

Is There Obedience In Faith? “Obedience Of Faith” In The New Testament

By Dante Spencer

A word about this paper. I had written on Richard Baxter’s neonomianism entitled, “Baxter Bewitched: The Gospel as Merely Being a ‘New Law’” since many do not seem to be aware of this fundamental area of his belief. Afterwards, it occurred to me that given Baxter’s doctrine of justification, Rom 1:5 and 16:26 would be classic passages for him to have misunderstood and used as support for his works-righteousness soteriology. I knew what Paul’s phrase “obedience of faith” meant and in writing this paper, came to find that Calvin and many others concurred with myself. It was therefore Baxter who gave rise to this study on faith alone.

For a brief discussion on neonomianism, see James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991 rpt.), 176-77, 202-203 or James M’Clintock and James Strong, *Cyclopedia of Biblical Literature* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1891), 6:937. For a study of Baxter, one can do no better than look to Hans Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn: Richard Baxter’s Doctrine of Justification in its Seventeenth-Century Context of Controversy* (Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, Zoetermeer, 1993) though his conclusion on p.330 is rather curious. Other scholarly studies on Baxter’s theology are C. F. Allison, *The Rise of Moralism: The Proclamation of the Gospel from Hooker to Baxter* (London: SPCK, 1966), 154-77, Dewey D. Wallace, Jr., *Puritans and Predestination: Grace in English Protestant Theology, 1525-1695* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 136-39, John von Rohr, *The Covenant of Grace in Puritan Thought* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 98-100, and J. Wayne Baker, “*Sola Fide, Sola Gratia: The Battle for Luther in Seventeenth-Century England*,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 16 (1985): 115-33. Also note the stinging remarks of J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1990), 159, 303 and Charles Bridges’ from 1830 in *The Christian Ministry* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991 rpt.), 41, 363 n.3.

...because that one article concerning justification even by itself creates true theologians, therefore it is indispensable in the church and just as we must often recall it, so we must frequently work on it.
– Luther, *Works*, 34.157

There can be no mixture of faith and works whatsoever in our confession of the gospel lest we deceive ourselves and die in our sins (Rom 3:28; 4:13-16; 9:30-33). Law and gospel are diametrically opposed; we cannot be under both a covenant of grace *and* a covenant of works because seeking justification by the law has nothing to do with faith but requires one to keep all of the law perfectly (Gal 3:12; 5:3; Rom 10:5). In contrast, we stand by faith in Christ (Rom 5:1-2; 11:20; Eph 2:18; 3:12) because he is our covenant-keeping Head and Savior who *merited* redemption by his *work* as the Last Adam (Rom 5:14; 1 Cor 15:45). It is true that we are saved by works, but they are the works of Christ; our hope rests in him and not ourselves as Richard Baxter (1615-1691) would have it. “Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for ‘The righteous shall live by faith’” (Gal 3:11 cf. 2:16). By accepting a so-called gospel that simply puts one under a ‘new law’ in which they must rely on their own evangelical obedience, Baxter appears to put himself under a curse (Gal 3:10) because he did not trust in him alone who was cursed for sinners. To the contrary, the gospel blesses the sons of Abraham who receive the promised Spirit through faith (Gal 3:13-14 cf. 4:28). As for the heart of the matter, there is no way to justify Baxter’s alleged twofold justification because it is entirely foreign to Scripture. Jesus pronounces the poor in spirit blessed (Mt 5:3) and rebukes those who trust in themselves (Lk 18:9-14). These two passages alone utterly exclude the slightest thought that we are to fulfill a righteousness of our own, even if it is of a *subordinate* character, in order to be justified *initially* by the righteousness of Christ by faith.¹

The Gospel of Faith Obeyed and Disobeyed in Romans

Romans and 1 Peter are tied as the books that make the most use of this language of obeying the gospel. But it is Paul’s letter to the Romans that contains the two main verses in this matter and will therefore be the first ones we look at. When Paul writes of bringing about the “obedience of faith” among the nations as the aim of his apostleship (Rom 1:5; 16:26), he does not have in mind obedience as part of faith, making obedience to Christ’s commands and faith in Christ synonymous.²

¹ Richard Baxter, *Aphorismes of Justification* (1649), 127-28. Baxter compared our personal righteousness to a small pepper corn. Crandon therefore went after him for having erected a works-righteousness parallel to Christ’s righteousness (*Aphorisms Exorized* [1654], 120). Cartwright also dealt with Baxter’s idea of us *purchasing* the new covenant (*Exceptions Against a Writing of Mr. R. Baxter’s* [1675], 50).

² Rudolph Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951), 1:314-15, Alan Richardson, *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1958), 30, Victor Paul Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), 185, W. G. Kümmel, *The Theology of the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973), 152, 200-201, Daniel Fuller, *Gospel and Law: Contrast or Continuum?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 105-20, *idem.*, Rejoinder to O. P. Robertson and W. Robert Godfrey, *Presbyterian 9* (1983): 72-79, Don B. Garlington, “The Obedience of Faith in the Letter to the Romans. Part I: The Meaning of *υπακουω πιστεως*,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 52 (1990): 201-24, Joseph Fitzmyer, *Romans, AB* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 237-38, James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 635, Ralph P. Martin, *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 191, Norman Sheppard, *The Call of Grace* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2000), 76, John H. Armstrong, *Reformation & Revival Journal* 11 (2002): 183. Daniel Fuller speaks of the old covenant being “laws of faith” and fulfilling the condition of receiving mercy through obedience of faith in *The Unity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 53, 353, 462, 479 n.6.

Nor does Paul write of obedience that springs from faith as fruit giving evidence to the genuineness of faith.³ Though both mistaken, there is an enormous difference between these two interpretations. The former is another gospel that denies grace alone while the latter is an orthodox interpretation that does not pay close enough attention to the context.

The obedience Paul has in view here is in believing the gospel; that is how the gospel is obeyed, by believing it. As an exegetical phrase, the obedience of faith is faith itself.⁴ But by no means whatsoever is this to deny that Christians obey Christ and that Paul calls them to this – that is patently clear and undeniable – but what Paul is interested in communicating here with this phrase is purely justification by faith. As John Preston affirmed, “Our Doctrine is, you see, that faith

³ Taking ‘obedience of faith’ as genitive of source: *Geneva Bible* of 1599, ad. loc., John Owen, *Works* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991 rpt. Originally 1854-1855), 20:538, Charles Hodge, *The Epistle to the Romans*, A Geneva Series Commentary (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1989 rpt.), 21, 452, Adolf Schlatter, *Romans: The Righteousness of God* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995), 11, William G. T. Shedd, *A Critical and Doctrinal Commentary on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans* (New York: Charles Scribner’s, 1879), 13, G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 195-96, Paul S. Minear, *The Obedience of Faith* (London: SCM Press, 1971), 1, 41, F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 70, Alister E. McGrath, *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 522, Peter Stuhlmacher, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (Louisville: WJK, 1994), 20, Ben Witherington, *Paul’s Narrative Thought World* (Louisville: WJK, 1994), 267, Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 62-63, Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 52, Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O’Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001), 182. To support this particular point I would point to Rom 6:17 or 1 Th 1:3,9, not Rom 1:5.

Thomas Schreiner belongs in this list as well but, without realizing it, leans precariously toward the synergistic view above when he appeals to Rom 11:20-22 to prove that we validate our salvation by our faith and obedience (Romans, BECNT [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998], 35 cf. his comments on pages 115 and 144-45. Nor had Schreiner rightly comprehended Garlington’s view when he wrote his *Paul, Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ* [Downers Grove: IVP, 2001], 211). While obedience is the fruit of gratitude and faith, that is not what Paul is teaching in Rom 11. Romans 11:20-22 says we continue to stand by faith alone, not by faith and obedience. If we continue in God’s kindness by obedience, then salvation would depend to some degree on works. Schreiner is reading obedience into Rom 11, the context of which is strictly about Jews and gentiles being engrafted into the olive vine by faith, period. Schreiner is also disconcerting when he commends Garlington’s dissertation dealing with this phrase in Romans which he wrote under Dunn and is represented in the *WTJ* article above.

Some, like C. K. Barrett, prefer to render this phrase ‘believing obedience’ because of what they see as its ambiguity. As one could easily suppose, Barrett sends us to 6:15ff for further elaboration on Paul’s thought on the relation between faith and obedience (A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, HNTC [New York: Harper, 1957], 21,131).

⁴ Luther, Calvin, Daniel Featley of the Westminster Assembly, John Murray, and D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones also took this as a genitive of apposition (Luther, Lectures on Romans, *Luther’s Works*, volume 25 [Saint Louis: Concordia, 1972], 5, Calvin, *comm.* Rom 1:5 and *Inst.* III.ii.8,29, Featley in *Annotations upon all the Books of the Old and New Testament*, volume 2 [London: Evan Tyler, 1657], Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987 rpt.], 13, Lloyd-Jones, *The Gospel of God, Romans 1* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1986], 137-40). Others who adopt this interpretation are Robert Haldane, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans*, Geneva (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1996 rpt.), 30-31, Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *The Epistle to the Romans*, CEC (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1884), 38, James Denney, *Expositor’s Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980 rpt.), 587, Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1949), 55, Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of his Theology*, tr. John R. deWitt [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975], 273-74, Seyoon Kim, *The Origin of Paul’s Gospel*, revised edition. WUNT (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1984), 310, C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1985), 1:66, Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 50, and Mark A. Seifrid, *Christ, Our Righteousness* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 135-36.

only is required... the rest will follow upon it.”⁵ Preston and the Westminster Divines could say this because they understood that not only justification but sanctification is by grace through faith (see Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q.35).

Paul’s apostolic ministry of the word, then, applies to both those outside the church and believers. It is Paul’s intent for not only those who have not heard the gospel to take Christ by faith for their justification (15:26-21), but for those already united to Christ to continue walking by faith in him for their righteousness before God. As he writes in v.17 of this chapter, “The righteous shall live by faith.” This was Martin Luther’s (1483-1546) revolutionizing discovery that began to restore the church and freed his own soul from the threat of God’s just wrath. When we are faced with the law of God and its perfect demands coming from the holy Judge, we are naturally burdened and grieved by our sin because we know we sin against him in thought, word, and deed throughout each day of our life. But we who are in Christ by faith are called by the gospel to rest in the righteousness of Christ with which we have been clothed. This is our assurance of standing in God’s presence without blame (Col 1:22; 1 Th 3:13; 5:23; Jd 24). This is what it means for a Christian to fulfill the obedience of faith. To live by faith means to walk before God by looking to the Righteous One (Acts 3:14; 7:52), his Son, for our righteousness.⁶ We are saints in God’s sight by imputation, not by works of merit in either justification or sanctification.

The meaning of “obedience of faith” is not arrived at by discerning the genitive and whether it is subjective or objective,⁷ but is determined in light of Paul’s soteriology as a whole which categorically assures us that no one will be justified by works of the law in God’s sight (Rom 3:20-21, 28; Gal 2:16). Because the command of the gospel is to believe the gospel (Acts 16:31; 1 Jn 3:23), obeying the gospel is through faith in the gospel, not some additional form of obedience on par with faith. This is why Matthew Poole could say in his commentary on Rom 1:5 that faith “is the great command of the gospel.”⁸

We come now to Rom 10:16. “But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?’” The use of parallelism introduced in the second sentence by ‘for’ supplies the reason of the first sentence. Paul demonstrates that to not receive and believe the gospel is to disobey the

⁵ John Preston, *The Breast Plate of Faith and Love* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979 rpt. Originally 1630). “Therefore, although faith does not exist by itself, but is united to works, nevertheless faith alone justifies, just as the sun does not exist alone in the heavens, but it alone makes day” (Johannes Wollebius, *Compendium Theologiae Christianae* [1626] in *Reformed Dogmatics*, tr. John W. Beardslee III [New York: Oxford University Press, 1965], 165 cp. Owen, *Works*, 20:540).

⁶ This is what John Eaton (1575-1642) championed in *The Honey-Combe of Free Justification by Christ Alone* (1642), for which Samuel Rutherford (c.1600-1661) considered him an antinomian in *A Survey of the Spiritual Antichrist* (1648).

⁷ So H. P. Liddon, *Explanatory Analysis of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (Minneapolis: James and Klock, 1977 rpt.), 6. Old translations such as the *Geneva Bible* rendered Rom 1:5 as objective (“the faith” as in Acts 13:8; 14:22; 16:5; Gal 1:23 and the 13 occurrences in the Pastorals).

⁸ Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1963 rpt.), 3:479.

Lord. Thus, ‘believe’ in the citation from Isa 53:1 serves to define the way in which Israel did not obey.

In Rom 15:18 Paul again speaks of his apostolic ministry. “For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the gentiles to obedience – by word and deed.” The obedience of the gentiles is spelled out in the following two verses: “by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God – so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum *I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ*; and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel...” (emphasis mine). The goal of Paul’s preaching was for gentiles to believe his gospel which was attested to by signs and wonders. Therefore, Paul glories in Christ for having brought the gentiles to himself through his labors. That is to say, by Paul’s ministry in word and deed the gentiles were made obedient, that is, embraced Christ by faith.⁹

Also relevant is what Paul says about Israel in Rom 11:30-32.

Just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.

From this passage we can make the following conclusions:

- Gentiles were disobedient to God
- God showed mercy to gentiles because of Israel’s disobedience
- Israel became disobedient so that the mercy bestowed upon the gentiles would eventually lead to mercy for Israel
- Jews and gentiles have been given to disobedience so God would have mercy upon all

Israel’s trespass (11:11-12) as illustrated in 11:2-4 was for worshipping Baal which was a result of not knowing the true and living God. Israel was therefore cut off from the covenant (11:15,17,19) on account of their unbelief. “They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith” (11:20). Therefore, “even they [Israel], if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again” (11:23). Jews can be “grafted back into their own olive tree” by faith in the Messiah (11:24) and in this way, together with gentiles brought into the new covenant by faith, “all Israel will be saved” (11:25-26). Therefore, the disobedience in view at 11:30-32 is unbelief. Like the gentiles, unbelieving Jews were shown mercy to believe and come into covenant with God

⁹ F. F. Bruce suggests that this is the fulfillment of Gen 49:10 that prophecies the nations will yield allegiance to the Son of David (TNTC, 247). But we could also point to Gen 12:3 which Paul cites in Gal 3:8 concerning the gentiles: “In you [Abraham] shall all the nations be blessed” (cf. Mt 28:19; Rom 11:12).

as his chosen people (9:18, 23-26). We apostasize if we rely on works through disbelief in the gospel (11:21-22 cf. Gal 5:4).

In Rom 10:3 Paul writes of Israel's unbelief as an unwillingness to "submit to God's righteousness," thus seeing faith as a form of submission. We are found righteous not by attaining to the standard of God's law (9:30), but by submitting to God's righteousness based on faith (10:6 cf. 4:13). This is a fitting imagery for believing since both are passive. This is entirely different from saying obedience is part of faith. By faith we are counted righteous as we rest in Christ's active obedience and by faith we take hold of him as our Substitute (Rom 1:17; 4:13, 23-25). This does not mean faith and obedience are routinely the same; they are distinct in their typical usage throughout the epistles and are just as far apart as are law and gospel.¹⁰

One final consideration before leaving Romans. After providing an introduction in 5:12-21 to the two ages which began with the fall of Adam, Paul answers the potential objection that his gospel is licentious in chapter 6 – those who believe in Christ have been united to him in his death so that they have died to sin and live in his resurrection life (vv.4-11). In the second half of this section, he writes, "But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed" (v.17). Is Paul's reference to the Romans' *obedience* from the heart speaking of their faith in the gospel? Does commitment "to the standard of teaching" mean a commitment to Paul's doctrine of faith alone? In 10:9-10 Paul does link faith with our heart: "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved." But as stated, in Rom 6 Paul is expounding our new life in Christ in the already/not—yet where we have become slaves of righteousness (vv.16,18). In a word, the context concerns sanctification, not justification (vv.19-22). The gift of eternal life includes the fruit of righteousness in this age (v.23). Yet might it not be that Paul is grounding our new life in our faith in Christ? For instance, in v.18 Paul writes of us "having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness." We were born enslaved to sin (5:12) and walked in it with our unbelief being at the root (1:18; 3:11,18). How were we set free from sin? By faith. How did we become slaves of righteousness? By faith when we were united to Christ. We would not be freed from sin and slaves of righteousness if we did not believe the gospel. Despite the truthfulness of these observations, the obedience in v.17 is not their faith and the standard of teaching is

¹⁰ See Luther, "How Christians Should Regard Moses," *Luther's Works*, volume 35 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), 162. At this point we might also note that some will link Rom 1:8 – "your faith is proclaimed in all the world" – with Rom 16:19 – "your obedience is known to all" – to establish a consistently synonymous/interchangeable relationship between faith and obedience. In 16:19 Paul is appealing to them to avoid those who "by smooth talk and flattery... deceive the hearts of the naive" and thereby cause divisions (vv. 17-18 cf. 14:13—15:13). The Romans' obedience, therefore, is in discerning the evil of those who "create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught" (v.17). Because of the immediate context, Paul rejoices over the Romans abiding by sound doctrine, that is, acting in accord with their faith in the truth of the gospel (v.19). The only real connection then to 1:8 is that they both indicate that the Romans believed the gospel.

not the gospel; it is the exhortations that flow out of the indicative of the gospel as seen in vv.11-14 (cf. what would appear to be Paul's same thought in Eph 4:20-24). That this is the case is made even more evident in Paul's unusual construction in v.17 which literally reads, "the pattern of teaching to which you were handed over."¹¹ God himself, whom Paul thanks, has given us to the ethics of baptism into Christ (vv.3-4). As God gave over those in Adam to sin (1:24,26,28), so he has given over those in Christ to new covenant obedience. Romans 6:17, then, does not express "the obedience of faith" from 1:5.

The Gospel of Faith Obeyed in Acts

Another passage pertinent here that does not receive as much attention as Romans, perhaps because it is a narrative, is Acts 6:7. "And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith." Luke does not report that the priests were progressively becoming more obedient to the faith,¹² but that over time many priests were coming to *the* faith (objective) *in* faith (subjective).¹³ These priests can be said to have become "obedient to the faith" because the gospel ("the faith") requires and calls for faith in Christ for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 10:43; 13:38). Luke's language here about obedience serves to describe the numerical growth of the church (cf. 2:41,47; 5:14; 11:24). Therefore, Luke has in view justification, not sanctification. To pull in some additional Lukan and Pauline theology, we might point out that this faith by which the priests are said to have obeyed the faith is itself the gift of God (Acts 18:27; Eph 2:8-9; Phil 1:29). It is God who opened their hearts to believe (Acts 14:27; 16:14) because they were elected to believe the gospel (Acts 13:48; 2 Th 3:13).

What about Acts 5:32, a statement that sounds like Heb 5:9 which we will consider further on? "And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him." Those who "obey him" here are the apostles (cf. 5:29 and 4:19) because they are Christ's *martus* (cf. Lk 24:48; Acts 1:8,22; 2:32; 3:15; 10:39,41; 22:15; 26:16). Their obedience is their testifying of Christ's resurrection, the bold and powerful preaching which is attributed to the filling of the Spirit (4:13,29,31,33). This is how the Spirit confirms (witnesses) to the apostles' witness.¹⁴ The Spirit is the gift of the exalted Son of God to his church as

¹¹ Moo, 401.

¹² *Contra* J. A. Alexander, *The Acts of the Apostles*, A Geneva Series Commentary (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991 rpt. Originally 1857), 248.

¹³ Although many commentators do not deal with the significance of priests having become obedient to the faith (e.g., Rackham, Longenecker, Kistemaker, Fitzmyer), the following agree with the view taken here: Calvin, *comm.* Acts 6:7, Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, CEC (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1883), 127, I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 182, F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, revised edition, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 123 (note that this indicates a shift in Bruce's thinking from his earlier commentary on Romans), and Brad Blue, "The Influence of Jewish Worship on Luke's Presentation of the Early Church," in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 479.

¹⁴ Peter Bolt, "Mission and Witness," in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 192, 202.

Jesus had promised, “But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning” (Jn 15:26-27). Acts 5:32 is therefore not a soteriological text.¹⁵

The Gospel of Faith Obeyed in 1 Peter

Peter writes of Christians as “Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love” (1 Pt 1:22). Faith is of central importance in Peter’s epistle as God’s power guards them through their faith (1:5) which is being tried in their suffering persecution (1:7 cf. 2:19-21; 3:13-17; 4:12-19; 5:6-10). Peter calls them to stand firm in this faith (5:9) since their hope is that by believing in Christ they will be saved (1:9; 2:6-7; 4:19). By faith we experience heavenly joy even now because we love Christ (1:8) and are thus sojourners in a hostile land (1:17; 2:11). If their faith were proved false through their trials, there would be no grace and eternal glory in Christ (1:7,13; 5:1,10).

Peter identifies this obedience to the truth in the sentence immediately preceding v.22 when he says that through Christ we are *believers in God* (v.21). As for the truth in question, it is nothing other than the good news which was preached to them (1:12). Peter’s theology is entirely coherent since in Acts 15:7-9 he tells us of God cleansing the heart of the gentiles by faith in the gospel.¹⁶

But this is actually not the first time in this letter that Peter writes of faith in terms of obedience. In his soteriologically-packed greeting he addresses the Christians as “elect exiles... according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, *for obedience to Jesus Christ* and for sprinkling with his blood” (1:1-2, emphasis mine). The ESV rightly renders both genitives as subjective: for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling. It would be odd if Peter placed obedience before remission of sin if by obedience he referred to the ethical calling of the Christian. But obedience is mentioned here before sprinkling with Christ’s blood because the obedience is not the sort of obedience called for in 1:14 (“As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance” cf. 2:11-12; 4:2-3). Instead, Peter writes of believing the gospel of Christ.¹⁷ These two genitives are tied together: *By faith in Christ we are cleansed from our sin by his blood* (1:18-19 cf. Eph 1:7; 1 Jn 1:7).

¹⁵ *Contra* Calvin, *comm.* Acts 5:32 although his comments here are consistent with his understanding of Acts 6:7.

¹⁶ On this insight I must express my debt to Calvin for pointing his readers to Acts 15 (*comm.* 1 Pt 1:22). I might also mention that Calvin interprets 1:22 consistently with how he read Rom 1:5 and even sees fit to mention those references in Romans. Leonhard Goppelt, *A Commentary on 1 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 125 and Edmund Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter*, BST (Downers Grove: IVP, 1988), 75 also take the interpretation advocated here. Peter Davids is off the mark somewhat when he ascribes this obedience to our repentance from sin (The First Epistle of Peter, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], 76).

¹⁷ There is a link between 1:2 and 1:14 where Peter writes, “As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance.” ‘Obedient’ is synonymous with believing here in light of Peter’s other references to obedience in this letter and because faith contrasts with their “former ignorance.” The gospel is the basis for Peter’s appeal (so also J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, WBC [Waco: Word, 1988], 12). Those who are

Accordingly, neither is the sanctification in view here what we call progressive sanctification. It would make no sense to think of God's election in terms of Christ's work in us by the Spirit. The genitive is subjective just as in 2 Th 2:13 – "But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits to be saved, *through sanctification by the Spirit* and belief in the truth" (emphasis mine). This sanctification is the separation by which we are made strangers and exiles in this world and brought into membership with God's holy and chosen people (cf. 1:17; 2:9-11), that is, set apart. A better translation of *agiasmos pneumatos* here would therefore be 'consecrated' (cf. 1 Cor 1:2; 6:11).¹⁸ This also adds to the many OT allusions and motifs that run through this book.

The Gospel of Faith Disobeyed in Galatians

When Paul preached the gospel to those in Galatia, they received the word with joy and greatly loved Paul (4:13-15). So Paul was amazed at how quickly they deserted God who called them by his grace for another gospel that is really no gospel at all (1:6-7). And as for Paul, they now considered him an enemy (4:16). In 5:7 Paul asks the Galatians a question, "You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?" This is the second time he asks the Galatians who it was that has corrupted their faith (cf. 3:1) but, as we will see, the first time in his canonical letters that he writes of faith in terms of obedience to the gospel.

The Judaizers troubled the Galatians by purposefully distorting the gospel of Christ (1:7) by forcing them to submit to a yoke of slavery, that is, circumcision (5:1-3; 6:12-13 cf. 4:17,21). To succumb to this legalism of justification by the Mosaic law is to be severed from Christ and fall from grace (5:4). The Judaizers tripped up the Galatians by spreading a leaven (5:7-9) that served to remove persecution for the cross of Christ (5:11; 6:12,17) but brought the wrath of God instead (5:12) and returned them to the bondage of the flesh (3:3; 4:21-31; 5:16-21). The 'truth' in 5:7 is the gospel of freedom from the law (2:4-5 cf. 2:19). Being under the law only merits the curse of God (3:13-13, 21 cf. 2:16) but to obey the truth means to receive righteousness in Christ alone. "But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith" (3:22,24 cf. 2:17; 3:6-9, 18,29). Those who obey the truth of grace boast in the cross of Christ by which they have been crucified to this age (6:14-15) and made alive by virtue of union with him to participate in the realm of the Spirit (5:22-25 cf. 1:4). As Paul said, our righteousness is by faith for neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything (5:5-6; 6:15). Whereas

regenerated (1:3) and obedient to the call of the gospel through faith are thus obedient to the will of God as they continue to live according to that faith. This is the indicative—imperative dynamic.

¹⁸ Michaels, 11, David Peterson, *Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 61-62, Paul Achtemeier, 1 Peter, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1996), 86. Also see Acts 26:18.

Abraham's spiritual offspring (3:7-9, 14), the Israel of God, enjoy the blessing of peace and mercy from God through believing in the Messiah (6:16), the legalists manifest works of the flesh. We walk by the law of Christ; we are not under the law of Moses (6:2 cf. 5:14).

This is the second time in Galatians that Paul links faith in the gospel to the Christian's practice. "But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel..." (2:14). Paul recounted his opposition to Peter and Barnabas when they fell into hypocrisy and wanted the gentile converts to live like Jews to show that everything must be consistent with the gospel of grace through faith if we are to be obedient the truth, and this includes our doctrine of sanctification. To cite just one passage, we find this made quite clear in 3:2-6.

Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? Does He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith—just as Abraham "believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"?

Not only justification, but sanctification must also be understood to be of grace in order for us to be faithful to the gospel. This would explain why Paul prefaced his question in 5:7 with the indicative imaged from athletics: "You were running well." Believing the gospel is not simply how we become Christians, it is what shapes our entire pilgrimage. The gospel is not something we leave behind because it is what continues to sustain our life in Christ. Faith in Christ is ongoing, like running a race. We see this centrality and perseverance in faith again in 5:25, "If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit" and at the close of the letter where Paul intentionally recaps his entire argument in his own hand (6:11-18): "And as for all who walk by this rule..." (v.16). "This rule" Paul holds to is the maxim in the preceding verse: "For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation." Paul separates those of the new creation from those who are in the era of the flesh based upon whether they walk by faith or the Mosaic law. (Note too the connection between 5:25 and 6:15 – live by the Spirit and new creation.) Paul is calling the Galatians back to the realm of the Spirit where the only thing that counts is "faith working through love" (5:6).

The Gospel of Faith Disobeyed in 2 Thessalonians

Along with Rom 10:16 and Gal 5:7 above, there are other instances where the gospel is spoken of as being disobeyed. In 2 Th 1:8 Paul tells us that Christ will return "in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus." Those whom Christ will judge are those who reject the gospel through unbelief. Therefore, our obedience to the gospel is none other than our reception of it by faith. The issue in this

passage is unbelief because unbelief is by nature ignorant and irreverent toward God.¹⁹

The Gospel of Faith Disobeyed in 1 Peter

In 1 Pt 2:8-10 we come to a highly illuminating passage touching upon Christ, predestination, and faith.

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

To begin with, Peter says Israel disobeyed the word. What word? He provides us with three examples in vv. 6-8. From Isa 28:16, "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." From Ps 118:22, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." And lastly, from Isa 8:14, "A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense." The word, then, is the word about the Messiah, the Savior of God's people. And how did Israel stumble or, as Peter puts it, "disobey the word"? They disobeyed through unbelief as he tells us in v.7 where we read of faith and unbelief – "So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe." The quote from Isa 28:16 in v.6 itself also spoke of faith. Peter continues with his contrast between those who are disobedient with those who are obedient in v.9 when he begins "But you..." We are not destined to stumble because we have been chosen by God to belong to him and worship him as our Savior. Echoing Hosea, he assures us that we have received mercy from God. But how? By believing the good news about Jesus that was preached to us (1:25).

Peter again employs the same language he used in 2:8 when he writes of nonchristian husbands of Christian wives who "do not obey the word" (3:1). In light of how he used this phrase above – in addition to the fact that the only Scripture that addresses those outside the church is the call of the gospel to believe in Christ – the disobedience to the word here is again a refusal to believe the gospel.²⁰ They do not obey in that they do not believe because what characterizes them is their unbelief. Although Peter implies their persecution or harsh treatment of their wives in v.6, that is not how they are disobedient to the word. Peter's concern is

¹⁹ Calvin, *comm.* 2 Th 1:8. As in his comments on 1 Pt 1:22, Calvin again refers to Romans. The Romans commentary was the first of all Calvin's commentaries, having been written in 1539, while Thessalonians was published in 1550 and Peter a year later in 1551. He also alluded to the interpretation of Rom 1:5 in Tim written in 1556. The repeated and consistent use of this phrase over the course of many years demonstrates how important this was to Calvin.

²⁰ *Apeithousin* ("do not obey") is rendered as unbelieving, unbelief, or unbelievers in Acts 14:2; 19:9 and Rom 15:31 (BAGD) but as 'disobedient' with reference to Israel in Rom 10:21 and 11:31. But this disobedience in Rom 10:21 is again a refusal to believe the promises of God.

that these men may be “won without a word” which is to say, brought to faith in Christ by the respectful and gentle spirit of their wife (vv. 2-6). Their disobedience to the word of the gospel will come to an end when they come to faith in Christ through the witness of their wife.

It looks as though 3:19-20 can also add something here. Peter writes that in the spirit Christ “went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water.” Although this is a very difficult passage to unravel, it is probably best to understand the spirits who disobeyed as the evil spirits on earth who were the offspring produced when the sons of God had relations with the daughters of men in Gen 6.²¹ Peter is telling us that those spirits now in prison born of this illicit union are the ones to whom Christ proclaimed his triumph. In light of Moses’ commentary in Gen 6:5, “The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually,” it would appear that Peter has in mind humanity’s rebellion as a whole, especially since he writes of this generation again as “the world of the ungodly” (2 Pt 2:5 cf. 3:5-7). Calvin read *apeithesasin* in 3:20 as ‘unbelievers’ and rightly so. In Noah’s day (2 Pt 3:3), just as now in the last days (1 Pt 1:20; 4:7), there are scoffers who mock the word of God. In fact, this is the reason why Peter has to write this letter – he is dealing with churches being persecuted for their faith (1 Pt 1:6-7; 3:8-17; 4:12-19; 5:6-10) as their watery baptism assured them they would (1 Pt 3:18-22). And as in Noah’s world, Jesus tells us, so too at the revelation of Christ people will be seeking their own pleasure, not believing that judgment is coming upon them (Mt 24:37-39 cf. 2 Pt 3:5-7; 2 Tim 3:1-2). The essence of unbelief is this derision at the threat of God’s impending judgment. But as for Noah, he was righteous by faith and it was this faith that moved him to fear God in carrying out God’s command to build a salvific ark (Heb 11:7).

Finally, 1 Pt 4:17 says, “For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?” Peter contrasts those who belong to the household of God and those who do not. How did we become members of God’s household? How did we come out of darkness and into his light? By his mercy which is received by faith (2:9-10).²² How, then, do those who do not belong to God resist and repudiate (i.e., disobey) the gospel? By unbelief. It could not be anymore clear.

²¹ Michaels, 207 against those who take this as Christ preaching repentance through Noah.

²² That our salvation is entirely of grace, and thus through faith alone, is attested by the fact that we were redeemed to worship God alone for our salvation which is Peter’s point in 2:9. As Calvin wrote in the opening to his critique of the sixth session of the Council of Trent, “The doctrine of man’s Justification would be easily explained, did not the false opinions by which the minds of men are preoccupied, spread darkness over the clear light. The principal cause of obscurity, however, is, that we are with the greatest difficulty induced to leave the glory of righteousness entire to God alone” (“Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, with the Antidote,” *Calvin’s Selected Works*, tr. Henry Beveridge [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983 rpt.], 3:108).

The Gospel of Faith Disobeyed in Hebrews

All that has been said thus far is summed up in Heb 3:18-19 when the author, commenting upon Israel in the wilderness, writes, “And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.” He is not saying that disobedience is the fruit of unbelief but that unbelief is the very disobedience for which they were judged and not permitted to enter the Promised Land.²³ The author of Hebrews refers to Israel’s disobedience two more times in 4:6,11. “Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience.... Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.” The sin of Israel was their refusal to believe the promise of Yahweh their Savior. As 4:2-3 states,

For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said,
 “As I swore in my wrath,
 ‘They shall not enter my rest,’”
 although his works were finished from the foundation of the world.

Israel’s hard heart was the cause of their unbelief. Hence, when the author of Hebrews cites Ps 95:7-8, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts,” (4:7), he is calling his readers to believe the gospel.

Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,
 “Today, if you hear his voice,
 do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,
 on the day of testing in the wilderness,
 where your fathers put me to the test
 and saw my works for forty years.
 Therefore I was provoked with that generation,
 and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart;
 they have not known my ways.’

As I swore in my wrath,
 ‘They shall not enter my rest.’”

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an *evil, unbelieving heart*, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the

²³ Though he is not a scholar, it is disappointing and somewhat concerning that the meaning of this statement is entirely flip-flopped in its usage by John MacArthur who takes disobedience here to be the indication of unbelief (*The Gospel according to Jesus* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988], 53). It is true that one who consistently disobeys the word of God gives evidence that he does not believe the gospel or know Christ (2 Tim 2:19; Titus 1:16; 1 Jn 3:3-10), but that is not the point of Heb 3, much less the book of Hebrews. Appealing to Jn 3:36, Acts 6:7, and Heb 5:9, MacArthur goes on to see obedience to Scripture as synonymous with faith (*ibid.*, 174). If that is so in passages such as Acts 16:31 and the like where there is a call to salvation, such an understanding would in fact be a denial of faith alone (Rom 3:28; 4:5).

deceitfulness of sin. For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original *confidence* firm to the end. As it is said,
“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.” (3:7-15, emphasis mine)

For one final time the author again speaks of faith as obedience in 5:9. “And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.” As a stiff-necked people, the nation Israel renounced their covenant God and brought his anger upon themselves. Through unbelief they excluded themselves from his promise of heavenly life (11:10, 13-16, 26; 13:14 cf. 4:8-9). “‘There is no peace,’ says the Lord, ‘for the wicked’” (Isa 48:22). We ourselves, spiritual Israel, enter God’s eternal sabbatical glory by continuing in faith (4:1,9,11,14,16 cf. 2:1; 3:6,14; 10:23,35; 12:25). This is the point of Hebrews: We trust in God’s Son and do not revert to the Mosaic covenant because it has passed away with the coming of the fullness of time (7:25—8:2, 5-6, 13; 9:13-14, 24,26; 10:10-14, 26,29). Those who receive God’s salvation persevere in faith (Mt 10:22; 24:13). We enter into the covenant of grace and stand by faith as Paul wrote in Rom 11:20-22.