

That “Faith Only” Translation

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What this writer said in a recent article in the **Firm Foundation** on the translation of “faith only” in Romans 1:17 is worthy of greater expansion. While conceding that it is liable to be misunderstood as supporting the modern denominational dogma of salvation without baptism, it was my contention that (1) it is a good translation of the original idiom here and (2) that there is a sense in which the New Testament teaches that salvation is by faith only.

This latter point may be illustrated by material from my **Commentary on the General Epistle of James** (1963). The following is a quotation of a “Note on ‘Faith Only’” on pages 117-119.

The doctrine of “justification by faith only” has become a loaded expression in modern denominational theology. It is a real bone of contention. The modern denominational doctrine (at least in some groups) is that in conversion man is saved at the instance of faith, when he puts his trust in Christ as his personal Savior. This leads to the denial of the efficacy of other acts of obedience, especially baptism. The Bible plainly teaches that baptism as an act of faith is a condition of salvation or remission of sins (justification). This does not mean that baptism is sacramental in the sense in which sacraments are generally understood. A sacrament (as used in Catholicism) is an act which has its efficacy in itself and in the validity of the administrator (an authorized person) and requires no faith on the part of the one on whom it is administered. In such an act faith does not “work together,” for there is no faith.

But this use of the term “faith only” is not the historic meaning of the term. Martin Luther did not mean this by his formula, and to attribute the rise of the term in its denominational sense to him (as is so often done) is an injustice. Luther meant that faith is the only meritorious ground of justification—salvation or remission of sins can never be obtained on any grounds apart from faith in Jesus’ blood. There are only two means of salvation as Paul stated them in Romans 3:27: “the principle” (law) of faith and the “principle” (law) of human works of merit (such as those under the Law). See the *New English Bible* on this verse. Since Paul rejected the principle of works, it follows that, unless one is to be saved by the principle of faith, he cannot be saved. This expression did not originate with Luther; others had used it before him (Cf. Anders Nygren, **Commentary on Romans**, pp. 164ff). But he stoutly defended the translation of Romans 3:28 “Man is justified without the works of the law through faith only.” To deny this (to Luther) would be to deny the whole teaching of Paul and to affirm that one can be saved by his own works without the Lord Jesus. In this understanding Luther is correct.

But Luther himself emphasized the importance of baptism. He is quoted as saying, “We are justified by faith alone, but not by the faith which is alone.” Some of the harshest things which Luther ever said were said in one edition of his commentary—against those who deny the place of baptism in the New Testament.

Thus we see that “faith only” can be used in two senses. It can be used **compositely** as the principle of justification. But it can be used **analytically**, where the process of obedience is broken down into its component parts. In the first sense, salvation is by “faith only”; in the second sense, it is “by works and not by faith only,” for here faith is only one of the conditions of pardon: “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved” (Mark 16:16); “**Repent and be baptized** ... for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38). Thus the denominational doctrine of salvation at the moment of faith—without obedience—is not a Biblical teaching, and it does not take its roots from the reformers. It is rooted in the conversion experience theology of early American revivalism. It sets aside the plain teaching of the Bible on the doctrine of obedience and works of faith. It is easy to see, therefore, that there is no contradiction between Paul’s use of justification of faith (only or “without works”) and James’ teaching that justification is by works and not by faith only. Paul is thinking of the composite nature of faith as the principle of justification by faith rather than by the works of the law (or of human merit). James is thinking analytically of faith as a condition of justification and insists that it must obey the conditions of the teaching of Christ and perfect itself in works.

A further word beyond this quotation from the commentary may be in order. Brethren, we ought to get the facts straight about this aspect of New Testament teaching (“faith only”) and Martin Luther. We ought to quit saying ‘that Luther invented the modern denominational doctrine of justification by faith only—without baptism. I was taught this specifically in my early years in college. I remember one of my teachers bringing a German translation of the New Testament to class to prove the point. I thus was not prepared when I read a translation of Luther’s *Commentary on Galatians* to see him teaching so strongly that baptism was for the remission of sins. For comparison one might look at the commentary of a modern orthodox commentator like R. C. H. Lenski. (See his comment on Titus 3:5, for example, where he takes the Baptists like A. T. Robertson to the woodshed.) Such a charge that Luther invented the modern denominational doctrine of salvation without baptism grows out of a misunderstanding of both Luther’s teaching and (more seriously) of that of the New Testament.

Recently a brother asked me, “Is there any sense in which we can say correctly that one is saved by faith only?” I replied, “Let’s turn it around and say that the only way to be saved is by faith in Jesus. Would you dispute this? Then in the sense of the meritorious cause or basis of salvation, salvation is by faith in Jesus only.” Isn’t this what Peter said in Acts 4:12: “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved”? If the translation of Romans 1:17 is understood in this sense and if it conveys the sense of the original (which it does), it cannot very well be set aside, except on the grounds that it is liable to be misunderstood. It ought not to be objected to on grounds that it is incorrect or not a good translation.

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