

Is Faith in Jesus Christ a Gift of God?

A person is eternally saved through faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ, but does God give this faith or is it purely a human response? Those who teach that faith must be given by God are usually constrained to do so by their theological perspective, as is true of Reformed theology. Their view of man's total depravity does not allow for any positive response from man toward God. They claim that if faith originated in man it would be a meritorious work that robs God of His glory. In their view, since God gives the faith that saves, that faith will sustain the believer in a life of obedience. But there are problems with viewing faith as a gift of God.

Theological problems with faith as a gift

Those who view faith as a gift interpret man's condition, described in Ephesians 2:1 as "dead in trespasses and sins," as a total inability to respond to God in a positive way. But that phrase describes man's total separation from God, not his inability to respond to God. Sinful man is totally separated from God and therefore without eternal life. Man retains the image of God to some degree; it was severely marred in the fall, but not totally destroyed. Acts 10:2 describes Cornelius before he came to know Jesus Christ as Savior as a devout man who feared God, gave alms, and prayed to God (and God heard his prayers! Acts 10:31). In Acts 17 the Athenians did not have the proper object of faith but worshiped idols. Paul encourages them to seek to know their "unknown God" which of course is Jesus Christ. Men can seek God in their unsaved state as God draws them (John 6:28-29, 44-45).

Another theological problem with the view of faith as a gift of God is that it misunderstands the nature of faith. Faith is not (as they claim) a divine energy, a special power, or an infused dynamic. That confuses faith with the power of the Holy Spirit. Faith is simply faith. It means that one is convinced or persuaded that something is true so that there is a personal appropriation of that truth. There is not a special kind of faith for eternal salvation. There is only a special *object* of faith—Jesus Christ. The kind of faith one might have in Buddha is no different from the kind of faith that one can have in Jesus. The only difference is the object: Buddha does not save; Jesus saves. To make faith the power of salvation is to confuse faith with the Holy Spirit. According to Ephesians 2:8 grace is the grounds of salvation and faith is the means by which we appropriate that grace. Properly speaking we are not saved *by* faith, but *through* faith.

To show that faith is not a meritorious work, the Bible contrasts faith in Christ with meritorious works in both Ephesians 2:8-9 and Romans 4:4-5. Faith means exactly that we can do nothing for our salvation. We can only receive salvation as a gift. Faith is like an empty hand that simply accepts a gift.

Exegetical problems

The main passage used to support faith as a gift of God for salvation is Ephesians 2:8-9.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; [it is] the gift of God, not of works lest anyone should boast."

It is claimed that the demonstrative pronoun “that” refers to “faith” as a gift of God (the words “it is” are not in the original language, but are supplied by the translation as shown by the brackets). But “that” cannot refer to “faith” (nor to “grace”) because in the original Greek it would have to be in the feminine gender. But “that” is neuter which shows that the best antecedent is the *concept of salvation by grace*. This fits the context which is governed by salvation by grace in chapter 1 and especially in 2:4-9.

There are other passages used to argue that faith is a gift of God, but they offer no support. For example, it is clear that some passages speak of faith as a special spiritual gift (Rom. 12:3; 1 Cor. 12:9) or simply as the opportunity to believe (Phil. 1:29), but not as a gift for salvation.

Logical problems

On the surface the view that says God must give us faith to believe is a tautology. It assumes what it seeks to prove. In other words, this view claims we believe because God gives us faith. But if God give us faith, then we do not need to believe. Or if we can believe, then God does not need to give us faith.

Another problem with that view is its theology which says unsaved man is “dead” and cannot believe unless he is first made alive. Therefore God gives us faith as a divine life-giving energy that regenerates us so that we can believe. But if we have the divine life and are regenerated, we would not need to believe to have eternal life—we already have it!

Also, if faith as a gift is a divine power that sustains the believer in a life of obedience, then that obedience would be perfect and never interrupted by sin or disobedience. New Testament admonitions and commands to live righteously would be superfluous. But since believers do sin, it shows that their human response is a crucial aspect of their sanctification.

Finally, if we cannot be saved unless and until God gives us faith in the gospel, then God could not hold us responsible for not believing the gospel. But he clearly does (John 3:18, 36, 5:40).

Conclusion

It is hard to escape the conclusion that those who claim that God must give us the faith to believe for salvation do so out of a theological construct that is not validated by Scripture. Sinful man retains the image of God to the degree that he can have faith in either an unworthy or a worthy object for salvation. The only faith that saves is faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Faith is not the gift; Jesus Christ is the gift. God can draw us to Himself (John 6:28-29, 44-45), convict us of the gospel’s truth (John 16:8), and invite us to receive eternal life (John 3:16; 4:10; 7:37), but it is our responsibility to believe the gospel for eternal life.