There is so much that suddenly falls into place. Chief among those is how and why the doctrine of faith as taught in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints differs from many mainline Christian positions. It was one of those “Of course — *that’s* what is happening!” moments. Once pointed out, it comes across as obvious truth. Notably, all of the material, together, requires only 12 pages or roughly 5% of the book. The remaining pages, which expand upon those 12, are also of value and necessary for a complete presentation. The bulk of the book will have particular appeal for those deeply interested in the linguistic and philosophical history of religious thought. However, I believe I received and fully appreciated the author’s main premise quite quickly in just the Forward and Introduction. Consequently, I found the increasingly intricate discussion of how the Pauline meaning of faith began to change over time somewhat repetitive. Schmidt traces the term through Greek and Latin linguistics and across the philosophical ideas of a plethora of authors, some quite obscure.

This in-depth survey will be of great value for scholars interested in ancient Jewish, Greek, and Latin origins of words, or those wanting to use Schmidt’s book as a reference source. For many attempting to read

this book cover-to-cover and looking for inspiration, it may seem taxing as Schmidt runs through a history of obscure thinkers and philosophers. The in-depth discussion includes “The Etymologies of *Pistis* and *Fides*” (Chapter One), a somewhat vague “Social Science Theories of Trust Inherent in *Pistis*” (Chapter Two), and “Old Testament Roots of *Pistis* and *Aman*” (Chapter Three). We read about “Greco-Roman Times,” the “Nuances of *Pistis*” and “The Goddesses *Pistis* and *Fides*,” each chapter essentially making similar points, albeit from different perspectives. This is not a criticism of the book, but an observation and opinion of one reader, hopefully as an aid so that those contemplating the text will know what to expect. No doubt other readers may disagree.

In Schmidt’s presentation, Augustine emerges in the middle of the book as a key figure in this elaborate history; he is the major “bad guy” in the book. Schmidt points to Augustine as the one who used the Catholic “Rule of Faith to rationalize and condone sinful Christian behavior” (p. 124). It was Augustine who negated the association of “faith with action or even with baptism, but reduced it to mere song, metaphor, or solitary sufficiency” (p. 147). It was Augustine whose “new doctrines of original sin (and thus the need for infant baptism) and salvation by grace in defiance of free will. . . [were] instrumental in inaugurating the doctrine of predestination, radically limiting heaven to a relative few of God’s children and casting out the rest, who cannot escape their bewildering inability to affect their eternal assignment” (p. 149). Schmidt believes this contributed to Augustine “becoming ‘so obsessed with the idea of God’s power that he left little room for his love’” (p. 150). Thus, the “Catholic Fathers [primarily Augustine] held that an abstract, sovereign God could make only some people possess a mystical, passive faith through grace while He withheld faith from others” (pp. 4-5).

These Fathers were followed by “Intellectuals [who] warped the once plain, cognizable, and physical Lord into an incomprehensible, unknowable, and incorporeal being with which one could have only mystical or emotional experiences guaranteeing salvation” (p. 6). The word, *faith*, then, became corrupted from an active faithfulness and mutual trust developed because of “works” of both parties “into the domain of thoughts and beliefs” (p. xiii). Faith became merely “an amorphous idea that was intricate, confusing, complex, and ultimately passive on the part of the would-be believer” (p. 17). Schmidt see three current trends:

First, the object of faith used to be a person . . . whereas now the object of belief has come to be an idea or a theory. Second,

the act of faith used to be a decision ... whereas now the state of belief has come to be a descriptive, if not a completely passive, condition. Third, the mood of faith used to involve one's relation with ... certainties ... whereas now the mood of belief merely involves thinking about uncertainties. (p. 19.)

On a personal note, these took on relevance for me as a retired professor of counseling psychology at a Catholic university. Just before I retired, the university adopted several "core themes" and all departments and programs were required to incorporate the new core themes into all curricula. One of those core themes was "Faith." Although a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and not a Catholic, I was surrounded by faculty who were Catholic but only loosely affiliated with that faith tradition. I assumed we would all think similarly about what faith really meant. To my surprise, I found myself the only one looking for a way to align our program with faith in Jesus Christ. By otherwise unanimous vote, the rest of the faculty voted to align our program with a vague "faith in the counseling process" and "faith in psychological theory." When we submitted our statement of affiliation with this watered-down theme, the central administration was fine with that since most other programs were doing the same thing, as was the university as a whole. (Augustine would have loved that!) This is what we currently see all around us today outside the Restored Church. The concept of faith has been contaminated by Augustinian thinking. *Faith* has almost universally come to mean "emotional, mystical inner feelings equated with instant salvation" (p. 2).

Schmidt cannot be accused of lacking courage for he takes on all comers, including even most translations of the Bible. He courageously writes: "Almost all modern Bible translations diverge significantly from what *pistis* meant in about AD 50, when Paul was writing. Because of later theological changes and biases, *pistis* has not been translated according to its original meaning; the idea of faith in modern times has been contaminated by later thinking ... Many of Paul's writings have been distorted in translation and have become difficult to understand because the original context has been lost" (p. 2).

Later, Schmidt discusses Martin Luther's doctrine that "imputed righteousness through faith in Christ taught that one could inherit Christ's righteousness without striving to *be* righteous" (p. 209, emphasis added). Schmidt observes that "faith now became a one-time, immediate, born-again experience" (p. 196).

Thus, we get to the evangelical debate of Lordship Salvation vs. Non-Lordship Salvation. That split came about from the controversy of faith vs. works. This is not a debate that can be fleshed out in this review, nor is it fleshed out in Schmidt's book. It is mentioned briefly and therefore represents an undeveloped but large elephant in the room. It bears some discussion. In brief, the debate among Evangelicals is the struggle of whether works cause faith or faith causes works – or whether works are even relevant at all. The latter is the position of Non-Lordship Salvation, which, in the extreme, asserts that since we are saved by faith alone (*sola fide*), behavior is irrelevant. Once a person has accepted Christ as Savior through a one-time born-again confession, he or she does not need to also accept Christ as Lord. In other words, subsequent sin (“bad works”) or subsequent righteousness (“good works”) don't matter since salvation comes totally from grace and has no connection at all with works – good or bad. Thus, a “saved” person can violate morals and laws and still remain saved through grace since they, at one time, accepted Christ. According to that radical perspective, proponents of Non-Lordship Salvation view faith as “merely the acceptance of salvation as a free and unconditional gift — and they [portray] discipleship as a second-level commitment. Therefore, according to their view, the gospel presents Jesus as Savior only, not as Lord.”⁴

I should add that most Evangelical proponents don't agree with the extreme position of Non-Lordship Salvation and prefer Lordship Salvation where good works naturally follow, but do not cause, salvation. In fact, Non-Lordship Salvation is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer labelled, “cheap grace [which] is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance. ... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship.”⁵ Although not believing that works “cause” salvation in any way, but rather that good works flow naturally from salvation, he writes that *sola fide* [faith alone] is a rationalization and represents merely a “cheap covering for ... sins; no contrition is required, still less any real desire to be delivered from sin.”⁶

A common attack on LDS teachings is the accusation that Latter-day Saints hold the opposite extreme. We are alleged to believe that

4. John MacArthur, “A 15-Year Retrospective on the Lordship Controversy,” *Grace to You* (website), <https://www.gty.org/library/articles/A100/a-15year-retrospective-on-the-lordship-controversy>.

5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), 47.

6. *Ibid.*, 46.

members can “work out their own salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12) – in other words, by works alone. That charge, of course, is demonstrably not true. The accusation is without merit and totally false. If true, it would be a complete denial of the efficacy and necessity for Christ’s atonement. Schmidt asserts that Luther “refused to allow that works are integral to faith or justification, lest they become necessary for salvation ... [which] would usurp the all-sufficient work of Christ” (p. 193). That our works can save us is not the doctrine of the Church. As Quentin L. Cook has taught in a recent General Conference: “None can return to God by his or her own good works alone; we all need the benefit of the Savior’s sacrifice. All have sinned, and it is only through the Atonement of Jesus Christ that we can obtain mercy and live with God.”⁷ Although that may sound close to *sola fide*, it is not. President Hugh B. Brown taught that “there must be more than mere lip service; faith alone is not sufficient.”⁸ The First Vision affirms his statement since Joseph Smith was told, by the mouth of the Lord, that the majority of the Christian world “draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Joseph Smith — History 1:19; see also Matthew 15:8). Similarly, the current Prophet, President Russell M. Nelson, has emphasized the reciprocal nature of trust-built relational faith. One example of such teachings can be seen in the following words: “I plead with you to take charge of your testimony of Jesus Christ. Work for it. Own it. Care for it. Nurture it so that it will grow. Then watch for miracles to happen in your life.”⁹

The above are only a few citations from Church leaders among many hundreds that could be listed. The Church clearly teaches that works are not merely the result of being saved but play a role in securing the salvation that comes only through Jesus Christ. Thus, Latter-day Saint doctrine is in close alignment with the definition of faith explicated so thoroughly in *Relational Faith*. Schmidt believes that President Nelson

7. Quentin L. Cook, “Be True to God and His Work,” *Liahona* 46, no. 11 (November 2022): 119, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2022/11/57cook>.

8. Hugh B. Brown, “Are the Latter-day Saints, or Mormons, Christians?,” *Conference Report* (April 1962), 107, <https://archive.org/details/conferencereport1962a/page/n107/mode/2up>.

9. Russell M. Nelson, Facebook, August 1, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/russell.m.nelson/videos/5938701126159705>. See, also, Nelson, “Choices for Eternity” (devotional, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, May 15, 2022), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/worldwide-devotional-for-young-adults/2022/05/12nelson>.

is teaching about faith in ways that “closely parallel ancient nuances of *pistis*” (p. 284). However, the intricate balance between faith and works continues to be confusing for many members of the Church and it is not fully understood by them. There have been several analogies drawn in an attempt to explain this delicate dance. Perhaps the best known one comes from the non-member but highly respected Anglican apologist, C.S. Lewis, who famously said, “Christians have often disputed as to whether what leads the Christian home is good actions, or Faith in Christ. I have no right really to speak on such a difficult question, but it does seem to me like asking which blade in a pair of scissors is most necessary.”¹⁰ Taken apart, scissors are merely two blades that can do nothing but awkwardly stab; together, they can cut intricate designs and patterns.

Unfortunately, Schmidt’s book does not cover much of this in its focus on providing sequential and detailed history. I opened this review by saying that the book had an important contribution to make, and so it does, but I would have really enjoyed more on his take on such issues. For me, this is a book that one may need to read, but it is not a book that many would call an *enjoyable* read. I couldn’t help but think that Schmidt’s significant research and his knowledge of Greek and Latin would have made, and could still make, a terrific journal article with a broad appeal. As I opined earlier, the “Forward,” “Introduction,” and final “Conclusion” chapters tell the tale extremely well and in just 12 pages. Then, again, we all recognize that humans require repetition for lasting learning, although some readers may opt out of reading *Relational Faith* after the first few chapters.

A valid question, therefore, is to ask, “Who is this book for?” It is not particularly stirring for those looking for an inspirational experience because the writing style is decidedly dry. Even general scholars might find it too heavily loaded with Greek terms, Latin terms, and rather obscure historical figures to hold their interest. However, the book would be perfect for those who care deeply about Greek philosophy, details of linguistic evolution, and the detailed history of philosophical thought.

That the book did not work for me as much as I originally hoped may be irrelevant for some readers, but possibly a caution for others. As I vented to my wife at one point, “This book seems like reading the rules of a board game before we play the game: maybe it’s necessary,

10. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; repr., New York: Collier Books, 2001), 148.

but sometimes you just want to get on with it and learn by playing a trial round.” To readers who, like me, are extremely interested in the basic premise, read the Preface by John Welch, and the Introduction and Conclusion by the author. That will be a *Reader's Digest* summary of an important understanding of Pauline faith that was lost but now re-found and restored by Joseph Smith for saints in the last days. I was not prepared for an incredibly comprehensive history of Greek terms and history of philosophical thought by dozens of obscure writers and ministers. However, I encourage interested readers to sample the work for themselves. Of course, not all books speak to all readers. This one may or may not speak to you, but I appreciate what I got out of it.

Godfrey J. Ellis is a retired full professor of psychology. At retirement he was serving as the Director of the Masters program in Counseling Psychology and the Chair of the Department of Leadership and Counseling Psychology at a university in western Washington. Dr. Ellis earned his BA in French from BYU, his MA in Family Relations from BYU, and his PhD in Family Sociology and Social Psychology from WSU. He has worked as a professor of Family Relations and/or Psychology for more than 36 years and as a private practice marriage and family therapist for 30 years. He was born in England, raised in Vancouver, Canada, then California, then Canada again; served a mission in France, and has taught in China. He and his wife, Merry Ellis, have lectured on the topic of family history on cruise ships sailing in the Caribbean, up to Alaska, and over to Hawaii as well as lecturing at state and local family history fairs. He has published in the *Ensign* magazine (now *Liahona*), *BYU Studies*, and *Interpreter*. He currently serves as the teacher of a two-stake institute program. He also paints acrylic portraits of friends, missionaries, and family (see GodfreyEllisArt.com). He and his wife are blessed with three living sons, four daughters-in-law, thirteen living grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren.

