

# "Will the Real 'Justification by Faith' Please Stand Up?"

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## Part Two Gospel Wrongly Defined

I am greatly concerned about the UPCI doctrine of justification because it is the Gospel that is ultimately at stake. The Gospel is the good news of what Jesus has done for our salvation. His work centers in the Cross. What occurs on the Cross is crucial to the message of the Gospel. The message of justification is that we are right with God on the basis of what Christ did on the Cross. Christ bore our sins in His own body on the Cross (1 Peter 2:24), and by His sacrifice, imputes His righteousness to those who trust in Him by faith (Romans 4:5). Therefore, if we fail to get justification right, we fail to understand the full message of the Cross and thus the Gospel itself. The issue of the relationship between justification and the Gospel cannot be overstated. It is of highest importance to the life, meaning and future of the Church. The very salvation of souls is at risk. When the truth and meaning of justification is ill-defined, the heart of the story and message of Jesus' atoning work is obscured and inevitably lost or distorted. *We endanger the message of the Gospel when we teach incorrectly about justification.*

There is a present trend among some Evangelicals to redefine the historic understanding of justification. John Piper soberly states:

It is of deep concern to me that this move away from the historic Protestant view on justification is bringing in its wake a tendency to sacrifice clarity and definition in discussions of justification by faith . . . There is a tendency to use the familiar language of historic Protestantism, but with new content. There is a great hesitancy to make clear to the readers or listeners that the content is new. I think that those who are moving in this direction have some sense of the magnitude of the defection from mainstream Protestantism and are anxious about the repercussions of such a doctrinal revision. This is a

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dangerous tendency and begins to erode the importance of truth and clarity – what Paul described as “refusing to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Corinthians 4:2)<sup>1</sup>

It is my concern that David Bernard and the UPCI as a whole (when they do speak of it) “use the familiar language of justification of historic Protestantism, but with new content.” In their use of this language the impression is given that their doctrine is orthodox Protestant teaching. In reality, it is not. It is new content in that justification is defined as obeying their interpretation of Acts 2:38. However, it is old content in that the under-lying theology is Roman Catholic. It is a doctrine of merit that bases one’s justification upon their obedience rather than faith in the finished work of Christ. This is not only an attrition from the Reformation’s gains, and an abandonment of the consensual teaching of the Church since the beginning,<sup>2</sup>but *it leads to a redefinition of the Gospel*. That is the first fatal mistake in David Bernard’s teaching on justification.

Elsewhere, Piper, lists three major storms which place justification at their center. The **first** is the *ecumenical dialogues between Roman Catholics and Evangelicals*. A controversy has grown over the attempt to unite these two groups at the expense of the biblical meaning of justification, and thus the Gospel. The **second storm** is what is called the “*New Perspective*” on Paul and the law. Led by James D. G. Dunn, E. P. Sanders, and N. T. Wright, the notion of forensic nature of justification is a misunderstanding of Paul and his view of the law. This new perspective discounts the validity of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer and ultimately equates justification with sanctification. This new perspective, which is old medieval Roman Catholicism, is now having a strong influence in a number of leading Pentecostal theologians, who are attempting to bridge the gap between Protestant theology and Pentecostalism by returning to a

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<sup>1</sup>John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ*, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2002), fn. 16, p. 70.

<sup>2</sup>Cp. Thomas Oden, *The Justification Reader*, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2002).

Roman Catholic view of justification. They see this as a good thing since it creates a causeway for ecumenism. I consider it as a journey away from the Gospel.

The **third storm** is the “conflation of faith and the works of faith as the instrument of justification.” I believe that the UPCI falls into this category of error. To prove this case, I have listed below a number of contrasts between the teaching David Bernard, the leading writer for the UPCI, and the historic biblical view of justification by faith.

The **first fatal error** in Bernard’s definition of justification is that he *defines the Gospel as obeying Acts 2:38* (cp. Figure 1).

David Bernard	Historic Orthodox View
The <b>Gospel is defined as</b> identifying with the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus by “ <b>obeying</b> ” <b>Acts 2:38</b>	The Gospel is that Jesus’ work of salvation on our behalf graciously reconciles us to God through faith.

(Figure 1)

Bernard and the UPCI, tend to restrict the gospel to the mere events of Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection. However, it is the *meaning* of what Jesus did for us that makes them Good News. It is that we can share in them by faith. But the UPCI, by requiring that all must “obey the Gospel”<sup>3</sup> misses entirely the meaning of the Gospel. Instead, they insert “repent, be baptized, and receive the Spirit,” as the parallels to Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection, and make them the “commands” or things we must obey in order to obey the Gospel.<sup>4</sup> This totally inverts the

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<sup>3</sup>There is no indication that UPCI writers find it unusual to speak of obeying the events in someone else’s life. If the Gospel is, as they say, the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, then it does seem strange to speak of “obeying” these events. One must first understand their typological thinking and method of interpretation to make sense of it. Read [The True ‘Plan of Salvation’](#) where I speak more about this typological method.

<sup>4</sup>To call these – repent, be baptized, and receive the Spirit – commands is not correct. First, I would interpret repent as meaning the same as having faith in the Gospel.

meaning of the gospel, and reduces the work of Christ, offered out of grace on our behalf, into crass commands by which the gospel is legalistically obeyed! I do not believe the UPCI realizes that their teaching reduces the beauty and graciousness of the Gospel.

Paul, in Scripture, rejected any form of turning the Gospel into law:

I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? Have you suffered so much for nothing-- if it really was for nothing? Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard? Consider Abraham: "He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. (Galatians 3:2-9 NIV)

The issues surrounding this statement relate particularly to our subject. Many mistakenly think that the issue between Paul and the Judaizers was salvation by works of the law versus salvation by faith in Christ. It was much more subtle and insidious than that. Those influencing the Judaizers were Christians. They believed in Jesus Christ. But, they were also Jews from Jerusalem who were still committed to keeping the law of Moses. Their concern was that believers in Christ should keep the

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Repentance is another way that Luke describes faith in Luke-Acts. [Cp. Guy D. Nave, Jr., *The Role and Function of Repentance in Luke-Acts*, (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002). This is an excellent historical and exegetical treatment of the meaning of repentance.] Secondly, the call to be baptized and receive the Spirit are both in the passive voice, meaning the one hearing Acts 2:38 is being acted upon by God, rather than actively doing something to obey God. The verb for "be baptized" means "allow yourself to be baptized" which means someone else acts on the believer to convey the blessing of baptism. Receiving the Spirit is passive, in that God Himself is the one who acts to give the Spirit, not we who somehow obtain it in some way.

Mosaic law as a sign that they had true faith in Christ. It was not that they taught the Galatians to be saved by works. The contention they brought with Paul was over teaching the Galatians that they had to prove their justification by their works. Chiefly the focus fell on circumcision. They taught the Galatians, who were Gentiles and had not heard of circumcision, that they must perform this rite in order to prove their faith in Christ.

This is strikingly similar to the teaching of the UPCI. They would not say that we are saved by keeping the law of Moses. But, they would say that we must prove our faith by keeping baptism, following the UPCI conditions for Spirit-baptism, and keeping what amounts to the "house rules" or UPCI standards of holiness. The UPCI does not officially teach that keeping the standards saves a person (although I have heard it preached while in the UPCI), but they would say that a person who does not keep them is not truly saved. Thus, the standards of holiness, like the Mosaic law of the Judaizers, becomes the test of justification. This is what Paul meant by "another Gospel."

### **Does Faith Equal Obedience?**

The UPCI's eccentric interpretation of the Gospel is predicated upon the notion that faith *equals* obedience. This leads to obeying Acts 2:38 as another form of law-keeping. By doing that, the whole point of the Gospel is lost. Gospel is swallowed up by Law. Paul makes a serious distinction between those who observe the law and those who "believe what you heard." So should we. There is a difference between obedience to God's Word and faith in God's Word. Obedience should follow faith. Faith and obedience are never separated in the Christian life. Yet, they are never treated as synonymous.

Why? Because no one is able to 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. 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 *εις υπακοην πιστεω*. The King James translates this as "for obedience to the faith." However most translators and most of finest scholars translate this phrase as **the obedience that IS faith**. Cranfield, one of the eminent Romans scholars, in his timeless commentary, presents 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. He says, "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.'"<sup>5</sup>

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."<sup>6</sup> Later, commenting on Romans 1:16 he further expounds on Paul's understanding of faith in Romans:

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<sup>5</sup>*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.

<sup>6</sup>C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1957), p. 21.

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. 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.<sup>7</sup>

Probably 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.<sup>8</sup>

Moo says that 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 the UPCI steps of Acts 2:38 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.

I must repeat at this point that, **to redefine faith as obedience is a serious mistake.** Bernard’s claim that, to obey Acts 2:38 is the equivalent

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<sup>7</sup>Barrett, Op. Cit., p. 28.

<sup>8</sup>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.

of obeying the Gospel, is not his most serious mistake. *Redefining faith as obedience is the most serious error, since to have faith is the essential response to Acts 2:38.*<sup>9</sup> Once this happens, all the rest of his teaching is like the stacking of many coins on a very crooked one. The relationship of every coin subsequently stacked on it is crooked. *This redefinition leads to a flawed interpretation of Acts 2:38 itself.* Instead of a response to the Gospel and a result of trusting in that Gospel, it is a series of prerequisites in order to obtain the Gospel. This stands the whole meaning of the Gospel on its head. We will address this problem a number of times throughout this paper.

### **Redefining Faith as Obedience**

In relating, "saving faith, which includes obedience to the gospel," to "the full work of justification comes by faith as one repents, is baptized in Jesus' name, and receives the Holy Spirit," Bernard leaves the biblical and historically orthodox definition of faith and *redefines* it. *The biblical view of trust is replaced with a religious view of obedience.* He may not intend this, and he also may make specific statements in an attempt to distance himself from this charge. Nevertheless, the logic of his teaching about Acts 2:38 leads to this. This is the **second fatal misunderstanding, and probably the most noteworthy** in Bernard's view of justification: *Faith is equated with obedience.*

Obeying Acts 2:38 is not salvation by works. Repentance, water baptism, and the Holy Spirit baptism are not works of man that earn salvation, but works of God that accomplish salvation in us.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Cp. my book, Bernie L. Gillespie, *Faith is the Essential Response to Acts 2:38*, (Findlay, In Christ Alone! Publishing, 2003). Also articles at: <http://www.inchristolone.org/BLGBookFaithEssen.html>

<sup>10</sup>David K. Bernard, *The Message of Romans*, (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 1987), p. 101.

The application of grace and the expression of faith come as we obey and experience John 3:5 and Acts 2:38.<sup>11</sup>

I think this next quote reveals the reasoning behind Bernard's conclusion:

Justification by faith does not mean mental acceptance instead of obedience, nor does it mean believing instead of doing. Rather it means pleading the merits of Christ instead of our own merits. It means believing Christ, which means believing His Word, which means accepting and obeying His Word in our lives.<sup>12</sup>

He states that faith is not mental assent, but it is believing Christ. So far so good. But the next step in his argument is that "believing Christ" means "believing His Word." Taking it to the next step, he qualifies believing Christ's Word by saying: "which means accepting and obeying his Word in our lives."

Faith is the means by which man appropriates God's grace. It is the means by which we yield to God, obey His Word, and allow Him to perform His saving work in us.<sup>13</sup>

Saving faith, then, includes appropriation or application as well as acceptance. We cannot separate it from obedience (Acts 6:7; Romans 1:5; 2:6-10; 10:16; 16:26; Hebrews 11:7-8). Obedience to the Word of God is absolutely necessary to salvation. (Matthew 7:21-27; John 14:15, 23; Romans 15:18; II

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<sup>11</sup>David K. Bernard, Neil Stegall, *A Study Guide for the New Birth*, (Hazelwood, Word Aflame Press, 1987), p. 109.

<sup>12</sup>David K. Bernard, *The Message of Romans*, (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 1987), p. 100.

<sup>13</sup>David K. Bernard, *The Message of Romans*, (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 1987), p. 102.

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Thessalonians 1:7-10; Hebrews 5:9, I Peter 4:17; I John 2:3-5; 5:1-3).<sup>14</sup>

Faith in Christ finds expression in obedience to Acts 2:38,<sup>15</sup>

For Bernard, 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 his interpretation moves him away from the view of the Protestant Reformation, and back to that embraced by the Roman Catholic Church since the Middle Ages.<sup>16</sup> 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 in "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." Bernard appears to miss altogether the significance of this crucial historical issue.

Interestingly, as I was writing this, I remembered 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

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<sup>14</sup>David K. Bernard, *The Message of Romans*, (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 1987), p. 99.

<sup>15</sup>David K. Bernard, *The Message of Romans*, (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 1987), p. 102.

<sup>16</sup>Bernard often quotes Christian writers (Smedes, Erdman, Bloesch) who reject "cheap grace" to support his claims for faith as obedience. He does not take into consideration that these authors are preserving the organic connection between justification and sanctification and are refuting antinomianism. They are not trying to make define saving faith as obedience. They are saying that true faith in the work of justification will by its nature be manifest in sanctification. The failure by Bernard to perceive this distinction is a telling fault in his understanding of the theological issues connected to justification.

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.

Here is a crucial mistake made by Bernard. In his definition of justification he equates faith with obedience in order to make faith into faithfulness. This has serious implications for the rest of his theology of salvation. If faith is misunderstood, so then is grace. If grace is misunderstood, 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.<sup>17</sup>

<b>David Bernard</b>	<b>Classic Orthodox View</b>
<b>Justifying Faith = Obedience</b>	Justifying Faith = Believing/Trust

(Figure 2)

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<sup>17</sup>Link to my article ["Faith As the Only Essential Element in Acts 2:38"](#)