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The Obedience of Faith



John H. Armstrong

The relationship between faith and obedience has prompted serious reflection and debate in the Christian Church since the beginning. What is the proper way to understand the biblical relationship of faith in the promises of God to personal obedience by the Spirit?

Clear definitions of saving faith are uncommon in the modern era. Even less clarity exists with regard to the proper relationship of God-given faith to human obedience by the Spirit. On the one hand, some insist that faith and obedience are related in a way that collapses faith and works into one another, making them synonymous. In this approach no *distinction* is made between faith and obedience. The result is an understanding of salvation that sounds like our hard work and personal merit earn us eternal life. On the other hand, a large number of teachers have argued that faith and obedience have no *necessary* or *intrinsic* relationship, thus they are *mutually exclusive*. In this pattern, which quite often results in seriously aberrant practice, people believe in Christ and the gospel but never really seem interested in an evangelical obedience that *necessarily* follows faith. Moral formation, or godly character, is rendered unnecessary. Conservative Bible believing churches are filled with people of this persuasion.

Texts that display a vital link between faith and obedience

abound in the New Testament. For all practical purposes these texts are often ignored or misinterpreted. Consider two examples. Paul writes: "By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me" (1 Corinthians 15:10). Probably one of the most straightforward connections between faith and obedience appears in these familiar words: "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:12-13).

Even a cursory reading of such verses will convince fair-minded readers that there is a *living* faith that unites us to Christ and this faith is directly *linked* to obedience. To believe, properly defined, is to be transformed *by* and *through* a living faith. Indeed, the central emphasis of the New Testament ices this point—living faith *always* brings the one who believes into a vital union with Christ. A union by which Christ is *daily* transforming the believer.

This connection between living faith and real obedience is *grounded* in our union with Christ. To demonstrate my point I direct your thinking to Paul's Epistle to the Romans. Here I want to demonstrate that trust (faith) and obedience (works) are *essentially* and *necessarily* related in Paul's mind. Further, I will seek to show that this relationship forms the *essential core* of Pauline thought in terms of how he understands the gospel.

It has been said that the grandest movements of reformation and heaven-sent revival have come when the great themes of Romans have been preached and believed with renewed clarity. If I am correct in understanding the evangelical link between faith and obedience then we should pray for the Spirit of revival as we consider this subject.

THE FUNCTION OF "THE OBEDIENCE OF FAITH"

In Paul's greetings to the Roman Christians he states his goal: "Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace

and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith (Romans 1:5).

The phrase, "the obedience that comes *from* faith," or more simply, "the obedience *of* faith," is a *unique* Pauline construct, occurring here and later in this same epistle in a slightly different form (cf. 16:25-26). The apostle states that his missiological intention is to bring about the obedience of faith, or the kind of obedience that comes *from* faith. What Paul has in mind, as we shall soon discover, is what I call, "believing obedience," or "faith's obedience." The motive is "for his (i.e., Christ's) name's sake." One can rightly conclude that "the totality of Paul's missionary endeavors is epitomized by the words [the obedience of faith]."¹

As already noted, this same phrase occurs again at the end of Romans:

Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him—to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen (Romans 16:25-27).

You will note that the phrase "believe and obey him" is virtually the same as the "obedience of faith." Therefore, I submit that this particular phrase guides Paul's intention in writing the introduction to this congregation of believers and it is also central to his conclusion and doxology. I believe that within the meaning of this little phrase, which I hope to demonstrate is *intentionally ambiguous*, lies a kind of *grammatical and linguistic key* to the thought of this entire epistle.

It has been properly noted that this phrase has an important eschatological (future oriented) significance as well. The phrase is Paul's *own articulation of the design and purpose of all his missionary labors*: God is now bringing his purposes to pass in salvation history through Paul's gospel (v. 25). Paul's commission, therefore, is to be viewed as nothing less than the eschatological actualization of the eternal plan to create

faith's obedience among the nations.²

But what is the significance of "the obedience of faith" for the relationship of true faith to evangelical obedience? That is my *primary* concern.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF FAITH TO OBEDIENCE

The precise question is: "What is the *relationship* between faith and obedience?" I am suggesting that this little phrase lies at the very heart of the correct answer.

Commentators have disagreed regarding the range of meanings to be associated with the phrase "the obedience of (NIV, 'that comes from') faith." There are two ways the phrase has been interpreted. Both make significant contributions to the proper understanding of the verse, but neither does full justice to what I hope to show is a contextually accurate understanding.

(1) The Obedience Which Comes From Faith

First, this phrase can be interpreted as referring to the obedience faith *produces*, or in which faith results. The word faith is a noun in the genitive case. The genitive is the case of definition, source, or description. Greek grammarians agree that this generally makes a noun function in an adjectival manner. Here the commentators disagree as to whether or not the word faith (in the genitive case) functions in a subjective or objective manner.

Arguments for the objective genitive here are not as strong as for the subjective. The subjective view says Paul has in mind "the obedience *which faith works*" or "the obedience *which is required* by faith." The real intention of these options is that obedience *always finds* its true fountainhead in faith. Though this is true it does not encompass the full meaning of the phrase as Paul employs it.

The simple truth of the exegetical issue at hand is that "the genitive *pisteos* is hard to pin down."³ If the faith in view is *subjective* then it could be translated as "the obedience that springs from faith." In this understanding the emphasis is placed on post-conversion commitment, i.e., the fruit that fol-

lows saving faith will be evidenced in obedience. This conclusion is accurate but I believe Paul intends even more.

(2) The Obedience Which Is Directed Toward Faith

This view sees faith as a genitive of apposition. It reads: "'the obedience directed toward, or in [the] faith.' In this sense *pistis* [faith] could refer to a body of doctrine or to the message of the gospel [itself]."⁴ Thus the genitive means "the obedience which consists in faith." A popular version of this idea translates the phrase as "the obedience which *is* faith."

Support for this reading can be seen in various texts where obedience and faith occur together. Consider one important set of parallel passages in Romans. In Romans 1:8 Paul writes, "I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world," and in the parallel text of Romans 16:19 he says, "Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I am full of joy over you." The faith of the Roman believers is widely known, as is their obedience. Similar parallels can be demonstrated in Romans 10:16a and 10:16b as well as in 11:23 with 11:30-31. To receive the gospel is to act in obedience to the commandment of God who requires all people to repent and believe.

All of this points out the tragedy of much modern preaching. We often hear faith offered to people as something that is good for them. It will bring you happiness and peace so you should believe on Jesus. What is missing here is the truth that sin is *primarily* rebellion against God. It is *disobedience!* Indeed, unbelief is *massive disobedience*, as the Gospel of John makes clear. The message of the gospel must be preached as command, not merely as offer. This idea seems clearly to have been in Paul's mind when he puts the "obedience of faith" in the context of his own role as a faithful ambassador to the nations.⁵ We trivialize the work of evangelism when we treat the gospel *primarily* as a message that helps people and leads them into an abundant life in which they can now "live happily ever after."

ANOTHER READING OF FAITH AND OBEDIENCE

The subjective option, as noted above, tends to place too much emphasis on postconversion obedience. Douglas Moo helpfully summarizes my sense of how these two views interact and why an alternative understanding is preferred.

Paul's task was to call men and women to submission to the lordship of Christ (cf. 4b and 7b), a submission that began with conversion but which was to continue in a deepening, life-long commitment. This obedience to Christ as Lord is always closely related to faith, both as an initial, decisive step of faith and as a continuing "faith" relationship with Christ. In light of this, we understand the words *hypakoe* [obedience] and *pisteos* [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.⁶

Paul is *not* saying that faith *plus* "observing (works) of the law" (cf. Galatians 2:16; 3:2, etc.) *justifies* the sinner before God. Neither the performance of ritual (ceremony), even rituals ordained by God (i.e., baptism and the Lord's Supper), or the covenantal keeping of the law in any sense, can bring one into relationship with God.

Likewise, Paul is not saying that one believes and the necessity of faithfulness to God in the covenant is thereby *optional*. Paul called men and women to a faith in Jesus Christ that was conceived of as *inseparably connected with* obedience to God and the covenant. The Savior to whom believing worshipers come is the Lord Jesus Christ. So-called "non-lordship" teachers are prone to suggest that we come to Jesus as God (i.e., deity), and thus this commitment has nothing to do with our submitting to him as our Lord (in terms of resolve and commitment to follow him). In reality, this explanation begs the biblical question. If you come to Jesus as God then you must necessarily respond to Jesus as Jehovah God. To do this infers submission to the one who is God.

We can only come to Christ in faith, not by "what our

guilty hands have done." But the faith with which we come is joined to an *active obedience* that God graciously grants to those who believe. Further, we can only obey Jesus as Lord when we continually give ourselves to him in faith. All of this means that "the obedience which consists in faith cannot be abstracted from the obedience demanded by the gospel."⁷

The phrase "the obedience of faith" appears not to be a simple formula. This should make the careful interpreter cautious. It seems to me a good case can be made for this phrase meaning *both* the "obedience which *consists in faith*" and "the obedience which is the *product of faith*."

What all of this ultimately means is that a translation like "faith's obedience" (or "believing obedience") seems better to preserve the studied ambiguity of Paul. This translation honors the way in which Paul connects faith and obedience throughout this epistle.

BUT IS SALVATION BY WORKS?

To speak of obedience as *vitaly connected* to faith makes it sound as if obedience *adds* something to the justification of God. I answer—obedience is the product of true faith, and where true faith exists there will be justification by God. I believe this is the proper cautionary note: "When cause and effect are thus kept in proper sequence, any initial anxiety at the notion of justification by 'doing' should be ameliorated, if not quelled altogether."⁸

CONCLUSION

The historic dichotomy between faith and works has often been badly stated. This is so precisely because too sharp a *contrast* has been made between faith and works, or between trust and obedience.⁹

It is genuinely difficult to understand how and why Paul could put "works" and "faith" together as he does (cf. 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10) if these ideas are as dichotomous (and opposed) as many suggest. They are clearly placed together in the very same phrase because they are *indispensably* and *intimately* connected. To use an apt phrase from a different context:

"What God has joined together, let no one put asunder."

Finally, I plead for a balanced application of these conclusions. It must be stated, and restated, because of our propensity to confusion, that there is absolutely *no* possibility for a "righteousness by works" (cf. Romans 5:15-17; 6:23). In this sense, *salvation is by faith alone*.

Categories such as regeneration, justification and sanctification are quite useful for careful thought. However, what must be kept in mind is that salvation is not to be conceived of as a line with successive stages each following the other in time (i.e., first regeneration, followed by conversion, then by justification, and then by sanctification and perseverance, and finally by glorification). Salvation is best understood, in this sense, like a pentagonal building whose five walls are constructed of experiences which all begin and continue *simultaneously*. If we could regain this balanced view of how the Bible speaks of salvation, and of both faith *and* obedience, we would go a long way toward recovering the power of God in the gospel.

Author

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Notes

1. Don B. Garlington, *Faith, Obedience and Perseverance* (Tubingen, Germany: J. C. B. Mohr, 1994), 11.
2. Garlington, *Faith, Obedience and Perseverance*, 13.
3. Douglas Moo, *Romans 1-8: The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 44.
4. Moo, *Romans 1-8*, 44.
5. Glenn N. Davies, *Faith and Obedience in Romans: A Study in Romans 1-4*. *Journal for the Society of the New Testament*, Sup. 39; (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 19.
6. Moo, *Romans 1-8*, 44-45.
7. Garlington, *Faith, Obedience and Perseverance*, 17.
8. Garlington, *Faith, Obedience and Perseverance*, 31. Quoted from Joseph A. Fitzmeyer.

9. D. A. Carson, editor, *Right With God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), cf. P.T. O'Brien's chapter, "Some Crucial Issues of the Last Two Decades," 94.