

Faith as Allegiance: Matthew Bates on Pistis and the Call to Loyal Obedience

Introduction

Many Christians today understand “faith” as belief in certain facts about Jesus: that He is God’s Son, that He died for sins, and that He rose again. While these are essential truths, theologian **Matthew Bates** argues that the New Testament meaning of “faith” (*pistis* in Greek) goes deeper. It includes **intellectual agreement**, but also **relational trust**, **loyalty**, and **active allegiance** to Jesus as the risen and reigning King.

In his groundbreaking books, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone* and *Gospel Allegiance and Beyond the Salvation Wars*, Bates insists that when Paul and other early Christians talked about faith, they weren’t just inviting people to agree with doctrine, they were calling people to **pledge allegiance** to Jesus as Lord. This reframing helps modern believers understand salvation, discipleship, and evangelism in a more biblically grounded and Christ-centered way.

What Does *Pistis* Really Mean?

The Greek word *pistis* is traditionally translated “faith” in English Bibles. However, in the first-century Greco-Roman world, *pistis* had a **broad range of meanings**, including:

- Trust
- Belief or conviction
- Faithfulness or fidelity
- **Loyalty or allegiance**

Bates notes that *pistis* was often used in political and relational contexts where it clearly meant **allegiance or loyalty to a ruler or benefactor**. For instance, Roman emperors expected *pistis* from their subjects—not mere belief that they existed, but **personal loyalty expressed through obedience**.

So when Paul says in Romans 10:9, “If you confess with your mouth ‘Jesus is Lord’ and believe (*pisteuō*) in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved,” he is describing not just intellectual belief, but a **public declaration of loyalty to King Jesus**. This was a politically dangerous and spiritually radical claim in a world where Caesar claimed lordship.

“The word *pistis* can and often does mean allegiance. That was its core political meaning in the ancient world—and that’s exactly what Paul means when he says that we are saved by *pistis*.”

— Matthew Bates, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone*, p. 78

Allegiance and the Gospel

If *pistis* means allegiance, then the gospel is not just a message about how to get to heaven, it is a **royal announcement** that Jesus has been enthroned as King, and that all people are summoned to give Him their **loyal obedience**.

Bates presents a 10-part gospel summary (featured in Message 1) that focuses on Jesus's kingship and mission. As a reminder, here is that summary—

The gospel is that Jesus the King:

1. Pre-existed as God the Son,
2. Was sent by the Father as promised,
3. Took on human flesh in fulfillment of God's promises to David,
4. Died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures,
5. Was buried,
6. Was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,
7. Appeared to many witnesses,
8. Is enthroned at the right hand of God as the ruling Christ,
9. Has sent the Holy Spirit to His people to effect His rule, and
10. Will come again as final judge to rule.

In this framework, **faith is the proper response to the gospel**, but not in the sense of mere agreement. Faith is:

- **Personal allegiance to King Jesus**
- **Ongoing loyalty expressed in obedience**
- **Trust that Jesus's way is better than the world's way**

Bates writes:

“The gospel requires a response, and the only saving response is allegiance to Jesus as the enthroned Lord. It is not simply belief about his identity or trust in his benefits, but embodied loyalty to his rule.”

— *Gospel Allegiance*, p. 45

Biblical Case Studies: James and Matthew

James 2:14–26

This famous passage declares that “faith without works is dead.” While often debated in relation to Paul, Bates helps clarify that **genuine *pistis* includes action by nature**. James is not arguing against faith, he's arguing against a **false faith** that is mere intellectualism.

“Even demons believe and shudder” (James 2:19). In other words, **bare belief without allegiance** is meaningless.

Bates explains that James is **affirming Paul's view**, once *pistis* is rightly understood:

“If Paul meant allegiance when he said *pistis*, then James is not contradicting him at all. They are both saying: true saving faith is a loyal life response to the kingship of Jesus.”

— *Salvation by Allegiance Alone*, p. 158

Matthew 7:21–27

Here, Jesus warns that **not everyone who calls Him “Lord” will enter the kingdom**, but only those who **do the will of the Father**. The parable of the two builders highlights this: both hear Jesus’s words, but only the one who **obeys** builds on the rock.

This fits perfectly with Bates’s emphasis: **Allegiance to Jesus means obedience to Jesus**.

- The person who says “Jesus is Lord” but lives by their own agenda is like the foolish builder.
- The one who submits their life to Christ’s authority is the wise builder who endures.

Salvation by Allegiance Alone?

Bates’s title may raise eyebrows, but he is not denying grace. He is emphasizing that the **kind of faith that saves is allegiance-oriented**. It is:

- **Initiated by grace**
- **Empowered by the Spirit**
- **Expressed through loyalty and obedience**

Bates argues that “faith” understood as allegiance actually clarifies **how salvation works**:

- **Jesus is the King.**
- **We are saved by His grace.**
- **We respond by giving Him our allegiance.**

This view helps avoid both legalism (earning salvation) and easy-believism (mere lip service). It calls believers into a living, loyal relationship with Christ as their reigning Lord.

Key Takeaways from Bates’s Perspective

- *Pistis* means more than belief; it includes **allegiance, loyalty, and faithfulness**.
- Faith is not just agreeing with doctrine, but **entrusting your life to King Jesus**.
- The gospel is a **royal proclamation** that demands a **loyal response**.
- **Obedience doesn’t earn salvation**, but it proves allegiance.
- Christians are not merely “saved individuals”, they are **citizens of the kingdom**, called to live under Jesus’s lordship.

Scriptures for Further Study

- **Romans 1:5** – “...to bring about the obedience of faith among all the nations...”
- **Romans 10:9–10** – Confessing Jesus as Lord
- **James 2:14–26** – Faith without works is dead
- **Matthew 7:21–27** – Obedience as the test of lordship
- **Galatians 2:16** – Justified through the *faithfulness of Jesus Christ* (*pistis Iēsou Christou*, a debated phrase which Bates reads as Christ’s own allegiance)
- **Revelation 17:14** – “...called and chosen and faithful followers.”

Conclusion

Matthew Bates’s work on *pistis* reshapes how we understand faith. Rather than reducing salvation to a mental agreement, Bates helps recover a **New Testament understanding of faith as a living allegiance** to King Jesus. When we say “Jesus is Lord,” we’re not just stating a belief, we’re **swearing loyalty**. And that loyalty is lived out in obedience, discipleship, and trust in the one who gave Himself for us.

To follow Jesus is to **follow a King**, not just believe in a Savior.
And faith in the Bible isn’t passive, it’s **pledging allegiance** and living it every day.