

MORE ON THE PRINCIPLE OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

I am unable to give individual responses to all questions received.

If one is justified by faith before obedience, then all commands and instructions in the Scriptures may be ignored. The only way to lose justification would be by losing faith, and some assume that original justification cannot be forfeited. James, in elaborating on the principle of justification by faith, definitely states that the faith is dead if it is not active, not just hearing the word but in doing the work it demands. So he emphasized that, in that consideration, a person is not justified by faith alone but by works which complete (“perfect”) faith. It is commonly asserted that James is referring to the obedience of disciples rather than to justification. Absolutely not so! James asks rhetorically about faith without works, “Can that faith SAVE him?” Then in similar rhetorical manner which demands an affirmative answer, he asks, “Was not Abraham our father JUSTIFIED by WORKS, when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar? You see that FAITH WAS ACTIVE ALONG WITH HIS WORKS, and faith was COMPLETED by works ... You see that a man is JUSTIFIED BY WORKS AND NOT BY FAITH ALONE.”

Was Abraham justified twice, or in two different manners? Was he justified originally by faith before obedience and again later justified by faith that was active as James indicates? Or, was his original justification incomplete? Assuming such untenable positions as consistency would force, subsequent to his original justification by faith without obedience, his faith without obedience would still justify him still precluding his works of obedience. So just cancel out all works of obedience as relating to justification in any manner! And, in doing so, declare James to be uninspired, ignorant, or deceptive because he declared those works to be necessary for JUSTIFICATION!!!

In all this logic and illogic, we must not make Paul contradict himself. His discussion of justification was to teach Jews that Gentiles were included in the promises given through Abraham. So, he introduces his epistle to the Romans with his call “to bring about the OBEDIENCE OF FAITH for the sake of his name among all the NATIONS, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ” (1:1-6). We cannot afford to forget that Paul is setting forth the PRINCIPLE OF FAITH which includes OBEDIENCE OF FAITH as he later uses the simple term of FAITH.

If we ignore that distinction, we will misapply his meaning in Verses 16-17: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to EVERY ONE WHO HAS FAITH, to the JEW first and also to the GREEK. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘HE WHO THROUGH FAITH IS RIGHTEOUS SHALL LIVE.’”

BEGIN

A fearfully misleading assumption has allowed the compass of interpreters to point in a wrong direction. That assumption is that the PRINCIPLE OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH began with Abraham, specifically in Genesis 15:1-6, that he was not justified until that point, and that no one else had been justified by THE PRINCIPLE OF FAITH before that time. Let us look again at some very obvious references which are generally skirted around.

“BY FAITH Abel OFFERED to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which HE RECEIVED APPROVAL AS RIGHTEOUS, God bearing witness by ACCEPTING HIS GIFTS... “ (Heb. 11:4). Wow! Just “outside of Eden,” Abel was approved as righteous/justified by faith, not when he had just believed factually, but after his faith had acted in offering an acceptable sacrifice. God bore witness of his completed (“perfected”) faith by accepting his gifts. How could the principle of “obedience of faith” be stated more plainly? So, the principle of justification/righteousness by faith did not begin with Abraham!

“By FAITH Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death ... Now before he was taken he was attested as having PLEASED GOD.” How had he pleased God? By the PRINCIPLE OF FAITH which included, “Enoch WALKED WITH GOD.” (Heb. 11:5; Gen. 5:24). Another patriarch saved by God’s universal principle.

“By FAITH Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, TOOK HEED AND CONSTRUCTED AN ARK FOR THE SAVING OF HIS HOUSEHOLD; by this he condemned the world and became HEIR OF THE RIGHTEOUSNESS WHICH COMES BY FAITH” (Heb. 11:7) Noah’s and Enoch’s faith was not belief at one point in time, but their continuous activating conviction. Obedience was an essential in the very definition of faith. Accepting that definition, we may rightly say that they were saved only by faith, as Luther taught

From these three examples, it is undeniable that OBEDIENCE OF FAITH, or the principle of JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH was effective from the beginning of the history of mankind. From the beginning, activity was always a part of the essence of faith so that it was ineffective and dead without it.

Was the principle of JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH effective in Abraham’s life prior to Genesis 15? Assuredly so. The writer of Hebrews did not jump to that point but he begins years earlier. “By FAITH Abraham OBEYED when he was CALLED TO GO OUT to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance.” “By FAITH he SOJOURNED in the land of promise...” (11:8-9). In the years previous to the record of Genesis 15, he was a BELIEVER and WORSHIPPER following the instruction God had given him. His case is presented in the same manner as those of Abel, Enoch, and Noah.

The reason so much is made of the case of Abraham is not that his justification was unique, though that is generally assumed. Abraham was pointed to because he was called to be the father of the nation of Israel through whom the promise would be fulfilled. The Jews made their claim of justification based upon ancestry and the Law of Moses. Paul labored to convince the Jews that ancestry and the Law offered no claim to the promises, but that they were offered to all who had faith like Abraham, whether Jew or Gentile.

In view of the principle of JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH illustrated so clearly in the lives of Abel, Enoch, and Noah, can anyone whose compass is set on truth deny that Abraham was justified before mention was made of it in Genesis 15:1-6? And can intellectual honesty allow us to assert that his justification was previous to works of obedience? The Genesis account called attention to his justification at that point just as James called

attention to it when Abraham offered Isaac. They were both revealing the same truth about Abraham's faith and justification but not identifying it as something that happened at a certain point in time. Faith involves continuous conviction producing continuous activity. Faith without works is dead, and works without faith are futile. Neither are part of the principle of justification by faith.

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Abraham Was Justified By Faith, No. 1

True or False: Abraham was justified by faith before he obeyed any command.

The vote may be split by you who are regular readers of my material, but the Protestant world, I am confident, would answer "True" by a vast majority. Because Abraham is set forth as the prototype and "the father of the faithful," and it is definitely stated that his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness, it is widely proclaimed that he was justified by factual, trusting faith before any work of obedience.

Salvation by faith, even before any act of obedience, is proclaimed so confidently and consistently by most preachers that others of us may be intimidated about questioning the accuracy of it. Since we are not the elite in academics and are such a small minority, it is easy for us to feel that we are the ones following the wrong scent on the trail of truth. But one more time, I am pleading that you question whether you are following the scent of other searchers for truth or following the true scent of truth itself. This is much more serious than contending about who is doctrinally correct. It is vital to our salvation.

Of Abraham, it is written, "*And he believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness*" (Gen. 15:6). After Christ came, Paul reaffirmed, "*Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness*" (Rom. 4:3). He continues (v.23-25), "*But the words, 'it was reckoned to him,' were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him that raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification.*" Martin Luther added his affirmation by writing "sola"- (only) marginally beside, "*For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law*" (3:28). It is of vital importance, however, that we recognize the kind of works to which Paul referred. "Works of law" is specific and does not include all actions of believers.

Let us look at the setting. Many years before it was declared that his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness, Abraham was an obedient believer. "Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.' ... So Abram went, as the Lord had told him" (Gen. 12:1, 4). Stephen adds details: "The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, 'Depart from your land and from your kindred and go into the land which I will show you.' Then he departed from the land of the Chaldeans, and lived in Haran" (Acts 7:1-4). Then Stephen says, "God

removed him from there.” Did he remove him miraculously or by giving instructions which Abram followed? All of this was done in obedience of faith for, “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place he was to receive as an inheritance” (Heb. 11:8). Could we suppose that Abram’s faith would have been blessed if he had declined God’s instructions saying, “God, I truly believe and trust in you, but I like it here in Mesopotamia where my ancestors have always lived; so, please understand my refusal to leave.”?

After living in Haran, when Abram was seventy-five years old, he left for Canaan. There he built an altar and called on the name of the Lord (Gen. 12:8). After a stay in Egypt, he returned to that altar (13:3-4). Then when Lot was rescued by military victory, Abram gave a tithe to God’s priest, Melchizedek. For ten years his obedience of faith was rewarding. “After these things...,” (15:1), God promised him a son when he was eighty-five years old. “And he believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness” (15:6). Question: Was it at that instance that Abram came to believe? Or had he not had obedient faith all those years? Was it a factual, trusting faith or a responsive faith? The answer is obvious and undeniable. If Abram had responded, “Lord, I fully believe what you are promising, but I refuse to become a father at my age,” would his faith have been reckoned as righteousness?

Here another element is added. When Abram was ninety-nine years old, God made a fleshly covenant (agreement) with him. God would give Canaan to his descendants, and of them it would be required, “Every male among you shall be circumcised.” .. “So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant” (17:1-27).

This is the background for Paul’s writings about Abraham’s faith and of justification by faith in general. Paul dealt with three elements of controversy. (1) The Jews trusted in the covenant made with Abraham, a fleshly covenant of circumcision. (2) They trusted in righteousness through the covenant of law made with Israel and by keeping the rituals of the Law of Moses. (3) They had a problem in accepting Gentiles who observed neither circumcision nor the rituals of Moses.

First, Paul argued that the universal principle of justification by faith was in effect before the covenant of circumcision and the fleshly covenant. *“Is this blessing pronounced only upon the circumcised, or also upon the uncircumcised? We say that faith is reckoned to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received circumcision as a sign or seal of the righteousness which he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, and likewise the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but also follow the example of the faith which our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.”* (Rom. 4:9-12). Question: To follow “the example of faith” of Abraham, must one perform the specific things he did, or must one follow the principle of obedience of faith?

Second, the covenant of law and the Law of Moses came 430 years after the promise; hence, they could not be a part of it (Gal. 3:17-18). Could either Jew or Gentile be righteous by keeping the Law of Moses? The answer is clear as Paul continues: *“The*

promise to Abraham and his descendants, that they should inherit the world, did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression. That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants --- no only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham, for he is the father of us all ...” (Read all of Romans 4).

Third, could a Gentile be righteous apart from the covenants of circumcision and law? *“Now I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he is bound to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love” (Gal. 5:2-6)*

Further: *“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and he justifies him who has faith in Jesus. Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On the principle of works? No, but on the principle of faith. For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of their faith and the uncircumcised through their faith. Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law” (Rom. 3:21-31).*

Very briefly, these are the contexts of discussions concerning faith, obedience, works, and law in the scriptures. Paul is not arguing whether salvation is by faith before works of obedience. He is arguing that the promise was not based (1) upon the covenant of circumcision made with Abraham, (2) the covenant of law given through Moses with its ceremonial works such as circumcision, and (3) since the promise was based upon the principle of faith, all who believe, both Jews and Gentiles, were recipients of the promise. In no way can we declare that Paul was divorcing works of obedience from faith itself. The principle of faith always includes “obedience of faith” (Rom. 1:5). That is amply proven in the texts above which portray Abraham as an obedient, worshipping, yes, working believer for years before the declaration was made that his faith was reckoned for righteousness.

The idea of meritorious works does not enter the picture. No mention is made about Abram gaining righteousness by giving enough tithes to Melchizedek, building enough ornate altars, converting hundreds to faith in God, using his wealth to help the poor, or his achieving glorious military victory. No such works can achieve righteousness. That

would be the “principle of works,” but the “principle of faith” includes “obedience of faith” as texts already quoted indicate definitely. And more will follow.

Hebrews 11 gives a list of heroes of faith. The principle of faith is illustrated in their conduct. “By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he received approval as righteous... .” “By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death . . . Now before he was taken he was attested as having pleased God.” How had he pleased God? “Enoch walked with God . . .” (Gen. 5:24). “By faith Abraham obeyed... etc.” This thrilling chapter mentions the familiar characters of Bible history indicating that they were all activated by faith to obey. Their obedience was an essential element of faith, not something added to it, for faith without works is dead. Living faith is a continuing process rather than something that was completed, matured, perfected at some point in the past. “Whoever lives and believes in me shall never die,” is the way Jesus put it (John 11:26). “Believed” is not used as a completed process.

Here is where James 2:14-26 fits in harmoniously. “What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him?” James makes this a “salvation issue”! He makes general application. He is not referring to works of merit or achievement, else faith itself would be ruled out for faith is an achievement of the individual. He is illustrating the principle of faith which involves “obedience of faith.” “So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead,” he states categorically.

Factual faith strong enough to bring awesome fear alone is ineffective, else demons would be saved, James has assured us all.

Paul pointed to Abraham’s justification by faith. James pointed to Abraham to emphasize the principle of faith which includes obedience of faith. “Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered his son upon the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by works, and the scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.’” If Abraham was justified by faith alone, he was justified years before Genesis 15:6 where it is written, “And he believed the Lord; and he reckoned it for righteousness.” So James decisively ruled out faith alone with, “You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.” And, as if that might be misunderstood, he gave the idea a death blow: “For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead.” How much clearer could James have made the case for the principle of justification by faith?

There is no conflict between Paul and James. James says that Abraham’s faith was completed (made perfect, fully matured) by his obedience. Can incomplete faith save? No, for without that obedience, the faith is dead! Not just weak, but dead! How much faith is required of us? Enough faith to obey. Perfected (completed) faith. And this is not for some point in the past, but an ever-living, active faith.

This is a most serious matter. Most evangelicals contend that salvation and regeneration come at the moment of belief before any action expressing obedience of faith, especially without the initiating ritual of baptism. “Just accept him in your heart at this moment.” “Not of works” is explained in a most confusing manner, for they imply that any action of

acceptance is an effort to add to Christ's work and an effort to be saved by one's own meritorious actions. How dare one think he can do anything to help God save him!!

However, in the next breath they urge, "Just believe in him and invite Jesus into your heart and pray the sinners prayer, etc.!" Talk about inconsistency! Submitting to baptism could never be as meritorious as believing in Jesus. Believing is a much greater and more difficult achievement than submitting to baptism. Believers are also urged to repent of their sins which is also a difficult achievement. Are belief and repentance efforts to add to the saving work of Christ. Are they included in "not of works"? Why try to squirm out of this which is so obvious?

It is high time to be candid. On Pentecost, Peter, using the keys of the kingdom, threw wide the door of entrance in proclaiming the gospel message. When his hearers were frightfully convinced, they cried out, "*Brethren, what shall we do?*" *And Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him''* (Acts 2:37-39). Let me ask in all seriousness, why would most preachers today be absolutely tongue-tied if they attempted to give Peter's answer to convicted believers today? Why do they prefer to divorce baptism from the answer and create their own answers instead? They might have to give account to their denomination if they include baptism in the answer, but account will be given to a Higher Court if they leave it out.

When we contend that obedience of faith is essential, others object that we can never be sure we are obeying enough; so that creates doubt and insecurity. That is a valid point, but let us apply it consistently. If faith is essential to salvation, how can we ever know if we have enough faith? Has your faith moved a mountain yet?

Abraham, the father of the faithful, is the prototype of the principle of obedience of faith - the kind of faith imputed for righteousness. He had assurance when his faith was completed / perfected by works. Yet he did not obey fully at all times, like when taking his father and kindred with him instead of leaving them in Mesopotamia. He was not honest with the Egyptians about Sarah being his wife. His weakness of faith allowed him to try to substitute his plan for an heir for the one God planned. God knows the weakness of each of us and his grace covers exceptions to what he desires of us. Our aim is not to use the exception as a rule to give license but to live submissive to his will. We are not left without confidence, but fuller discussion of it is too lengthy to include here. This is too long! Thanks for your patience.

(P. S. Questions: If regeneration comes at the point of trusting faith, was Abraham regenerated in that manner also? If he could be regenerated by faith without Christ, can others be also? Was Nicodemus already regenerated by faith? Were those on Pentecost who had faith to cry out already regenerated by that faith? Were the objects of saving faith different -- Abraham believing in God and we believing in Christ?)

(Cecil Hook; August 2002) []

