

# OpenTheo

## What if We Can't Agree on the Definition of "Faith"?

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### #STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about how to navigate a conversation with someone who insists "faith" is not based on proof, how to use apologetics without sounding like you're avoiding the question being asked, and how to respond to the statement "Certainty is a sin" logically and tactically.

- \* How do I navigate a conversation with my friend when we can't agree on what "faith" means? He's using a dictionary definition that says it's not based on proof.
- \* How can I use apologetics without sounding like I'm avoiding answering the question being asked?
- \* How can I analyze the statement "Certainty is a sin" logically and respond tactically?

### Transcript

Welcome to Stand to Reason's hashtag, St-R-Ask podcast. I'm Amy Hall and with me is Greg Kockel. Hi, Amy.

Hi, Greg. Alright, Greg, let's get right into this. Here's a question from Caleb.

Hi, Amy and Greg, do you have any advice on how to navigate a conversation with my friend when we can't agree on what faith means? He's using the Oxford definition that says, quote, faith is strong belief in God or in the doctrines of a religion, and it's not a word. Based on spiritual apprehension rather than proof. And let me just say too, I don't have a way of verifying that that's the actual -- Right, right.

I looked online and you have to have some sort of a subscription. So I'm not sure that's what it actually says. The problem here is, and this has happened more and more, is that the word faith is now being polluted, or let's maybe, that's not a nice way to put it.

Well, yeah, it's inaccurate way of putting it. It's being corrupted by those who mischaracterize the biblical concept. Okay, now this is what's really key.

And I talk about this in the story of reality. I'm just, I think I talk about it in Street Smarts 2. In fact, I do. And the first chapter on atheism is that atheists are free to define faith however they want for their own usage.

Okay? The problem is when you are talking with somebody else about the concepts they believe in, if you're going to deal with their concepts, you have to deal with their concepts. I mean, this is the classic straw man difficulty. If you mischaracterize the view that you're trying to critique, you are not critiquing the view anymore.

You're critiquing something else, a view that person doesn't hold. And this happens a lot. And so I think the way I put it in Street Smarts, because there is this back and forth.

Well, as far as I'm concerned, if you have reasons, it's not faith, okay? Well, then I suggest in the book, well, then what would you call it? I would call it reasons or I would call it convictions or say, great. So let's talk about my convictions or my reasons. Whatever word they end up giving you, and we won't talk about my faith.

We will talk about my Christianity. We'll talk about my convictions. We'll talk about the doctrines I think are true or the history I think is true.

We're just going to totally avoid the word faith because we are not an agreement on that. But do you want to critique my view or do you want to critique what the dictionary says my view should represent? I had a kind of a parallel circumstance I had with a person who raised an issue from scripture as an atheist called the show. And then he said, here's a problem with this verse.

You know, I have a problem with this verse. And I said, well, that's what this verse means is not what you think it means. What it means is something else.

And then I gave him the meaning in the context, the best I understood it, which was able to evade the difficulty that he thought he saw there. And he said, well, that's not my interpretation of that verse. I said, well, that's fine.

You can have your own interpretation. But keep in mind that your difficulty is with your own interpretation. Your conflict is with your interpretation.

Your conflict is not with me. It's with yourself. And that's what we have here.

If people are going to try to characterize faith a certain way in a way that is inconsistent with our use of the word, then what they are doing is they're beating up on a view that we don't hold. That's a classic straw man. Okay.

Now the way that for for Caleb, maybe to get around this is to say, okay, let's not use the word faith because you and I can't agree on the definition. That's all right. In fact, this is the way I play it out in the Street Smart book and the chapter on atheism distractions.

This is a distraction. Okay. Faith means believing what you know ain't so kind of deal.

Well, okay, that's not the faith I have. Well, that's what the dictionary says it is. Okay, that's not what I mean though.

What would you call it then? Let's give it another word. Not one that the dictionary disagrees with. Let's just find what would you call the convictions that I have that are based on reasons.

Well, let's just call them convictions. Okay, I can work with that. So now we're going to talk about my convictions, not about my faith.

And so you do an end or end and run around the challenge and end around the challenge because that which is the atheist is fussing about at this point is irrelevant to any significant conversation. This is why I say in Street Smart, it's a distraction. I totally agree with that, Greg.

I mean, like you said, what do we mean by the word? What does the Bible mean by the word? The Bible clearly gives us reasons. God clearly talks about giving us reasons to trust him. So you can point that out.

Now, having said that, I think that is the first approach someone should take. So I decided to look as a second approach if that doesn't work at all. I decided to look at what the dictionary definitions actually were.

So I looked up a bunch of dictionary definitions. And what's interesting, and this is something you might bring up with them. The way we're using faith is the normal way people use faith when they're not talking about religion.

Everybody understands this use of the word. So, so here's a dictionary.com. Confidence or trust in a person or thing faith in another's ability. That's what we're talking about.

But then they have the second one, belief that is not based on proof. Okay. Why? Why is there's other reason? Here's why I think that's in there because dictionaries are supposed to cover the range of the way people use the word.

And that's the way a whole lot of people use the word. But to enforce one option given the range that satisfies the atheist is illicit. You have to use the definition that is in view by the person using the word or else should be guilty of the strong man.

And I don't want to get away from that. That is definitely where to go. But I just want to keep going with a few more of these.

So here's Maryam Webster belief and trust in and loyalty to God. We have no problem with that. Then they have firm belief in something for which there is no proof.

But what you see here is every one of these dictionaries has a definition that we would agree to that we mean by faith. So you can't just go to these to this one dictionary definition of this one within that dictionary's definitions and say that's the one you have to agree to. Here's one.

Collins online dictionary complete trust confidence or reliance. Okay. Absolutely.

Here's another one for that same dictionary Christian theology the trust in God and in his promises as made through Christ and the scriptures by which humans are justified or saved. It's perfect. So you just I went down the list Britannica first Britannica strong belief or trust in someone or something Oxford learn his dictionaries trust in someone's ability or knowledge trust that somebody slash something will do what has been promised.

This is all great Cambridge great trust or confidence in something or someone. Some of these don't have anything about proof Cambridge dictionary doesn't have anything about proof. Long they just touch on the subject of element not on the justification issue in other words.

This is what faith means for this person. It means that they're trusting in God or Jesus. Right now some of these do say strong belief in God or particular religion but they don't say without proof.

So not every dictionary is saying this. So even if you were to go by the dictionary. It's not that every dictionary is saying this is the exact.

I have a suspicion. What was the dictionary has Caleb Shren cited Oxford. I guarantee you if you're able to go to the Oxford if you subscribe to their service.

You would find just like any other good dictionary a range of meanings for a particular word because almost no word in the English language is univocal has only one meaning. They're equivocal. They have multiple meanings and you determine the meaning from the context of the conversation that that you're thinking about or the writing that you're addressing.

And in this particular case you have a stubborn person who doesn't want to give any ground to other potential ways that Christians might be using the term and wants to insist. No. Okay.

Well, that's the straw man as we discussed. So the only way out there is to use a different word. And I don't even really understand why they would try to force you to use some other definition.

Are they trying to insist that you can't have reasons? Are they trying to stop you from giving? None of it makes sense to me. I think it's just something that they're trying to

use to force the idea that you don't have reasons into the definition. This is something that you talk about in Streets of Arts in that one of the reasons that they use this definition of faith is they do not believe that there are any good reasons for God.

And therefore, if you have any, I'm trying to think of a word now, believe conviction faith or whatever, these must be without reason. However you want to characterize it must be without reason because in their view there is no reason. Now, this is odd because there are there are tomes upon tomes upon tomes that have been given as rationales for why belief in God is smart.

Now, it may be that for any given atheist, none of those reasons are adequate for them. Fine. But that's very different than saying there's no evidence.

There are no reasons. Those are two different kinds of things. And so it just strikes me as a species of narrow mindedness or bullheadedness when people must insist that there cannot be any reasons for God.

Okay. Let's go to a question from Kellyanne. Do you have any good tips for how to use apologetics without sounding like I'm avoiding answering the question? I get a lot of eye rolls like, here we go.

Like they don't want to hear the answer. It sounds like to me. Well, as I understand, Kellyanne's question, it has to do with people confronting her and then she's responding with a question.

Okay. Is that correct? And then she gets an eye roll? She wants to know how to use apologetics without sounding like she's avoiding answering the question. So they ask her a question and as she's trying to answer, they accuse her of trying to avoid the question.

Well, I guess I'd have to be privy to a particular conversation to get a sense of what's going on. Of course, our approach is you're asking some questions to get clarification. What do you mean by that? How did you come to that conclusion? So therefore, there's no avoidance going on at this point.

There is just a request for more information. So we can have a clearer idea of what we're up against, what we need to respond to, what the concern is. All right.

Now, if the Christian can go no further, what they can say is I can go no further. I don't know what to say to this. I don't have an answer that might be satisfying to you.

And that's the best I can do. Sorry about that. That's not avoiding the question.

That's just acknowledging you don't have an answer. And sometimes if it looks like you're avoiding the question, because you don't have an answer, then it's just better to fess up and say, you know, that's a tough one. I'm going to have to think about this.

Incidentally, there's a magic word. I think I'm going to have to think about this a little bit because when you say, let me think about this or something like that, you are acknowledging your inability and therefore you have no responsibility to give any further response. You're not avoiding it.

You're just acknowledging that you're not adequate to the task at the moment and you need more time to think about it. Hopefully, after you're done that you think about it and whatever the particular issue is you research it a little bit better. But I don't, I guess I'm not maybe not entirely clear in the kind of circumstance she's facing.

What do you think? Well, what if it's a situation where let's say they ask you a question. I'm trying to think of an example of a question, but it's a yes or no question, but she has to actually explain more than just give a yes or no answer. Well, that's like, do you think if I don't believe in Jesus, I'm going to hell and all Jews that don't believe in Jesus are going to hell.

I mean, there's kind of a classic question that. Well, there is a yes or no answer to that, but if you give the yes or no answer, in this case, yes, it's true that a person who doesn't put their trust in Christ to pay for their sins has to pay for their sins themselves. And that happens now.

But notice I'm giving more explanation. So it doesn't sound so stark and really end up being misleading. Some questions will have a yes or no answer, but even giving yes or no, whatever the accurate answer is to the question may end up misleading people about the nature of the answer.

And so you have to go into more detail. And that's what you need to do. I was actually asked that question about Jews almost like seven years ago.

You were there and it was a Dennis Prager and a group and I was on the stage with Dennis and there was the whole group in the high holy days of Jews. And Dennis asked me if the Jews don't believe in Jesus, something to that effect. Are they going to hell? Do they have to believe in Jesus to go to heaven or something like that? And I told him, I said, just giving you a yes or no answer.

Just giving you a simple answer is going to be misleading to the rest of the people because it will sound anti-Semitic. So I need to put it in a different way. So at least you can get the sense of what the claim is.

And that's when I went into a more thoroughgoing explanation that had nothing to do with Judaism, but had everything to do with sinners. You know, it's not God doesn't play favorites like religions or clubs and he used to like the Jewish club and now he likes the Christian club. No, it's a whole different thing.

And by explaining it, at least it was more clear what we meant when we said that Jesus,

one must believe in Jesus in order to go to heaven. Here's the calculus of that whole thing. And I guess some might consider that to be evasive.

Why don't you just get to the point? Why are you beating around the bush? Well, what I'm trying to do is make it more clear. And I like that way of putting it, of saying, look, I could just say yes or no, but I think whatever I say will be misleading because you're probably thinking things. I'm not thinking when I say yes or no.

So I think if you could just explain that and then say, so are you okay if I actually explain the answer so you understand my answer? I just want to make sure that it's clear and that you understand what I'm claiming here. And by the way, sometimes, especially in a public situation, I was just thinking of a BBC interview I had on the abortion question a long time ago that was very hard. What they're trying to do is, I know I want a yes or no answer because I want you to look as ridiculous as possible to the rest of the audience.

Now, obviously they don't say that, but that's the game ismanship that's going on in that situation and also some other conversations. And so you want to try to sidestep that. So there's clarity about what you're claiming.

All right, Greg, let's squeeze one more in here. This one comes from Call Me Joe. What kind of suicide does the statement certainty is a sin commit? How do we analyze a statement logically and respond tactically? Well, if the statement certainly certainty is a sin is offered as a certainty, then itself refuting.

Then it is the sin that it seems to be, in a sense, chastising. Okay. The other question I would say is, first of all, I would point out, is that a certain statement? I'd apply the rule to itself to see if it satisfies its own, its own demand.

And if they mean to be, say that as a certainty, then they're committing the sin that they're implying no one should commit. Okay. And then there are other things that you could ask.

They're counter examples. This is a false statement. Is it a sin to say that I mean, to use the kind of tired phrase to plus two equal four? Is that a sin? Because I'm certain about that.

Is it is it a sin? And then there's a whole bunch of other pieces of knowledge that people have that they're certain about. By the way, certainty is a psychological thing. People can be certain about all kinds of things that are false.

But nevertheless, there are all things that people are certain about. They're certain about where they live. And this is why they get in their car and drive there when they leave work because they are completely convinced it is objectively, absolutely and certainly true that they live at this particular address.

Okay. Are they committing a sin of some sort? No. What they are trying to do is enforce a kind of relativism about things that really matter that they disagree with others.

And then they're enforcing it by chastising the so-called certainty that people have. That's all it is. It's a trick.

It's a ruse. Yeah. And especially if they're saying it's a sin, they're talking about a religious concept here.

Does God want us to have confidence? Does he want us to be clear about what we believe and to know what is true? The answer is obviously yes. The Bible is full of God giving evidence for things so that people will know that he is God and that they'll be able to endure. They'll be able to persevere because of their confidence.

Confidence is never denigrated in the Bible that I can think of. Unless of course it's false. Yeah.

When it comes to scarier, spiritual truths, moral truths, etc. You're right. My suspicion is when somebody says that certainty is a sin, they are just trading on religious language to say that's a big no-no and you ought not do it.

You're in your off the reservation when you talk like you're certain about things and I think that's what's going on. But it may be that progressive Christians might say that. That certainty is a sin and you evangelicals who are so certain about your views, then you're actually sitting against God.

My suspicion is that comment probably comes from a non-Christian who's just employing that kind of language to disqualify certainty as a way of responding to things. And it could have something to do with relativism because when you think about it, the real question is what you're certain about true or is it false? If it's false and if it's evil, then of course your certainty will cause damage to people because you will do rash things and will hurt people. But if you're certain about something that's true, like say Wilberforce was, then you will have the perseverance and the confidence to do what's right and make a good difference in this world.

It's not the certainty that's the problem. And I think for a long time, people thought that's what the problem was, but it's silly. William Wilberforce was certain that slavery was a serious moral harm and that's why he fought it for his whole life.

Mother Teresa was certain that helping the poor was a virtue and that's why she did it her whole life. So are we saying that Mother Teresa was sinning because she was certain about the virtue of helping the poor? When these kinds of these counter examples are really good in conversations because what people, I know what people are after here. They're trying to disqualify Christians' confidence about concepts that the challenger doesn't agree with.



And so they want to relativize your point, the claim that Christian is making. No, you're so certain about this, but certainty is a sin. You shouldn't be certain.

You should just be saying, well, this is my belief, but I can't say it's true for everybody. That's what they want. Okay.

And that's all that's going on here. All right. Well, hopefully that helps you out, Jo and Kellyanne and Kayla.

Thank you for your questions. You can always send us your question on our website at [str.org](http://str.org) through our hashtag, StRask page, or you can go to the platform formerly known as Twitter, which I guess we're calling X now. I have to stop saying maybe I just have to call it X. I just can't bring myself to it.

It's so weird. Well, I wouldn't know what you're talking about if you said X. So you can say Twitter X maybe or something that's formerly known as it's like Prince who changes his name to an ampersand or something like that, a symbol. You know, and they always had to say the one formerly called Prince.

They can't just say and ampersand is playing tonight at the theater. Huh? Oh, wow. Okay.

Well, but you still can send it that way with the hashtag STR ask. We look forward to hearing from you. This is Amy Hall and Greg Coco for Stand to Reason.