

Abraham Was Justified by Faith, No. 3

In our essays FR 135 and FR 138 we discussed the universal principle of justification. It is righteousness / justification / salvation imputed on the basis of our faith. That principle includes more than a single affirmation or act at a certain point in time for it is a living, active, and continuous faith by its very definition.

The Golden Text of the Bible affirms that, *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever BELIEVES (continues to believe, not once believed - ch) in him should not perish but have eternal life”* (John 3:16). Because of a common misconception that the principle of works of the Law, merit, or achievement rule out the principle of obedience of faith, it is widely proclaimed that one is saved at the moment of belief before and without any obedient act of acceptance, particularly the submission to baptism. Most of you were probably brought up in a Christian home like I was, and you never came to belief on any particular date, but you did confess Christ and were baptized as a defining action completing (making “perfect”) your faith.

While denying the necessity of the baptismal ritual of initiation, and denouncing it as a work, most all evangelists instruct the sinners into other expressions of faith and acceptance. They are told to accept Jesus in their hearts, commit their lives to Jesus, pray the sinner’s prayer, or some similar activity. Why is the scriptural *“repent and be baptized”* rejected as a work while the unscriptural “pray the sinner’s prayer” not a work? It is clearly a substitution of man’s formula for the one declared by him who held the keys of the kingdom.

If one is justified by faith before and without obedience, then all commands and instructions in the Scriptures may be ignored. The only way to lose justification would be by losing faith. As long as a person believes, he could ignore all instructions and warnings relating to moral conduct and obedience. If one is justified by faith alone and he continues to believe, he may practice all the works of the flesh that Paul enumerates with no loss of his imputed righteousness. Poor misguided Paul thought that such a person could not inherit the kingdom of God! (Gal. 5:19f). His much learning confused his mind so that he taught justification by faith alone and then demanded obedience of faith! And with my little learning, he has confused me into believing that *“such shall not inherit the kingdom of God.”*

If a person believes with the intention of obeying, does God have to wait to see if the person is baptized before saving him? In sustaining this point, it is proposed that God did not wait until Abraham offered Isaac to recognize his faith. Not true! It is stated that he offered Isaac (Heb. 11:17; James 2:21). True, he did not kill him, but the word “offer” does not mean to kill. He offered him on the altar, and the angel said, *“Now I know you fear God”* (Gen. 22:12). James says that was when his faith was perfected by works.

Although I cannot presume to limit what God can and will do, I cannot give assurance from hypothetical cases. Grace, by its definition, is free, but I am not the dispenser of it and can offer no shortcuts to it. We may ask the same question about a pagan with an honest heart. Does God have to wait and see if the pagan will believe when he hears the gospel? I leave that to God, but I cannot tell a sinner, “Just have an honest heart and you will be saved.”

If a sinner is saved by faith alone, he is saved without repentance. All sorts of evasive arguments have been offered. Some say that both faith and repentance are gifts of God; hence a person cannot deny that saving faith. Some teach that the Spirit will not let the person deny the faith or sin so as to lose his justification. So warnings against falling away are as senseless as warning a person not to jump over his house lest he break his leg! Because no one can live without sinning, it is argued that the enormity of our sins make no difference. We are warned against letting grace become a license to sin, so that must be a possibility. What happens if a believer uses it as a license to sin? Is he saved anyway?

Failing to understand Paul’s distinctions in the principle of faith, the obedience of faith, and the principle of works, sincere students have made him seem to be inconsistent and to contradict his own teaching. Martin Luther struggled with the system of law and works imposed by the Catholic Church and came to understand justification by faith. Then Luther’s concepts were misunderstood in following generations who came to think he taught justification by faith alone.

A fellow-student of mine in Abilene Christian College, J. W. Roberts, became quite a scholar. He wrote the Living Word Commentary on The Letter of James. I shall quote at length from him here beginning on Page 98:

“Notes On FAITH ALONE”

“The doctrine of “justification by faith only” has become a loaded expression in modern denominational theology. It is a real bone of contention. The modern denominational doctrine (in some groups) is that in conversion man is saved at the instant of faith, when he puts his trust in Christ as his personal savior. That leads to the denial of the efficacy of other acts of obedience, especially baptism. The Bible plainly teaches that baptism as an act of faith is a condition of salvation or remission of sins (justification). See Acts 2:38; Mark 16:16; 1 Peter 3:21; Acts 22:16. This does not mean that baptism is sacramental in the sense in which sacraments are generally understood. A sacrament (as used in Catholicism) is an act which has efficacy in itself and in the validity of the administrator (an authorized person) and requires no faith on the part of the one on whom it is administered. In such an act faith does not “work together,” for there is no faith.

“But this use of the term “faith only” is not the historic meaning of the term. Martin Luther did not mean this by his formula, and to attribute the rise of the term in its denominational sense to him (as is so often done) is an injustice. Luther meant that faith

is the only meritorious ground of justification -- salvation or remission of sins can never be obtained on any grounds apart from faith in Jesus' blood. There are only two means of salvation as Paul stated them in Romans 3:27: "the principle" (law) of faith and the "principle" (law) of human works of merit (such as those under the law). See NEB on this verse. Since Paul rejected the principle of works, it follows that, unless one is to be saved by the principle of faith, he cannot be saved. This expression did not originate with Luther; others had used it before him. But he stoutly defended the translation of Romans 3:28: "Man is justified without works of the law through faith only." To deny this (to Luther) would be to deny the whole teaching of Paul and to affirm that one can be saved by his own works without the Lord Jesus. In this understanding Luther is correct.

"But Luther himself emphasized the importance of baptism. He is quoted as saying, "We are justified by faith alone, but not by the faith which is alone." Some of the harshest things which Luther ever said were said in one edition of his commentary -- against those who deny the place of baptism in the New Testament.

"Thus we see that "faith only" can be used in two senses. It can be used COMPOSITELY as the principle of justification. But it can be used ANALYTICALLY, where the process of obedience is broken down into its component parts. In the first sense, salvation is by "faith only," in the second sense, it is "by works and not by faith only," for here faith is only one of the conditions of pardon: "He who BELIEVES and is BAPTIZED will be saved" (Mark 16:16); "REPENT and be BAPTIZED ... for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). Thus the doctrine of salvation at the moment of faith -- without obedience -- is not a biblical teaching, and it does not take its roots from the reformers. It is rooted in the conversion experience theology of early revivalism. It sets aside the plain teaching of the Bible on the doctrine of obedience and works of faith.

"It is easy to see, therefore, that there is no contradiction between Paul's use of justification by faith (only or "without works") and James' teaching that justification is by works and not by faith only. Paul is thinking of the composite nature of faith as the principle of justification by faith rather than by the works of the law (or of human merit). James is thinking analytically of faith as a condition of justification and insists that it must obey the conditions of the teaching of Christ and perfect itself in works."

Those words give clarity and express the harmony of Paul and James. Paul speaks of the principle of faith as the whole condition of acceptance by God. James speaks of the obedient actions involved in the principle of faith.

Most everyone will agree that James was correct when he stated that faith is dead if it is not accompanied by works which complete ("perfect") the faith. But it is commonly asserted that James is referring to the obedience of disciples rather than to justification. The principle of obedience of faith that James explains applies both to the initial justification and the continuation of that saved state. He very plainly makes it a "salvation issue." 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*.” James is writing about the same justification that Paul wrote about, and they were in harmony with one another but at odds with countless present-day interpreters.

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 like James wrote about? Or, was not his justification sustained continuously by his obedience of faith?

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.’*”

We shall break off here with hope of continuing later. If this seems disjointed and repetitive, your gracious patience is implored. May our minds be united in truth.

(Cecil Hook; September 2002) []