

“Easy Believism: How Would ‘Hard Believism’ Affect the Gospel?”

Bernie Gillespie

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Those who challenge the teaching of salvation by faith alone in Christ alone use such loaded phrases as “easy believism,” and “cheap grace.” The insinuation is that salvation by faith alone is watered-down, lax, and morally weak. In the historic debate salvation by faith has been characterize as antinomian, *i.e.*, lawless. It is assumed that Christians who believe they are saved by the sheer grace of God, with only naked faith in Christ, are ethically irresponsible and morally careless. They are seen as neglecting obedience to God and the necessity of good works.

But if there is “easy believism,” then one wonders what “hard believism” would be like. How does one make believing harder? And should we make it harder? As we look deeper, we see that the aspersion of “easy believism” goes to the very definition and nature of faith. What is true saving faith?

To have faith means more than to have an opinion, belief or conviction. It means far more than knowledge or acknowledgment. It means trust and reliance. "Reliance upon a thing or person supposed to be trustworthy, this is Faith."¹ As I said, some make the mistake of faulting those who hold to "faith alone" as "easy believism" or mere "mental assent." But the issue is more than "easy believism" or "uneasy legalism." The phrase "easy believism" betrays a lack of understanding concerning what Scripture teaches about saving faith. The issue is the clear meaning of saving faith as presented in Scripture.

Some propose that we can make saving faith “harder” by adding *obedience* to it. Faith *alone* is “easy believism,” but if obedience is made essential to our salvation, then faith is made harder. What is behind the desire to make salvation “harder”? Some may claim that we honor God through obedience as part of our salvation. That would be true if we *could* fully obey God. The simplest answer to this is found in Romans. Paul received a new understanding of obedience that the Gospel teaches or makes possible. In Romans 1:5 Paul speaks of "the obedience of faith". While some have attempted to say that Paul means that true faith is obedience, *that is the very opposite of what he is saying*. Paul claims that true obedience is *faith!*

This is a radical transformation of the meaning of obedience for a one time Pharisee. Still, we can see that this new understanding of obedience is consistent with the Paul’s teaching of justification by faith. Throughout Romans and his other epistles, Paul declares and constantly argues for faith as the basis for salvation. The obedience of faith is that, by believing, we have reached or showed the highest form of obedience possible. By faith in God we have truly and savingly obeyed Him because we totally trust in Him to be God or sovereign in our salvation. We must marvel at the beauty of this. We trust in God’s way of saving us - Jesus Christ alone! By faith in Jesus Christ we truly obey God’s

¹ H.C.G. Moule, *Justification By Faith*, (London, John F. Shaw and Co., n.d.), p. 12.

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call to, "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else" (Isaiah 45:22).

We must be careful of our definitions of faith. Some refer to Hebrews 11:1 as a definition of faith. After a closer look, Hebrews does not give a definition, but a description of what happens because of faith. Faith is not a power or faculty in itself which "moves" or "compels" God. It is an attitude of confidence *in* God Himself. It always points to the One *in* whom it is placed. "Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, they all treated the hoped-for and the unseen as solid and certain because they all relied upon the faithful Promiser . . . It was reliance on the Promiser. It was taking God at His Word."²

We must always remember that the quality or power of our faith is based on what, or in whom, we trust and not in our faith itself! If our faith is in the omnipotent, eternal, living God, who became the man, Jesus Christ, then our faith is most excellently and wonderfully founded. Reliance upon the Maker of Heaven and Earth is the most powerful faith. Not because of the "hardness" of the believers faith, but because of the greatness of Whom the believer trusts. Faith is great, effective, and powerful because of its *object* -- Jesus Christ. His is the Glory, the Kingdom, and the Power forever. It is great faith because it is faith placed in the One worthy of all "power, wealth, wisdom, might, honor, glory and blessing." We *trust* in the:

"Blessed and Only Potentate the King of kings, and Lord of lords; Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and power everlasting. Amen." (1 Tim 6:15,16 KJV)

This is why we are justified by faith *alone*. It is God who is the author of salvation. If we have any mixture of our obedience or self-righteousness with our faith, we take glory from God. The beauty of faith alone is that it makes Jesus Christ supreme - Savior alone - in the work of salvation.

A certain description of the nature of faith grew out of the Reformation. Today those who believe in salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, hold this basic understanding of faith. Saving faith consists of *knowledge, assent and trust*. No description of faith that fails to include these three things is considered a biblical depiction of saving faith.

True saving faith must be based on the *knowledge* of salvation. One must know the truth about the Savior in order to trust in him. You don't believe what you don't know. When I say that faith must consist of the knowledge of salvation, I mean that true saving faith has an object. In biblical salvation that object is Jesus Christ. Saving faith involves a *faith relationship*:

² Ibid., p. 15.

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A faith relationship by definition requires both a subject and an object. In involves the one who believes (subject) and that which is believed (object).³

The knowledge necessary for saving faith does not have to be exhaustive. But it must be the true knowledge that God expects. What he reveals to us about Jesus Christ in Scripture is true knowledge. When we read that Jesus died for our sins and rose again to give us eternal life that is true knowledge. God gives us that knowledge to base our faith upon. Saving faith is more than knowing the facts about what Jesus did to save us. But faith cannot be saving *without* that knowledge. Saving faith means believing in something. We must know something about what God has done through Jesus in order to place our trust in him.

The second aspect of saving faith is *assent*. I mean by assent that we must embrace or agree with the true knowledge of salvation. We could know the story of how Jesus died and rose again, but that is not the same as owning that truth personally. When we assent to the truth of the Gospel, we say I confess that Jesus died and rose for my salvation. We must acknowledge or accept what Jesus has done to save the world is also done for me. True faith means to believe that Jesus not only died to save people, *he died to save me*.

The third aspect saving faith is trust. James makes it clear that one could have the first two aspects of faith and still not be saved. “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!” (James 2:19 ESV) James is saying that we can have true knowledge (God is one) and assent to it (believe and shudder). *But trust is missing*. The demons do not trust in God. True, saving faith must include trust. This is called *fiducia*, from which we get the language of *fiduciary* institutions (institutions we can “trust”). As R.C. Sproul and Gordon Clark point, the demons’ problem is that their heart are so corrupt they have no love or affection for Christ. That is because they do not know the “sweetness and excellence of Christ””

Saving *fiducia* rests on an awakening to the sweetness and loveliness of Christ, an awakening wrought in the minds and souls of corrupt humans by the regeneration power of the Holy Spirit.⁴

Faith must have something *worthy* of trust as its object or end. In the Gospel, the object of faith is Jesus Christ. By faith we place our souls in His hands. The whole of one’s relationship to God is a commitment of trust.

³ R.C. Sproul, *Faith Alone*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), p. 77.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

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Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator. (1 Peter 4:19 KJV)

Peter says that we entrust our souls to God because we believe Him to be a faithful Creator.

Paul quotes Genesis 15:6 when speaking of saving faith in Romans chapter four. "Abraham believed God and it was counted (imputed, reckoned) unto him for righteousness." This faith is an attitude of trust in the character of God. Some say it this way, "Abraham believed God," with the emphasis on "believed." However, it should be said, "Abraham believed GOD," with the emphasis on God. *Faith is trust in the character or person of God.*

To have faith in a commander does not mean merely to entertain a conviction, a belief, however positive, that he is skillful and competent . . . No, to have faith in a commander implies a view of him in which we either actually do, or are quite ready to, trust ourselves and our cause to his command.⁵

For example, when one gets on a plane one does not simply hold an opinion as to the competence of the pilot. One literally entrusts one's life into his hands. This is faith as trust (*fiducia*) or reliance.

All three of these aspects faith - saving knowledge, assent and trust - must be present in order for true, saving faith in Christ to exist.

We now have to ask, "Is faith easy?" Apparently, if there is such a thing as "easy believism" then it is assumed that there is some form of saving faith that is easy. But, is it easy for someone to believe that Jesus is Lord, the only Savior of the world, the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world, and the giver of eternal life? Not according to the Bible. In fact, reading the entire Bible leaves the clear impression that the hardest thing for Israel and all people is to trust in God to save them. When Jesus walked the Earth, most did not receive him or trust in him to save them. At one point even his disciple fled and left him alone. Actually, the Bible implies that Jesus was the only one who kept true faith:

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. (Heb. 5:7 ESV)

As strong and obedient as Jesus was, he still cried out on the Cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34). Jesus became as us

⁵ Moule, p. 12f.

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on the Cross – a dying sinner without God. He took this suffering on, not because of his own need, but to save us. Even as a redeeming Savior, believing was not easy for Jesus, and neither was the obedience that wrought our salvation. When people tell me that the Gospel sounds like easy believism, I say: “Easy for whom?” It was not easy for Jesus. He paid for my salvation *with his very life!* He did this that he might give salvation to us as a gift. That is what the Bible means by saving grace.

So should it be *harder for us*? To call faith alone easy believism is to make true faith hard. It closes the mind of those who trust in their obedience to utter dependence on Christ. To disparage grace as “easy” or to try to make faith “harder” tragically misses the whole point of the Gospel. God did in Christ what we could not do ourselves. We could not trust in God because our hearts were fallen and corrupt. We could not see the sweetness and excellence of Christ because of the darkness and deadness of our hearts. So God graciously opened our hearts – raised us to life and gave us light - to see the truth of the Gospel. He gave us a new heart so we could love him. Yes, he made it easier for us, but if he hadn’t there would have been no one saved. He made it easy for us, but at a great price to himself.

We cannot make grace more expensive than it already is. It cost Jesus the Cross. There is no such thing as “cheap grace” in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We ought not make faith any harder because it is hard enough. It is so hard for us as sinful people that God had to work a transforming miracle – a new birth – in order for us to have hearts that could love and believe in Jesus. Because of our sinfulness, it cost the blood of the Son of God to purchase our grace. Any attempt to make grace more expensive and faith harder is an effort to make the Gospel less true. Those who teach a *more expensive grace* or a *harder faith* also desire to take the Gospel right out of our hearts.