

**“Faith and Proof”**  
**Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-13**  
**Scott B. Martin – 8-12-07**

Our justice system is based on proof. It is the prosecutor’s job to prove some one is guilty beyond the shadow of a doubt. The scientific establishment has to be able to prove all of its hypothesis’. If a hypothesis can not be proved it is dropped or sidelined until it can be proved. When you send in a coupon for a rebate on an item you purchased you have to enclose a “proof of purchase” to get your rebate. In Scrabble if someone challenges whether the letters you put down are really a word or not, a dictionary is pulled out to prove it one way or the other. If a child, youth or adult makes a statement that produces doubt in the mind of hearers it is not unusual to hear this phrase, **“PROVE IT!”** We live in a world that demands proof.

This puts religion, any religion, in a tough place. For simplicity sake let’s just stick with some of the claims of Christianity: There is a God. God created the cosmos. God loves us. God forgives us. There is life after death. Love of God and love of neighbor as oneself are the two greatest commandments. Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God. God raised Jesus on the third day and he ascended to the Father in heaven, to be seated by the right hand of God. The church is the body of Christ in the world. Well, you get the idea. These are some pretty amazing statements. We probably shouldn’t be too surprised that many, either silently or out loud, say “Prove it!”

Many people expect their minister to provide such assurance and proof. I must have slept through that class at seminary! Frankly, I don’t think any of these claims and many more beside can be proved beyond the shadow of a doubt by me or anybody else with mere words or rational arguments.

This of course won’t keep people from trying. The attempt to prove the existence of God goes back even beyond the dawn of the Enlightenment. Thomas Aquinas made a list of 5 proofs of God.

1. Prime mover: Everything that moves is set in motion by something, but there must be a “prime mover” that was not moved by something else. That prime mover is God.

2. It is impossible for everything to be the source of itself. There must be an original source or cause and that is God.
3. Everything around us didn't have to exist, but it does. But there must have been something that had to exist because of its very nature. This makes the things that are possible, possible. This is God.
4. As we think about things we can see that there are gradations: good, better, best. This gradation suggests that there must be an ideal, this is God.
5. Finally, we have the proof that Intelligent Design types love. When we look at the complexity of the world there must be a designer who created it all.

These are indeed thought provoking and even today worth meditating on, but in the final analysis they can not prove beyond a shadow of a doubt God's existence. Indeed, Aquinas borrowed most of these ideas from Aristotle, who did not believe in a personal deity.

It is my understanding that towards the end of his life Aquinas had a mystical experience. Such was the power of this experience that he asked that all his writings be burned like straw! Nothing he wrote could compare with what he had experienced of the transcendent.

Perhaps H.L. Mencken had it right, **“Theology is an effort to explain the unknowable in terms of the not worth knowing .... [It] is not only opposed to the scientific spirit; it is opposed to every other form of rational thinking.”**

This brings us to the well known definition of faith in Hebrews 1:1: **“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”** What is the Bible talking about here? Perhaps more importantly, “What is our experience of faith?”

As always we are dependent on translations from the original Greek to the English and as is often the case this is not easy to do. The key word here is “assurance”, which in the Greek is *hypostasis*. The word is used twice before chapter 11. In 1:3 we are told Christ is the **“reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being [hypostasis].”** It is used again in 3:14 where Christians are told, **“For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence [hypostasis] firm to the end.”** Harold Attridge argues rather persuasively in his commentary (*The Epistle to the*

*Hebrews*, Hermenia, pp308-10) that a better translation for Hebrews 11:1 might be **“For faith is the REALITY of things hoped for....”**

Now lets move on to the second part of that opening thought. Normally the translators say “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, **the conviction of thing unseen.**” Once again commentators say the translation is problematical. The word normally translated *conviction* comes from the Greek word *elegchos*. In *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV-Year C* the author states that *elegchos* “...**does not mean conviction in the sense of personal, internal belief that something will happen. Instead it normally refers to PROOF.**”

Now I don’t know about you but this puts a whole different spin on this well known verse. Instead of **“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, a conviction of things unseen,”** we get, **“Now faith is the reality of things hoped for, the proof of things unseen.”** Notice how much stronger this statement is now! Faith is no longer a feeling that the things one believes to be true are in fact true even though there is no rational proof. The presence of faith itself becomes the **REAL PRESENCE** of unseen things that underlie and permeate the so called real world around us. One might well call this the transcendent, which artists, writers, painters, poets and prophets point to.

People often want to tell us “Have faith” and such and such and so and so will happen. Faith becomes a means to an end in this scenario rather than the “end” itself. But what if we saw faith as the ends itself, not simply a means to an end? Such a faith would have a “self-authenticating quality about it”, especially for the person experiencing this deep reality.

Such a faith would itself be the presence of a deep reality which one might well not be able to prove by rational argument. As Mencken pointed out, this would be to try to “explain the unknowable in terms of the not worth knowing.” This is why mystics always find language incapable of describing what they experience.

Alright where does that leave us? If we can’t rationally prove the existence of God and or the transcendent realm, what can we do? We can do the same thing that scientists do when looking for quark particles. The particles are so tiny that no current scientific instrument can see them, but we do have instruments that can detect the effect of their presence. The characteristic results of their presence can be spoken of and observed.

Notice what the writer of Hebrews does. He points to a whole series of people of faith and how these people lived their lives in this world. Faith makes a difference in people's lives. The effects of faith are there for all to see. We are talking about more than their praying, or reading scripture or attending worship, as important as these things are to people of faith. Hebrews points to the effects of faith on their whole lives, their daily lives, year in and year out.

Not surprisingly, we are pointed to Abraham whose experience of God was so strong that he left his homeland on the promise that God would give him descendants as many as the stars in the sky and a land that God would show him at some future date. Abraham leaves his father and the life he had known. He leaves his homeland and becomes a wanderer, a nomad. At this point he didn't even have a son and Sarah was well past child bearing age.

Years passed without Abraham and Sarah having a son to carry on the line. Yet they journey on. Finally they are shown the land God says will be theirs, but it is already occupied by several powerful groups of people in fortified cities. How could this land become his and his descendants? Abraham dwells in hope among these people. By the time he dies the only land in this Promised Land that he actually owns is the burial plot for Sarah and himself! None the less he continues to trust the promise, so powerful is his experience of God with him.

Indeed, many generations would pass before Abraham's and Sarah's descendants would inherit the Promised Land, and only then after they had spent generations as slaves in Egypt. None the less, Abraham's descendants trusted in the promise of God. This is particularly amazing considering how little of the original promise was followed through on in the short run. There seemed to be little to prove that promise could be trusted, yet the faith continued to burn within, sometimes more strongly than others, sometimes almost going out, but it burned on none the less. Since faith was itself the "real" presence of God the lack of possessing the Promised Land did not prevent them from trusting in God. As the writer of the book of Hebrews put it, **"Now faith is the reality of things hoped for, the proof of things unseen."**

We do not have to go back to biblical times to see such faith at work. Remember Martin Luther King and his vision for a society where people would not be judged by the

color of their skin but by the content of their character, a land where justice reigned, a land at peace. Shortly before he died he prophetically said that he might not get there with those he was speaking to that day, but that some day this vision would come to pass. , **“Now faith is the reality of things hoped for, the proof of things unseen.”** Not only Martin Luther King keep this faith but so did countless thousands of others, known and unknown, who worked for this vision in the 1960’s and who are still working on it today.

Think of people like Mother Theresa, Albert Schweitzer, Bishop Tutu and not only them but people in your life, maybe a Sunday School teacher you had, or a pastor, or a neighbor, people of faith, whose lives declared the reality of faith, of the transcendent. Give thanks for everyone of them! , **“Now faith is the reality of things hoped for, the proof of things unseen.”**

May we be inspired by their example. May we fan the flames of our faith. Jesus once said that the kingdom of God was within each and every person. , **“Now faith is the reality of things hoped for, the proof of things unseen.”** Amen.