

Does Faith Equal Obedience?

Bernie Gillespie

Modified from: “*Will the Real “Justification by Faith” Please Stand Up.*”

Does faith *equal* obedience? There are Christians who attempt to redefine the Gospel by making faith the equivalent of obedience. In so doing, the whole point of the Gospel is lost. Gospel is swallowed up by Law. Paul makes a critical distinction between those who observe the law and those who “believe what you heard” (Gal. 3:2) So should we. There is a difference between obedience to God’s Word and faith in God’s Word. Obedience should follow faith (Heb. 5:9; 1 John 2:5; 5:3). Faith and obedience are never separated in the Christian life (Rom. 16:26; 1 Pet. 1:22). Yet, they are never treated as synonymous (Rom. 4:1-5).

Why? The Bible teaches that no one can obey enough to merit salvation. This is the heart of the problem Jesus came to solve. We are not able to fully obey God’s Word (Romans 3:23). Only Jesus was able to perfectly obey God’s Word. [[Was Jesus a Christian?](http://www.inchistalone.org/WasJesusAChristian.htm)¹] While we fail to fully keep God’s Word, Jesus did not fail. He alone is the Son of God, in whom the Father is well pleased. He was spotless, sinless, and without guile. Christ is the righteousness of God. Here is the miracle of the Gospel and the grace of God: God, out of His grace allows us to receive Christ’s righteousness through believing the Word of the Gospel.

Paul does even more than distinguish between the observing of law and faith. He identifies a new kind of righteousness (Romans 1:17; 3:21-22). It is the righteousness that is the product of Christ’s perfect obedience. And this new kind of righteousness is available to those who believe in Christ. This is the reason why Paul speaks in Romans 1:5 about the εἰς ὑπακοὴν πίστεως (obedience of faith). The King James translates this as “for obedience to the faith.” However most translators and many respected scholars translate this phrase as *the obedience that IS faith*. Cranfield, an eminent Romans scholar, presents in his timeless commentary all the grammatical possibilities for this phrase. Then, as is his method, he lays out the reasons for each one. Finally, he gives the reasons for his choice: “Of these the one which seems to us to suit best the structure of Paul’s thought in Romans is ‘the obedience which consists of faith.’”²

Another highly regarded commentator on Romans, C. K Barrett, states about this phrase, “Paul is using a shorthand expression and means that the object of his apostolic work is that men should (a) become obedient to Christ, and (b) put their faith in him.”³ Later, commenting on Romans 1:16 he further expounds on Paul’s understanding of faith in Romans:

What faith is will become gradually clearer as the epistle proceeds; but its primary meaning is already apparent. It is the ‘believing obedience’ of v.

¹ <http://www.inchistalone.org/WasJesusAChristian.htm>

² *The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments*, eds., J. A. Emerton, C. E. B. Cranfield, and G. N. Stanton, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994). Vol. I, p. 66.

³ C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1957), p. 21.

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5. He believes who accepts the power of God which is at work in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as – the power of God, and therefore submits himself to it, claiming no rights over against his Creator but ready to trust himself wholly to his grace and wisdom. Only when man is prepared to stand still and see the glory of God can he apprehend God's action as salvation.⁴

Some feel the finest modern work on Romans is by Douglas Moo. Commenting on Romans 1:5, Moo says:

In light of this, we understand the words "obedience" and "faith" to be mutually interpreting: obedience always involves faith, and faith always involves obedience. They should not be equated, compartmentalized, or made into separate stages of Christian experience. Paul called men and women to a faith that was always inseparable from obedience – for the Savior in whom we believe is nothing less than our Lord – and to an obedience that could never be divorced from faith – for we can obey Jesus as Lord only when we have given ourselves to him in faith.⁵

Moo states it is only proper to speak of obedience and faith together **when we understand that faith in Christ is the only true, acceptable obedience.** *It is not correct to say that obeying something like a specific denomination steps of salvation, no matter how they are drawn from Scripture, is true faith.* That would be a reversal of the case. What Paul means is that faith alone, trusting in what Christ alone has done for us, is the true obedience.

FAITH = TRUE OBEDIENCE

OBEDIENCE ≠ TRUE FAITH

I am compelled to reiterate, ***to redefine faith as obedience is a serious mistake.*** Any claim that obeying specific steps to be saved is the equivalent of obeying the Gospel, is a most serious mistake. But, a worse mistake is *redefining faith as obedience, because saving faith is a gift from that enables us to receive the gift of salvation.* Once faith is redefined as obedience, all the rest of one's teaching about salvation is fatally flawed. It is like stacking many coins on a very crooked one. Each coin stacked on the pile will follow the crooked path of the bent at the bottom of the pile.

For some Christians, salvation is not so much faith in the Pauline sense, but it is faithfulness in the Old Testament sense. It is important to point out that this interpretation moves away from the view of the Protestant Reformation, and back to that embraced by

⁴ Barrett, *Op. Cit.*, p. 28.

⁵ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, eds., Ned B. Stonehouse, F. F. Bruce, Gordon D. Fee, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), p. 52.

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the Roman Catholic Church (since the Middle Ages). Luther opposed Rome’s interpretation of faith as bare faithfulness. He saw this is an essential issue of the Reformation. Luther challenged that it is not by our righteousness (faithfulness) that we are counted just by God, but by “a righteousness from God” which is specially revealed in the Gospel. Paul makes it plain what this righteousness from God is: “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.” Christians who lean toward Rome by merging faith and obedience miss altogether the significance of this crucial historical issue.

Interestingly, I remember a class in Bible school where the teacher read Romans 1:17. This person commented that the word “faith” in “the just shall live by faith” should be understood as “faithfulness.” We were taught that the just were those who lived a faithful life. Tragically, this teacher failed to understand the most basic point that Paul was making. Paul was reinterpreting Habakkuk’s words in the light of the Gospel. Now, we are not just by our own righteousness, our own faithfulness, but we are only just by “the righteousness that is by faith,” which is the “righteousness from God” revealed in Jesus.

If we define justification in a way that equates faith with faithfulness, we make faith into obedience. The logical end is salvation by works, not matter how one may try to avoid it. This has serious implications for the rest of our theology of salvation. If faith is misunderstood this way, so then is grace. If grace is misconstrued, then the work of Christ in the Atonement is misapprehended. This way of defining justifying faith places one on a slippery slope that continues downward, away from the biblical Gospel. It moves to an increased focus on the boasting of humans, and away from an emphasis on the glory of God alone.

Pelagianism	Biblical View
Justifying Faith = Obedience	Justifying Faith = Believing/Trust