

**IS FAITH A GIFT FROM GOD?**

**H. Graham Wilson, Jr.**

**Ephesians 2:8 revisited.**

Various Theological quarters would argue that the New Testament teaches that *faith* is a gift of God. The passage that is cited is Ephesians 2:8, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God...” (NKJV).

**te gar chariti**

For by grace

**este sesosmevoi**

you have been saved

**dia pisteos**

through faith

**kai touto ouk ek humon**

and *that* not of yourselves

**to dorov Theos**

it is the gift of God...

From a cursory reading of the English verse it appears that the relative pronoun “**that**” has “faith” as its grammatical antecedent. However, in the Greek construction (transliterated here) “**that**” is a demonstrative pronoun (touto) with adverbial force used in an explanatory phrase. This particular construction uses a fixed neuter singular pronoun which refers neither to faith,

which is feminine in Greek, nor to any immediate word which follows. What all this means is that the little phrase “**and that**” (kai touto) explains that **SALVATION** is of God’s grace and not of human effort.

*Understood this way, Ephesians 2:8 could be translated:* “For by grace you have been saved through faith, that is to say, not of yourselves, it is the gift of God” Furthermore, there is a parallelism between **not of yourselves** (vs. 8) and **not of works** (vs. 9). This parallelism serves as a commentary to “For by grace you have been saved through faith” (vs. 8), which speaks of salvation in its entirety.

It is difficult to see how faith, **if** it is the gift of God, could harmonize with **not of works** (vs. 9). The conclusion is that in Ephesians 2:8 **all of salvation** is the gift of God, not faith. (We are distinguishing from the Spiritual gift of faith given to believers).

In all illustrations of faith there is confusion between the **instrument** of salvation (God’s Word, heard or read) and the **agent** of salvation (the Holy Spirit). Faith is a human response to a Holy Spirit prompted conviction of the truth of God’s Word.

There is a form of Theology that teaches one may **trust** Christ for the free gift of everlasting life and **not** get it (Lordship salvation, Reform Covenant Theology). This is neither Biblically nor psychologically true!

There is a problem of describing **faith** as an infused or transmitted substance. Faith is not analogous to a current of electricity that passes through a conduit and results in a release of mechanical energy. Neither is faith to be likened to water sprinkled upon a seed planted in potted

soil. Faith that saves does not trust a chair to hold you up when you sit in it. All these illustrations fail to explain Biblical faith properly.

The concept of **infused faith** for salvation bears a marked resemblance to the Sacramentalism of the Roman Catholic Church (the Mass). Here in Roman Catholic Theology the partaking of the bread and of the wine are considered as efficacious. The teaching is termed **transubstantiation**, where it is taught that the bread and the wine are **literally** the flesh and blood of Christ (Matt. 26:26-28). This Theology teaches that faith becomes a transmitted and efficacious element which God gives to men for salvation. This seems to lead to a pantheistic view of God. Here the Son is seen as being a part of creation, and that is heresy. This salvation based on a merit system, where grace is meted out in the elements (part of creation) of the Mass, is not Biblical. It must be emphasized that faith is not a physical **substance** nor is salvation earnable!.

If faith that is efficacious were a gift, then lost men would not bear the responsibility **to believe** the Gospel. The Biblical term **believe** would become an equivocal expression if regeneration occurs before faith. This is the view of those that consider faith to be a gift of God (Reform Covenant theology). This means that one would get one of the spiritual gifts offered to the redeemed before redemption and sealing, this is absurd and non- Biblical (Gal. 5:22). In fact it is teaching another Gospel (cf. Gal. 1:8-10).

Those that hold to this view argue that the natural man can not understand the things of God (I Cor. 2:14) which is true. But their great error is in forgetting the ministry of the Holy Spirit to the unsaved (John 16:8-12). The **calling** of God (Holy Spirit) initiates the human response of a lost

one to a Holy Spirit conviction of the truth of the redemptive merits of Christ which is revealed in God's spoken or written Word in the Church Age to the lost and this is the faith that saves (Rom. 8:28-30). The second error is that there is a misconstruing of what happen in Genesis 3. When Adam sinned the image of God was marred in man but not eradicated. Fallen man still had the capacities of a being; mind, emotion and will. Man then, in his fallen state, did not lose the capacity to think. Fallen men can understand the truth of the offer of eternal life and be regenerated while under conviction by the Holy Spirit. According to John 16:8-12 this is the ministry of the Holy Spirit to the world and lost men are in the world.

An infused idea of faith engenders a less than balanced view of **sanctification**. Victory in the spiritual life is viewed as a virtual guarantee. If God gives faith to the lost then the difficult aspects of progressive holiness stated in Scriptures tend to be soft-pedaled. The central truth of power to do good is revealed in Galatians 5:22-23 where the new life in Christ is described as *the fruit of the Spirit*. The fruit of the Spirit are supernatural qualities impossible for a person in his own strength to achieve. The God-honoring characteristics of a Christian life described as the fruit of the Spirit are possible only to those that are **indwelt** permanently by the Holy Spirit in the Church Age.

The work of the Holy Spirit enables the believers to overcome evil and gives them power to do good. By the power of the Holy Spirit the believer can accomplish what he could not accomplish in his own strength. Living a holy live is a result of complete dependence on God to supply the power for the victory. The death of Christ does not provide any automatic victory for

the believer, and in his own strength a Christian cannot command and control the old nature, the Adamic nature.

Though the believer has a new nature, this fact in itself cannot gain him victory over the old nature. This is illustrated in Paul's struggle as stated in Romans 7:7-25. Paul confessed that the struggle between the old and the new natures is not one that he could resolve himself but must be accomplished by divine power, "through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 8:4). The secret of victory is to live not according to the sin nature but by the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:4). Clearly victory over sin is not accomplished by eradicating the sin nature but rather by depending on the superior power of the Holy Spirit. The Christian never reaches the point where he **is not able to sin** in the flesh, but by the grace of God he can achieve being **able not to sin** while in his fleshly body. A believer's consciousness of sin and of his tendency to sin can lead to his coming into closer fellowship with God, and having drawn nearer to God, to abhor his sin nature (Rom. 8:12-14).

In conclusion, it is a great error and *sensus plenior* reasoning to suggest that God gives the unregenerate a "special gift of faith" so that they may be saved and subsequently sanctified. Instead, God has sent His Holy Spirit into the world to convict the lost of sin and to enlighten darkened and depraved minds to the saving truths contained in Scripture (John 16:8; Rom. 10:17; Eph. 3:9).

When a lost person is regenerated (born again, saved), it is yieldness to the filling ministry of the Holy Spirit, not infused faith, that results in good works. From Ephesians 2:8 and the collective whole of New Testament teachings, God is presented as the gracious initiator who,

through His Holy Spirit, woos and wins men to Himself. Man is depicted as the responder who, in his spiritually destitute state, is convicted and enlightened by the Holy Spirit, and answers in simple faith to the promises of the Gospel.

One might say that salvation is obtained when the sufficiency of Christ dawns on one's darkened heart and it is at the moment of illuminated conviction one becomes a believer. In view of such exquisite grace, it is only fitting to contend that salvation is a superlative expression of divine favor, yes, even a Gift of God! Saved by grace through faith...! Amazing grace...that saved a wretch like me and you.