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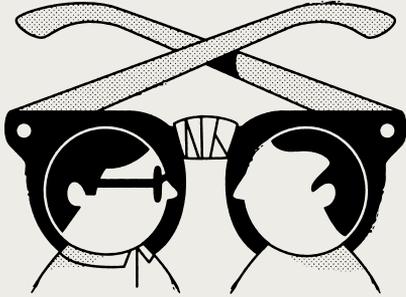
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Talking about Faith in Non-Western Contexts

By Jayson Georges

Many Western Christians have a problematic understanding of faith. The concept of “faith” has been reduced to a person’s religious beliefs or the mere intellectual assent of an individual to a specific set of religious doctrines or dogmas. This view of faith is not only incomplete when compared to how the Bible speaks of faith, but it also presents difficulties for non-Westerners when they are presented with the claims of Christ by missionaries. A better understanding of faith—one that is truer to what Scripture says and easier for non-Westerners to grasp—is to place the language of faith within the realm of personal relationships, specifically “patronage” or the reciprocal relationship between social unequals.

Patrons provide security and safety for their clients; the wealthy assume responsibility for people in need. Clients, in turn, are morally obligated to reciprocate by honoring their patrons—they repay with loyalty, praise, and allegiance. Patrons give material help and then receive social clout.

In the first-century Greco-Roman world, patron-client relationships formed “the bedrock of society, a person’s principal assurance of aid and support in an uncertain and insecure world.”¹ The Roman philosopher Seneca claimed, “The practice of patronage constitutes the chief bond of human society.” Patronage remains the primary socioeconomic system in Majority World cultures—life runs on relationships, reciprocity, and honor. I have experienced

“People of honor-shame cultures place a high value on relational loyalty and commitment to a group leader. Communities are close-knit kinship groups that expect individual members to remain ‘faithful’ to the group.”

this reality of patronage during my years as a missionary and businessman in Central Asia, and I can personally testify how confusing and frustrating patronage is for Westerners from free-market, democratic societies! The dynamics of patronage illuminate many aspects of Scripture, including the nature of faith.

THE LOYALTY OF PATRONS AND CLIENTS

Patron-client relationships are not mandated by law or enforced by legal contracts. Rather, people feel compelled to reciprocate because of honor and shame. Generous patrons and grateful clients acquire positive reputations in the community. People gain honor for being trustworthy and loyal in their relationships. In collectivistic cultures, such relational reliability is a supreme virtue. David deSilva explains, “The patron needed to prove reliable in providing the assistance he or she promised to grant. The client needed to ‘keep faith’ as well, in the sense of showing loyalty and commitment to

the patron and to his or her obligations of gratitude.”² The Bible’s language of faith is at home in this social context of patron-client relationships. Faith connotes a person’s trustworthiness and dependability in a relationship.

People of honor-shame cultures place a high value on relational loyalty and commitment to a group leader. Communities are close-knit kinship groups that expect individual members to remain “faithful” to the group. Asian families are one example: children are expected to choose a career that reflects positively on their parents, and there is a strong sense of familial loyalty where a child’s obedience brings honor to his parents. This strongly relational notion of group loyalty best approximates the Bible’s meaning of faith, not the modern Western sense of “my personal faith.”

NEW COVENANT LOYALTIES

This sense of loyalty is evident in the New Testament’s use of *pistos*, which we translate in English as “faith.” In normal biblical usage, *pistos* “is a quality of firmness, fidelity, and reliability.”³ For example, servants in Jesus’ parables are “referred to as *pistos*, clearly in the sense of ‘loyal,’ faithful,’ or ‘trustworthy’ (Matt. 24:45; 25:21; 1 Cor. 4:2).”⁴ In Revelation, *pistos* refers to one’s relationship more than private thoughts. So, one scholar translates Revelation 2:13 as “you did not deny your loyalty [*pistin*] to me even in the time of Antipas, who was steadfast in declaring his loyalty [*pistos*] to me that he was put to death among you.”⁵ Undivided loyalty to Christ distinguished early Christians from pagan neighbors, who sought patronage by pledging their allegiances to Roman leaders or pagan gods. This steadfast faithfulness enhances God’s name and renown, for it demonstrates our allegiance as his clients. Professor John Barclay says that “living by faith” is “expressed in new patterns of loyalty and behavior.”⁶

In Majority World societies, people display *pistos* by trusting in the goodwill and

benevolence of their patrons. For Christians, *pistos* is bold confidence in God's patronage: "And without *pisteōs* it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must *pisteusai* that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" (Heb. 11:6). *Pistos* is the confident expectation of God's blessing.

This notion of relational loyalty is inherent in the word *lord*. Western Christians profess Jesus as "*my personal Lord*" who forgives sins. Yet for early Christians the confession "Jesus is Lord" declared Jesus' sovereign provision and their allegiance to him. Vinoth Ramachandra notes, "The earliest Christian profession, 'Jesus is Lord,' was never merely a statement of personal devotion but a claim to universal validity. Christian mission made sense only on the premise that the crucified Jesus has been enthroned as the true Lord of the whole world, and thus claiming allegiance of the whole world."⁷ Jesus' lordship means he is the king who provides benevolent salvation to those committed to his reign. The confession "Jesus is lord" demonstrates our allegiance and subverts all other claims of false patronage. "An analogy can be drawn between the patron-client model and the relationship that Christ has with Christians. Christ is their Lord. They are joined to him. They live for him and not for themselves."⁸

This notion of covenant loyalty is not original to the New Testament. Israel's relationship with Yahweh under the Sinai covenant was also a patron-client relationship. The Sinai covenant was a suzerain-vassal treaty, a standard form of contract in the ancient Near East for ratifying patronage relations between powerful kings and inferior nations. In the Old Testament, Yahweh provided *shalom* (blessings) and protections to his client nation, and Israel (should have) reciprocated with faithfulness, praise, and obedience. God expected fidelity and loyalty from Israel. The covenantal framework from the Old Testament echoes through New Testament theology and informs the response God expects from his people.

CONCLUSION

When speaking to people who don't possess the Western sensibilities of individualism and intellectualism, how can we best convey what the Bible means when it speaks of faith? We must certainly endeavor to show them that while there is an individual and intellectual side to understanding what faith means, there are other words and ideas such as "allegiance," "loyalty," and "faithfulness" that also inform the nature of faith between the one who believes and the one believed. In cultural contexts that understand the reciprocal obligations of patronage, we must tell the Bible's story of God as a patron who has demonstrated his faithfulness to us by giving the gift of his Son, and we clients must honor him with unflinching loyalty and obedience for his benevolence. Because God has assumed responsibility for our salvation, our lives are committed to his glory. The sole basis of our patron-client relationship with God is his grace—a gift given without any regard to our previous worth or status. God has sovereignly elected us to be recipients of his patronage, called us to praise his lavish generosity, and transformed our hearts to be loyal and faithful to him. **Mr**

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- 1 David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 119.
- 2 DeSilva, 115.
- 3 Barnabas Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 109.
- 4 Zeba A. Crook, *Reconceptualising Conversion: Patronage, Loyalty, and Conversion in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2004), 212.
- 5 William Barclay, *The New Testament: A New Translation* (London: Collins, 1968).
- 6 John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 444.
- 7 Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Recovery of Mission: Beyond the Pluralist Paradigm* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 226.
- 8 Peter Lampe, in *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook*, ed. J. Paul Sampley (Harrisburg, PA: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2003), 505–6. Verse citations have been removed from this quote.