

SAVING FAITH INCLUDES OBEDIENCE

The doctrine of salvation by faith alone has been a hallmark of Protestant theology since the beginning of the Protestant Reformation with Martin Luther. Luther was especially emphatic in his assertion "that faith alone justifies us and fulfills the law" ("Preface to Romans"). In his Preface to the New Testament, Luther made the well-known statement that "the epistle of St. James is an epistle full of straw, because it contains nothing evangelical." By this Luther admitted that his own theory of salvation by faith alone clearly contradicted James' teaching (James said "not by faith alone" in 2:24).

By "faith alone" the reformers clearly meant belief or trust, apart from anything else. Obedience to them was, though important, definitely not compatible with the free grace of God and its acceptance by faith. So faith, unaccompanied by any work of man, brought man to salvation. The doctrine was accepted by most Protestant churches, and is still widely preached today. It is explicitly stated in many denominational creeds. In the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, as well as in the Articles of the Methodist Church, is found the statement, "Wherefore, that we are justified by faith only is a most wholesome doctrine, and very full of comfort."

Very often in efforts to persuade people to obey the gospel of Christ, we have to confront this false doctrine. One mention of the command to be baptized, and many can (and will) quickly quote the phrase "saved by faith only" almost as if it were a part of Scripture. If only people could recite the Scriptures with such readiness! It's amazing, isn't it, how well we can learn the wrong lessons, and how poorly we learn those that are right.

We Christians need to be able to answer this and other objections to true obedience to God. Not only is the "salvation by faith only" doctrine not found in God's Word, the very opposite is plainly taught there. Notice these examples which show that *true faith includes obedience*.

1. In John 3:36, John wrote, "He who *believes* in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not *obey* the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (emphasis mine, dp). It is unfortunate this verse is not as well known as verse 16. Do you see the significant point of the passage? The words "believe" and "obey" are put in positions of equality. The writer is using the technique of repetition of the opposite as a means of emphasis ("he who believes...but he who does not obey"). The person who "does not obey" Christ does not truly "believe" in Christ.

2. Another good illustration is Hebrews chapters 3 and 4. In 3:18-19, the writer states: "And to whom did He swear that they should not enter His rest, but to those who were *disobedient*? And so we see that they were not able to enter because of *unbelief*" (emphasis mine, dp). Again, compare 4:2, where the Israelites fell in the wilderness because the word "was not united by *faith*"; and 4:6, which says they failed to enter the Promised Land "because of *disobedience*" (emphasis mine, dp). Please notice that in these passages, faith and obedience are used interchangeably; their disobedience was a

manifestation of their unbelief. The point, of course, is that we must take care not to follow the same example of disobedience (4:11).

3. A third example is found in Acts 16:30-33, the conversion of the Philippian jailor. In reply to the question, "What must I do to be saved?", Paul and Silas told the jailor to believe. Many like to read this verse and stop; and then say, "He was only told to believe in order to be saved." Please read on, however, and observe that other things were told the man ("the word of the Lord"), after which he was baptized (which he could only have learned when they spoke to him God's word). But now look especially at verse 34: the jailor rejoiced greatly, "having believed in God." What did his believing include? It included obedience to the "word of the Lord." It included baptism.

Surely anyone can see the truth of these Scriptures clearly. They well illustrate the teaching of James, who taught that faith is "perfected" when it works through obedience (James 2:17-24). It is possible, of course, to have faith but not obey. Not all faith is obedient. But that kind of faith is not faith that saves. It is, as James said, "dead" faith. "You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone" (v. 24). No wonder Luther deleted James, in effect, from his New Testament.

Our plea to those who still have not rendered the "obedience of faith" (Romans 1:5; 16:26) to the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that they will do so. Only in this way can they have the assurance of forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation in the final day (2 Thessalonians 1:8; 1 Peter 4:17).

Dan Petty