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FAITH ACCORDING TO PAUL

AN ESSAY ON A THEOLOGICAL THEME IN PAULINE THOUGHT

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ABBREVIATIONS

BDAG	<i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature.</i> Trans. and rev. by W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1979.
BECNT	<i>Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament</i>
cf.	confer, “compare”
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , “for example”
et al.	<i>et alii</i> , “and others”
ESV	<i>The Holy Bible, English Standard Version</i> , copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
ICC	International Critical Commentary
i.e.	<i>id est</i> , “that is”
LXX	Septuagint – Greek translation of the Old Testament
N.T.	New Testament
O.T.	Old Testament
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
tr.	translated

INTRODUCTION

The encounter with Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus profoundly transformed the life of Paul (Ac. 9.15, 26.16-18). By the sovereign hand of God, he was called away from the zealous pursuit of Judaism and set apart for the growth of Christ-exalting faith among the Gentiles (Ac. 22.3, 4; Gal. 1.14, 15). Through an exhaustive study of the apostle's letters, we will observe how Paul conveys *faith* in the cross-centered message of salvation which justifies the sinner, gives hope to both Jew and Gentile, and unifies the church of God.

THEME: FAITH ACCORDING TO PAUL

Previous to his conversion, Paul was devoted strictly to the Law. Being educated under Gamaliel, and placing confidence in the flesh, he sought the ways of his ancestors so much that according to “the righteousness of the Law, he was found blameless” (Ac. 22.3; Phil. 3.4-6). However, the scales fell from his eyes and consequently what was once “gain” to him, now he “counted as loss for the sake of Christ” (Phil. 3.7). Evidently Paul now perceived that the Law was not capable of justifying him before the God of Israel (Ac. 13.38). Through the realization of what F. F. Bruce calls “the bankruptcy of the Law,”¹ the apostle's sights were now set on preaching the message of faith in Jesus the Nazarene, contrary to works of the law found in Judaism. This faith vocabulary permeates Paul's letters.

¹ F. F. Bruce, *Paul Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 80.

The noun **πίστις** is used 142 times² in Paul’s writings, and is most accurately rendered “faith.”³ According to Paul, faith is essential for salvation. His soteriological approach is not based on works (Rom. 3.28), but squarely upon the undeserved gift of God’s grace received through faith (Eph. 2.8, 9; cf. 1 Cor. 15.1). This faith can only be that which is the reliance upon God’s testimony concerning His Son (Phil. 3.9), and through this faith in Jesus, the Spirit applies truth to the soul (2 Thess. 2.13). It is also evident that faith is something that can be measured (Rom. 4.19, 20, 12.3, 14.1), yet it is Paul’s desire that all would be strong (Rom. 4.20; 1 Cor. 16.13), having a permanent reliance on the eschatological promises of God (Rom. 4.16, 15.8, 9; Gal. 3.14). Derived from **πίστις**, the verb **πιστεύω** (“to believe”) occurs 54 times and occasionally precedes the prepositions **ἐπί** (“upon”; e.g. Rom. 4.24, 9.33, 10.11, 15.13; 1 Tim. 1.16) and **εἰς** (“into”; e.g. Rom. 4.18, 10.10)⁴ – both of which demonstrate an abiding fellowship of the believers with Jesus Christ. Many times it is seen with **ἐν** (“in”). This displays the sincere act of believing *in* Jesus and is significantly instrumental for justification before God (Ac. 13.38; Rom. 3.28; Gal. 2.16), for in so doing the believer is credited Christ’s righteousness (Rom. 4.5). Paul gives an example of this continual belief and justification in the O.T. context of Abraham (Rom. 4.16-20). Paul also uses the adjective **πιστός** (faithful) 33 times,⁵ and often implies a

² Leon Morris, “Faith,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, eds. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Ried (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 285.

³ BDAG, 818.; E. P. Sanders rightly notes that, “...‘faith’ best translates Paul’s *πίστις*, since *belief* often connotes ‘opinion,’ which is far from what Paul meant.” *Paul* (Oxford, NY.: Oxford University Press, 1991), 45.

⁴ Morris correctly notes, “Christian’s rest their faith ‘on’ Jesus or are brought ‘into’ union with Him” (Morris, “Faith,” 285).

⁵ *Ibid.*

passive or active aspect⁶ of the verb **πιστεύω**. In other words, Paul can see someone as faithful in respect to what they have done, such as with God’s faithfulness (1 Cor. 1.9; 1 Thess. 5.24), or in respect to the present state someone is in, such as with the believer (2 Cor. 6.15; 1 Tim. 4.10).

From these few observances—which will be developed further below—one can collectively define faith in Pauline theology as a state of persevering belief and enduring confidence in the promises of God through Jesus Christ. Using this family of words, Paul helps his readers to understand the essence of faith for salvation apart from the works of the Law, yet together with Christ-centered promises.

APPEARANCE OF FAITH IN PAULINE THEOLOGY

FAITH AND THE LORD JESUS CHRIST

There are at least four major ways that Paul addresses faith in his epistles. The first is realized in his Christ-exalting message. Paul, who was once well pleased to observe the stoning of Stephen for his testimony of the Righteous One, now made this same Righteous One the center of his own preaching (Ac. 7.52, 22.14; cf. Gal. 1.23). For this message he was set apart by God (Rom. 1.5; Gal. 1.1; Eph. 1.1; 1 Cor. 1.1; 1 Tim. 1.1), in order that “obedience of faith” would grow amongst the Gentiles (Rom. 1.5, 16.26), thus fulfilling the promise made to Abraham saying, “All the nations will be blessed in you” (Gal. 3.8; cf. Gen. 12.3).

According to Paul, this faith is instrumental for salvation. He explains that salvation only comes by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ, “not as the result of works” (Eph. 2.8-9). Thus nobody is able to gain salvation based on any sort of merit. A believer’s boasting is limited to the cross, and in nothing he had previously accomplished (Rom. 3.27; 1 Cor. 1.31; 2

⁶ BDAG, 820-821.

Cor. 10.17; Gal. 6.14); including mustering up any sort of faith by his own power (1 Cor. 4.7). Indeed, faith is something which is granted, so that one would believe.⁷ If this is so, then C. K. Barrett rightly notes that faith is something “from outside a [man].”⁸ It is something which depends upon another, i.e. Christ, without any inclination that it, in itself, has become a virtuous act of the person in need. This is why Paul makes it his ambition to glorify the One, through whom God has brought salvation, by boasting only in the righteousness credited to him on the basis of “faith in Christ” (Phil. 3.9).⁹ In other words, while grace is God’s sovereign unmerited favor by which a man is saved, faith (i.e. in Christ) is the enabling dependence provided for that man to be saved, and both are wrought in the cross.

Together with the cross of Christ, the power of God, revealed after the cross and to be revealed in the resurrection from the dead and the Second Advent, increases the understanding of faith to a higher level. Rudolf Bultmann notes that faith not only looks “back to what God has

⁷ Paul reveals salvation as what God accomplishes to reconcile man to Himself (Eph. 2.1-10). Thus, faith is something that must be granted to a person, enabling them to respond to the gospel. (e.g. “but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out Abba! Father!” Rom. 8.15; “as God has allotted a measure of faith,” Rom. 12.3; “here are the varieties of gifts...to another, faith by the same spirit” 1 Cor. 12.4, 9; “and love and faith, from God the Father,” Eph. 6.23; “For you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him...,” Phil. 1.29.) Faith does not remove choice; rather, it enables it.

⁸ C. K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans*, rev. ed., Black’s New Testament Commentary (London: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1991), 77.

⁹ I am aware of the recent scholarship concerning the possibility of a subjective genitive used here in πίστεως Χριστοῦ [e.g. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1996), 114-16; R. B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ*, (SBLDS 56; Chico: Scholars, 1983), 158-162; et al.], contra to the traditional objective genitive (e.g. C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans* [ICC], 203; Thomas Schriener, *Romans* [BECNT], 182-184; and J. D. G. Dunn, *Once More, ΠΙΣΤΙΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ*, SBL (Atlanta, GA.: Scholars Press, 1991), 730-44; et al.); however, after weighing the odds, I have decided for the traditional objective genitive in relation to Paul’s other uses in Rom. 3.22, 26; Gal. 2.16, 2.20, and 3.22, all of which refer to Christ as the object of the believers faith.

done in Christ,” but also looks forward “to what God will do.”¹⁰ For example, the believer is to have faith in the past resurrection of Jesus, which both vindicates the cross and validates his faith (Rom. 10.9; 1 Cor. 15.14, 17; 1 Thess. 4.14; Col. 2.12), and also, is to have faith in the future grace provided for his own resurrection (1 Cor. 15.14; 1 Thess. 4.14; cf. 2 Cor. 1.9). Thus, God’s power demonstrated in Christ’s resurrection from the dead gives hope for the promises to be revealed in the future. This faith can also be displayed in Paul’s promise for the believer to share in eternal glorification (cf. Rom. 8.17, 30; 2 Thess. 1.10; Eph. 5.27).

Therefore, through Paul’s Christ-exalting message, faith is revealed as the means by which people come to salvation, placing their hope both in the past and future works of God in Christ, so that it will produce in them the “obedience of faith” in fulfillment of the promise given to Abraham. Believing this will bring “joy and peace” from the God of hope (Rom. 15.13) so that the believer abounds in faith, not resting on human wisdom, “but on the power of God” (1 Cor. 2.5).

FAITH, JUSTIFICATION, AND THE EXAMPLE OF ABRAHAM

The second major way that Paul reveals faith is in its function under the umbrella of salvation, i.e. through its enabling of sinners to be declared righteous before God (Rom. 5.1-2). This is known as justification, a truth which Paul was quite familiar with.

It is mentioned quite early in the apostle’s ministry when Luke records Paul’s sermon at Pisidian Antioch (Ac. 13.38-39). Paul knew that the Law of Moses was unable to accomplish a righteous standing before God (...*ὧν οὐκ ἠδυνήθητε ἐν νόμῳ Μωϋσέως δικαιωθῆναι*, from

¹⁰ Rudolf Bultmann, “πιστεύω,” Gerhard Friedrich ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. VI, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968), 221.

which you could not be justified by the Law of Moses, Ac. 13.38). Thus, the legal declaration, “not guilty,” must be rooted in something apart from the Law (Rom. 3.20, 21, 28; Gal. 2.16; cf. Eph. 2.9), i.e. by faith in Jesus (... ἐν τούτῳ πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων δικαιούται, in Him everyone who believes is justified, Ac. 13.39). Apart from faith in the blood of Jesus, a man now stands and will be condemned (Rom. 3.25; 5.9; cf. 2 Cor. 5.18; Gal. 3.13).

As he observes the O.T. through the lens of the gospel, Paul affirms that only the righteous out of faith will live (ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται, Rom. 1.17; Gal. 3.11; cf. Hab. 2.4).¹¹ If Paul intends ἐκ πίστεως (“out of/by faith”) to modify ὁ δίκαιος (“the righteous”), then it seems that he is explaining how one is to be justified. This line of thought is developed further throughout his letters—Romans and Galatians providing the weighty essentials.

In his epistle to the Romans, Paul notes that one’s justification by faith is based squarely upon the righteousness of God Himself (Rom. 3.21-31). Within the phrase δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ (the righteousness of God), Paul’s use of the subjective genitive, θεοῦ, reveals the “righteousness” to be God’s, and it is in His righteousness, that He provides the ground for salvation (Rom. 3.22). In fact, God put Jesus forward at the cross, in order that His righteousness would be vindicated, and so that He would be the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3.26).¹² C. E. B.

¹¹ Some scholars note that both the Hebrew text and the LXX hold that “faith” in Hab. 2.4 is not modifying “the righteous,” rather, it is modifying “shall live” [e.g. Ben Witherington, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans, a Social-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 55-56; Charles H. Talbert, *Romans* (Macon, GA.: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 2002), 42; et al.]. Currently, I agree with C. E. B. Cranfield who suggests otherwise, also noting that Paul’s argument in Rom. 1.17-5.11 is revealing how one is justified by grace through faith (Cranfield, *Romans*, 28-29, cf. 100-102).

¹² Notice Paul’s purpose construction (εἰς τὸ plus the infinitive εἶναι) in Rom. 3.26. It reveals how God’s being righteous (εἰς τὸ εἶναι ἀντὸν δίκαιον) is foundational for justifying the one who has faith in Jesus (καὶ δικαιούντα τὸν ἐκ πίστεως ἰησοῦ). Thus, faith is wholly grounded in the cross, in that it savors righteousness (God) and knows forgiveness (justification).

Cranfield refers to this upholding of divine righteousness as “the innermost meaning of the cross.”¹³ Faith in the blood spilt at Calvary, therefore, is being confident that God is just even while justifying the sinner who believes in Jesus.

Justification by faith is also seen in the O.T. example of Abraham. According to Paul, Abraham was not justified by works, but by his faith (Rom. 4.3, 9; cf. Gen. 15.6). To support his argument, Paul then demonstrates that it was prior to Abraham’s circumcision when God credited to him righteousness (Gen. 15.6, cf. 17.9-14, 24). His justification was not on the basis of circumcision, but on the faith he had in God “while uncircumcised” (Rom. 4.11).

In Galatians Paul gives a similar argument against the Judaizers who were insisting that Gentiles be circumcised. After quoting Gen. 15.6, he asserts that it is only “those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham” (Gal. 4.6-7; cf. Rom. 9.7-9). He also explains that the promise was not made to Abraham’s seeds, but to his seed, which is Christ, in whom all the earth would be blessed (Gal. 3.16; Gen. 22.18). Therefore, the promise of God to Abraham was not nullified by the Law, but fulfilled in Christ, so that believers might be justified by faith, and thus rendered heirs according to the promise (Gal. 3.17, 24, 29).

It is evident therefore, that Paul understands justification to be through faith. Faith in the promises of God in Christ credits righteousness to the one who believes, thus giving him peace with God. Therefore, faith enables us to rest in God’s marvelous grace and exult in the hope of the glory of God (Rom. 5.1, 2).

FAITH AND THE HOPE FOR BOTH JEWS AND GENTILES

The third major way which Paul reveals faith is by the hope that it brings for both Jew and Gentile. Though the Jews were ashamed of such an inclusive gospel in God’s redemptive

¹³ Cranfield, *Romans*, 213.

plan, Paul was not ashamed, and proclaimed that it is “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1.16, ESV). His message of the cross is for all who will place their faith in Jesus, whatever their ethnic background may be. Christ, he asserts, became “a servant to the circumcision” (i.e. to the Jews) “to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs,” (i.e. the promises concerning the Gentiles developed in Rom. 9-11!) and “for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy” (Rom. 15.8, 9, ESV). In other words, the salvation of the Gentiles is interdependent upon Christ confirming the promises to Israel, and Israel’s salvation is interdependent upon God bringing salvation to the Gentiles in Christ. Thus, salvation for both Jew and Gentile is based squarely upon the grace of God through faith in Jesus. It was the apostle’s desire, therefore, to proclaim this message of faith, and no other.

This proclamation is seen in Paul’s desire to rebuild Israel’s eschatological hope in the promises of God, which was evidently weakening amongst the Jewish Christians at Rome (Rom. 3.3, 4.16-19, 9.6, 11.1, cf. 14.1). It can also be observed in Paul’s longing for Jews outside the faith to come to salvation in Christ (Rom. 9.30, 32, 10.1-4, 6, 8). For the Gentiles it is seen in Paul’s specific calling (Gal. 1.15-16, 2.9; 1 Tim. 2.7; cf. Ac. 9.15; Tit. 1.1), so that the “obedience of faith” would come to all the nations (Rom. 1.5, 16.26). The Greek idiom found in the expression *ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν* (from faith for/to faith, Rom. 1.17) also displays this evangelism of the Gentiles. It is a picture of a “faith that grows,” i.e. the faith which is to grow amongst the Gentiles through the proclamation of Christ.¹⁴ The Scriptures, Paul adds, also bear

¹⁴ Over the years, scholars have debated on what *ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν* (from/out of faith for faith) means. Talbert notes the options as: “from the faith of the OT to the faith of the NT; from the faithfulness of God (or Jesus) to the faithfulness of humans; from one degree of faith to another, i.e. growth in faith” (Charles H. Talbert, *Romans* [Macon, GA.: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 2002], 41). I believe it has something to do with the whole of Paul’s purpose in Romans, i.e. of the growing faith among the Gentiles (cf. Rom. 1.5, 13-15; 15.5, 7-13; 16.25-27).

witness to this Gentile inclusion, because, in foreseeing that “God would justify the Gentiles by faith,” the gospel was preached to Abraham, declaring that all the nations would be blessed through his seed (Gal. 3.8, 13-14, 16; cf. Gen. 12.3, 18.18, 22.18).

Thus, the longing of the apostle’s heart was to see every nation rejoicing in the mercy of God, and all of Israel being saved. Paul was commissioned to preach Christ crucified among the Gentiles, but his heart longed for Israel to believe in the gospel. His desire was for both Jews and Gentiles to come to faith in Jesus, so that he would reestablish among them a hope in the promises of God in Christ, who is God’s “Yes”¹⁵ and Amen (2 Cor. 1.20-21).

FAITH AND CHRISTIANITY

Collectively, the first three major appearances of faith in Pauline theology come together in the fourth. It is because of these first three—Jesus Christ, God’s justification of sinners, and eschatological hope—that the fourth, Christianity, exists. It is only by the faithfulness of God in Christ that Christians are therefore able to remain, and thus be called a body (1 Cor. 7.25, 10.13; 2 Cor. 1.18; 1 Thess. 5.24; 2 Thess. 3.3; 2 Tim. 2.13).

According to Paul, faith is revealed on two different levels within Christianity, individual and corporate. Individual is understood as what Paul commends or encourages within the life of the Christian concerning his faith. It is first seen by the way Paul writes about the faithfulness of certain individuals within the body of Christ, usually of whom he holds high regard (e.g. Timothy, 1 Cor. 4.17; Tychicus, Eph. 6.21, Col. 4.7; Epaphras, Col. 1.7; Onesimus, Col. 4.9; et al. 2 Tim. 2.2). It is also demonstrated by his instruction for the individual life (Eph. 3.17, 4.13), in hopes that each believer would abound in faith (2 Cor. 8.7, 10.15).

¹⁵ Richard Holst, *The Meaning of “Abraham Believed God” in Romans 4.3*, Westminster Theological Journal 59, no. 2 (Fall 1997), 326.

Although Paul recognizes the importance of individual faithfulness, he more frequently encourages it for the corporate body of Christ, and thus displays the importance of stimulating one another to such mutual faith. Paul recognizes faith to be not just something the believer has, but also something which binds him intimately together with the rest of the body (Gal. 6.10; Eph. 4.5, 13; Tit. 1.4; Philem. 1.6). This is seen in the way Paul greets the churches (Eph. 1.1, 15; Col. 1.2-4, 2.5; 1 Thess. 1.8; 2 Thess. 1.3-4) and by the way he encourages the body within his letters (2 Cor. 10.15; Phil. 1.25; 1 Thess. 3.2; 2 Thess. 1.3). Faith also plays a vital role in the edification of the body, enabling the use of spiritual gifts (i.e. in the context of love) by the proportion which is bestowed to each member (Rom. 12.6; 1 Cor. 12.9, 13.2, 7, 13, 14.22).

When individual and corporate faith is combined, this “whole Christian way”¹⁶ can be summed up in Paul’s expression, ‘the faith.’ The expression is seen primarily in the “pastoral epistles,”¹⁷ most likely because of the rise of false teaching¹⁸ (e.g. 1 Tim. 1.4; 2 Tim. 4.3-4; Tit. 3.9). Thus, ‘the faith’ drew the implications of being something unique and set apart from what others believed (2 Cor. 13.5; 2 Thess. 3.2; 1 Tim. 1.2, 6.21). It is always directly identified with those who are in Christ. He is what makes the faith ‘*the faith*’ (1 Tim. 3.13). Prior to his conversion, Paul made it his aim to destroy ‘the faith’ (Gal. 1.23); however, he who once tried to destroy it was now exhorting the brethren to protect and guard it (cf. 1 Tim. 5.8; Tit. 1.13). Knowing firsthand the sufferings and opposition one might encounter because of ‘the faith,’ Paul encourages them to stand firm in its “sound words” (1 Cor. 16.13; 1 Tim. 6.12; 2 Tim. 1.13).

¹⁶ Morris, “Faith,” 290.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academics, 1992), 363.

In all, faith is a defining element of Christianity. Paul uses it to explain the faithfulness of God to enable believers to be bound in together in Christ. In so doing each individual is encouraged to remain faithful to Christ so that genuine fellowship would occur amongst the body of Christ. When the body is edified, they will remain strong in ‘the faith,’ and together they will carry out the Father’s business.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there are four ways in which the apostle Paul reveals faith. First, it is grounded in the cross of Jesus Christ. Only by faith in His atoning blood shall one be saved, and become joint heirs in the promises of God. Second, it is the means by which God justifies sinners. Through an explanation of God’s righteousness and the faith of Abraham, Paul reveals that God is able to credit righteousness to the one who has faith in Jesus and thus justifying him by the blood spilt at Calvary. Third, it is that which brings hope to all who believe the promises of God in Christ, for both the Jews and to the Gentiles. Fourth, it is that which grounds the Christian in God’s faithfulness, thus enabling him to have intimate fellowship with the rest of the body. This body is both unified in faith and edified by ‘the faith,’ so that together they would spread the glory of the Lord.

According to Paul, it is this faith which enables hell-deserving sinners to embrace the beauty of the righteousness of Jesus Christ. The infinite punishment, which the believer once deserved, was laid upon Christ at the cross, and by faith in His atoning blood alone, he shall be called righteous, not by his own virtue, but by Christ’s in which he is now robed.

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