

# การศึกษาวិเคราะห์แนวคิดเรื่องความเชื่อของพอล ทิลลิค

## An Analytic Study of Paul Tillich's View of Faith

ดร. พญ. วิจิตรา อัครพิชญธร\*

### Abstract

The issue of faith has been a long-debated issue. Various theologians demonstrate different views on it. As the subject of faith is fundamental to the Christian faith and the most critical one, it is crucial that we understand the real meaning of faith. This is an analytical study designed to explore and analyze Paul Tillich's view of faith in his **The Dynamics of Faith**. The findings are that three problems can be identified in Tillich's view of faith: Faith as ultimate concern, faith as uncertainty, and faith must be incorporated with doubt. After the analysis of Tillich's view of faith, I reconstruct it from my own point of view. My proposition is a new interpretation of faith on the basis of the Scripture, which composes of three arguments: True faith is in God alone, true faith is certainty, and true faith contains no doubt. My hope is that all suspicious concepts and theologies should be evaluated and analyzed in a more critical way to defend our true faith in Christ.

### บทคัดย่อ

ความเชื่อเป็นหัวข้อหนึ่งที่มีการโต้แย้งกันมานาน นักเทววิทยาต่างก็ให้ทัศนะที่แตกต่างกันไป แต่เนื่องจากเรื่องของความเชื่อเป็นพื้นฐานที่สำคัญที่สุดของคริสเตียน จึงจำเป็นที่เราต้องเข้าใจความหมายที่แท้จริงของเรื่องนี้ การศึกษานี้เป็นการวิเคราะห์ทัศนะของนักเทววิทยาพอล ทิลลิคจากหนังสือเรื่องพลังแห่งความเชื่อ (*The Dynamics of Faith*) และพระคริสตธรรมคัมภีร์ ผลการศึกษาพบว่า มีประเด็นปัญหาอยู่สามประการในแนวคิดเรื่องความเชื่อของทิลลิค ได้แก่ ความเชื่อ เป็นสิ่งที่มี

---

\* ผู้ช่วยคณบดีฝ่ายวิชาการ และอาจารย์ผู้รับผิดชอบหลักสูตรศิลปศาสตรมหาบัณฑิต สาขาเทววิทยา สถาบันกรุงเทพคริสตศาสนศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยคริสเตียน

ความสำคัญสูงสุด ความเชื่อคือความไม่แน่นอน และ  
 ในความเชื่อต้องมีความสงสัยเสมอ ผู้ศึกษาจึงเสนอ  
 แนวคิดเรื่องความเชื่อจากมุมมองของผู้ศึกษาเองขึ้นมา  
 ได้แย้งสามประการบนพื้นฐานของพระคัมภีร์ ได้แก่  
 ความเชื่อแท้คือความเชื่อในพระเจ้าเท่านั้น ความเชื่อแท้

คือความแน่นอน และความเชื่อแท้ต้องปราศจากความ  
 สงสัย ผู้ศึกษาหวังว่าแนวคิดทางเทววิทยาเรื่องอื่นๆ ที่  
 ยังไม่มีความกระจ่างชัดนั้นควรจะถูกนำมาวิเคราะห์  
 ประเมินและวิพากษ์ ทั้งนี้ เพื่อปกป้องความเชื่อแท้  
 ในพระคริสต์

## Introduction

The issue of faith has been a long-debated one; various theologians demonstrate different views on it. As the subject of faith is fundamental to the Christian faith and the most critical one, it is crucial that we should understand the real meaning of faith theologically in order to redirect our true faith in God. This is an analytical study seeking to explore the concept of faith in Paul Tillich<sup>t</sup>'s existential theology. The reason I chose to study Tillich's theology is because he was one of the greatest theologians in the twentieth century and his theology is highly influential to modern man particularly his view on faith in *The Dynamic of Faith*. Some embrace his view on faith unconditionally while others still raise many questions about it, or even object to it. In this study, I will first explore and analyze the concept of faith in Tillich's perspective, then I will make a

response, and finally, I will recommend a reconstruction of the concept of faith in a more biblical way.

### 1. Tillich's view of faith: Problems identified

In *The Dynamics of Faith*, Tillich describes faith as an act of personality. Faith as such is a cognitive affirmation of the transcendent nature of ultimate reality. This is achieved, not simply by a process of intellectual inquiry, but by an act of acceptance and surrender (Tillich, 1957: 7). The risk involved in faith is related to the presence of uncertainty. Faith may be dynamic when uncertainty is recognized and overcome, or non-dynamic, when the possibility of any uncertainty is excluded. The language of faith is a symbolic language used to describe ultimate reality. Tillich (1957: 56) views that myths are symbols of faith that tell stories to portray situations

---

t. Paul Tillich (1886-1965) was a German-American Christian existential philosopher and theologian. He was regarded as the most influential theologian of the twentieth century and was a prolific author of many works, for example, *The Courage to be* (1952), *The Dynamics of Faith* (1957), *Collected Works*, the three-volume *Systematic Theology* (1951-63), and his three volumes of sermons.

of ultimate concern. Myths may be 'broken' or 'unbroken.' Unbroken myths are myths which are accepted as literal statements of reality while broken myths are myths which are interpreted as mere symbolic statements of reality.

I find Tillich's view of faith insightful and thought-provoking in terms of religious philosophy. However, I have identified some dominant problems that contradict the biblical doctrine on faith: First, his definition of faith as ultimate concern; second, faith is both certain and uncertain; and third, faith must always be incorporated with doubt. These three points are too obvious to be neglected; otherwise they might cause such serious consequence as misleading his audience away from the true faith in the gospel of Christ. Moreover, it may cast the seeds of doubt in the minds of many believers. Thus his teachings on faith may cause serious harm to the community of faith. Therefore, I recommend that his teachings on faith should be corrected accordingly on the basis of the Word of God in the Scripture: First, true faith is in God; second, true faith is certainty; and third, true faith contains no doubt.

## **2. An analysis of Tillich's view of faith**

In this section I will explore and analyze Tillich's view focusing on the three identified problems: 1) Faith as ultimate concern, 2) faith as uncertainty,

and 3) faith must be incorporated with doubt.

### **2.1. Tillich's view of faith as ultimate concern**

For Tillich, the concept of faith identifies a way of life, a centered locus for oneself in the world of competing challenges and values (Musser and Price, 2010: 51). Tillich further explains his conception of faith: "Faith as ultimate concern is an act of the total personality. It is the most centered act of the human mind . . . it participates in the dynamics of personal life" (Tillich, 1957: 5). As Tillich states more explicitly in *the Dynamics of Faith*: "Man, like every living being, is concerned about many things, above all about those which condition his very existence . . . If [a situation or concern] claims ultimacy it demands the total surrender of him who accepts this claim . . . it demands that all other concerns . . . be sacrificed" (Tillich, 1957: 1-2). His definition focuses on a person's state of being and the individual connection to ultimacy in ontological, existential and psychological aspects (Tillich, 1952: 172). Actually nearly all people experience something ultimate that engenders their commitment to it, even though it may or may not be truly ultimate. They may not consciously recognize this presence, but when they do, they are experiencing faith. They accept that they have the experience of 'being grasped' by some kind of powers. The ontological root

of faith, therefore, is the activity of being itself (Manning, ed., 2009: 92). Whatever man's ultimate concern is, he should be responsive to focus on it. Faith happens when one is grasped by an ultimate concern and, in response, focusing completely on one's ultimate concern (Musser and Price, 2010: 51).

Tillich argues in his *Systematic Theology* (volume I) that the Name of "God" is the name that which concerns man ultimately, but this does not mean that first there is a being called God and then he demands that man should be ultimately concerned about him. Rather, it means that "whatever concerns a man ultimately becomes **god** for him, and, conversely, it means that a man can be concerned ultimately only about that which is **god** for him" (Tillich, 1951: 211). Thus whatever concerns man is his **god**, and orienting one's life to it is the heart of his faith.

I think that Tillich's definition needs more clarification. Moreover, it leaves the door open to what the ultimate concern might be. What is truly ultimate? Is there only one true ultimate concern, or is there more than one? If faith is ultimate concern, with what is it ultimately concerned? To be concerned, we must be concerned with something. Generally, each man has many concerns. Some of which are things necessary for his living (food and shelter), others are his spiritual concerns (cognitive, aesthetic, social,

political). Sometimes these preliminary concerns become his ultimate concerns, or their **gods**, and he puts his faith in them!

What then is the 'ultimate concern'? Tillich seems to be undecided to sharply answer. On the one hand, he argues (1957: 46) that scientists, artists, moralists showed clearly that they were also ultimately concern, even though, as we know, they are leading in the fight against religion. But on the other hand Tillich (1957: 52) proposes, "The fundamental symbol of our ultimate concern is God." Thus his two statements are contradictory with each other, ultimate concern can either be the scientists, artists, moralists, or it can be God! I think his arguments hardly ever help increase my understanding of faith as ultimate concern.

## 2.2. Tillich's view of faith as uncertainty

Basically Tillich claims that faith contains both truth and uncertainty. It is unlike any other type of knowledge that is either certain or uncertain because faith is neither certain nor uncertain. To him, faith is both. As Tillich (1957: 18) states, "Faith is **certain** in so far as it is an experience of the holy. But faith is **uncertain** insofar as the infinite to which it is related is received by a finite being." This element of uncertainty in faith cannot be removed but must be accepted (Tillich, 1957: 19). Faith cannot prove actual fact, which depends on

experience and observation. Thus it never claims absolute certainty in it. The truth of faith is different from other types of truth because faith cannot be put into the category of certain knowledge nor can it be put into the category of uncertain knowledge. On the one hand, faith is certain because we have a certain relation with something ultimate. Yet on the other hand, faith is uncertain because we may have faith in the wrong thing.

### 2.3. Tillich's view that faith must be incorporated with doubt

For Tillich, faith involves a more fundamental risk: **doubt**. He argues that doubt is included in every act of faith. The dynamic interaction between faith and doubt is that in every act of faith, there may be a possibility of doubt. Thus faith and doubt are two important and indispensable parts of the dynamic of faith. So it is obvious that instead of drawing a line of demarcation between faith and doubt, we should leave the two in connection (apurposemoreobscure.blogspot.com).

Tillich (1957: 21) emphasizes on the importance of doubt that in order to have faith, one must have doubt, which means that doubt is a positive thing for faith. He further explains that there are three types of doubt: The first is the **scientific doubt** that makes scientists ask question in the matters of empirical inquiry or logical deduction, which points to the

underlying scientific theory. The second type is the **skeptical doubt** that asks questions in the matters of all beliefs varying from religious experiences to all creeds. The last type is the **existential doubt**, which is implicit in every act of faith. In contrast to the methodological and the skeptical doubt, it does not question whether a special proposition is true or false; it does not reject every concrete truth, but is aware of the element of insecurity in every existential truth (Tillich, 1957: 23). Existential doubt is not like scientific doubt that verifies scientific theories by empirical testing; it is not like skeptical doubt which has no content in it. But existential doubt recognizes the insecurity of faith and, with courage, takes this into itself. The act in which courage accepts the risk of insecurity is the dynamics of faith.

### 3. Recommendation

In this section I will evaluate Tillich's view of faith on the basis of the Scripture. Hence, I would articulate a recommended view of faith composing of the three following arguments: 1) true faith is in God alone, 2) true faith is certainty, and 3) true faith contains no doubt.

#### 3.1. True faith is in God alone

Faith is a gift from God: the sole source of faith comes from God. But because God is invisible to human eyes, he would have remained hidden afar off if Christ did not incarnate to be human

flesh so that God can reveal himself through his Son. To seek Christ, we need to follow the Holy Spirit's guidance. As Augustine says that we must know our destination and the way toward it, and the only correct way is Christ, who is both God and man: "[A]s God he is our destination to which we move; as man, the path by which we go. Both are found in Christ alone" (Augustine, *The City of God*, XI. li, cited in Calvin, 1960: 3.2.1).

According to the Scripture, true faith is to **believe** in Jesus Christ, the Son of God: "But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you have life in his name" (John 20: 31). When we believe in Christ, we become the children of God: "For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith" (Galatians 3: 26). If one has true faith in Christ, he can be certain of his salvation. Faith leads to forgiveness of sin, justification, regeneration, and sanctification by the power of the Holy Spirit. As it is written, "But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe" (Romans 3: 21-22). The most important thing in the Christian life is that we receive eternal life as a gift from God through faith in the Triune God.

### 3.2. True faith is certainty

True faith implies certainty because it excludes all doubtful thoughts and changing opinions. Faith excludes obscured and confused conceptions. Faith contains 'full and fixed' certainty because it rests upon the Word of God as written in the Scripture. There is a permanent relationship between faith and the Word like that between the sunrays and the sun itself (Calvin, 1960: 3.2.6). Faith must be based on the Word because if it turns away even in the slightest degree, it does not keep its own nature, but becomes uncertain credulity and vague error of mind. Faith cannot exist apart from its source and the faith that builds on other sources other than Scripture is not considered true faith. In short, true faith is certain because its content is derived from the authoritative Word of God.

True faith means being convinced by a firm conviction that God is a kind Father who grants promises including that of salvation, and those who are convinced like this is a genuine believer (Calvin, 1960: 3.2.16). Moreover, true faith with its assurance will enable believers to be victorious over all trials and tribulations and over the devil and death. This is biblically right according to Paul's mastery summation (Romans 8: 38-39). In short, in true faith there is certainty, and this renders assurance in salvation and in victorious life in Christ.

### 3.3. True faith contains no doubt

The Scripture also affirms us that doubt is not an element of faith; rather, it comes from the human sinful nature. Whenever there is doubt, faith is challenged, shaken, or even destroyed. As faith rests upon the divine Word, it is certain because God's Word is certain. As a matter of fact, faith itself is certain, but it is our own minds which are uncertain : "So if faith goes off course by the least degree from the mark at which it ought to aim, it is no longer faith but becomes wavering doubt and uncertain mind" (Lane and Osborne, eds., 1987: 44).

The heart of the gospel is faith. This is because the gospel creates a confident, Christ-assured faith. This faith is built on the promises of God accomplished on the cross by an actual historical being, Jesus Christ. True faith contains no doubt because it is built on the promises of God and hence all doubts are overcome as it is written in the Epistle to the Hebrews, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11: 1). If we have pure faith, without any doubt, we need not see and touch the resurrected body of Jesus like Thomas, who said, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe" (John 20: 25). Jesus let him do as he wanted while saying: "Do not doubt but believe" (John 20: 27). Finally, Jesus said to Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (John 20: 29).

By faith, we are assured of our salvation and the invisible things in the Kingdom of God. It is by God's grace and power that our faith conquers all doubts.

The Christian life is a life of faith, whatever we do, we do it by faith. As James says, "If any of you lack wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. *But ask in faith, never doubting*, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind: for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord" (James 1: 5-8, emphasis added).

Although biblical scholars might be able to discern and accept 'existential doubt' as one part of faith, those with weaker faith might have problem with it. The best way is to exclude all doubts from faith. Although we are distracted by various thoughts, we are neither completely divorced from faith, nor are we immersed in its abyss. If we are struck, we are not cast down from our position.

### Conclusion

Tillich's theology in general is a valuable heritage in both philosophy and Christian theology. Yet his interpretation of the term "faith" in the *Dynamics of Faith* needs clarification and analysis in order to understand his concepts. In this study, I have analyzed Tillich's view of faith and summarized it within the following three arguments: 1) Faith as ultimate concern, 2) faith as uncertainty, and 3) faith must be incorporated

วารสารมหาวิทยาลัยคริสเตียน

ปีที่ ๒๐ ฉบับที่ ๓ (กรกฎาคม - กันยายน) ๒๕๕๗

with doubt. To make Tillich's view more biblical in order to avoid misunderstanding, I proposed a reconstruction of Tillich's view of faith with my three arguments: 1) True faith is in the Triune God, 2) faith has certainty, and 3) faith contains no doubt. I hope that correction of the concept of faith to be in one God, affirming the certainty of faith, and excluding doubt from faith as such, will help strengthen the Christian life in accordance with the biblical teachings. I also suggest that we should do more critical reading of all kinds of theology from all theologians and analyze them, pointing out the problematic issues. By so doing, we can develop and reconstruct better doctrines in accordance with the Scripture, which is the most authoritative source of theology.

---

### References

- Calvin, John. (1960). *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. (Ford Lewis Battles, Trans.). John T. McNeill (ed.). The Library of Christian Classics.Vol. XX. Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press. (Original work published 1559).
- Lane, Tony and Osborne, Hilary. eds. (1987). *John Calvin : The Institutes of Christian Religion*. Grand Rapids. MI : Baker Book House.
- Manning, Russell Re, ed. (2009). *The Cambridge companion to Paul Tillich*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.
- Musser, Donald W. and Joseph L. Price. (2010). *Tillich [Abingdon Pillars of Theology]*. Nashville. Abingdon Press.
- Sherwood. (2010). *Paul Tillich-the dynamics of faith*. [Online]. Retrieved November 26 2010, From <http://apurposemoreobscure.blogspot.com/2006/12/paul-tillich-dynamics-of-faith.html>.
- Smith, L. Scott. (2003, October). What is faith? An analysis of Tillich's 'ultimate concern. *Quodlibet Journal*. 5(4). Retrieved November 26 2010, from <http://www.quodlibet.net/articles/smith-tillich.html>.
- Squish. (2008). Tillich and faith. *Religion*. [On-line]. Retrieved November 26, 2010, from <http://socyberty.com/religion/paul-tillich-and-faith>.
- Tillich, Paul. (1951). *Systematic theology volume I*. Chicago, IL. University of Chicago Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1952). *The courage to be*. New Haven. Yale University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1957). *The dynamics of faith*. New York. Harper.
- Zahn, Jasan. (2010). *True faith is certain : A critique of Tillich's assertions regarding faith*. [On-line]. Retrieved November 27 2010, from <http://www.wls.wels.net/Publications/Theologia/vol2no2/ZahnTillich.htm>.