**Faith in the Book of Romans**

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Martin Luther, in his zeal to undermine and cast down the indulgence and merit systems of the Catholic Church, fell prey to an oft-repeated fault. He went to the opposite extreme. Fearfully running away from Rome, he ran all the way past Jerusalem. Throughout the lectures which he presented on the book of Romans (1515-1516), he insisted that it is faith alone that justifies and that faith is by nature a passive affair. [All of the following quotes are from Luther’s lectures on Romans. HRO] To him faith meant "a living trust of the heart." It could not be an active thing, for were it so, it would involve a work of righteousness and that is impossible for man: "All our good is outside us, and that good is in Christ." Faith cannot count as a good work. Faith only comes in because this good, that is, righteousness apart from works, is imputed to believers. On the other hand, good works can be done only as works of faith "done out of the spirit of liberty and solely for the love of God." Thus, according to Luther, it is through faith in Christ that we are made righteous for the performance of works of righteousness.

This concept as promoted by Luther and Lutherans, has infiltrated the ranks of almost every modern Protestant body through their founders and creeds. It became crystalized in the Lutheran confession of Augsburg (1530) and the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) and passed from these to others. The latter document in questions 60 and 61 deals with faith in the following manner:

Q: How are you righteous before God?

A: Only by true faith in Jesus Christ. In spite of the fact that my conscience accuses me that I have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God, and have not kept any one of them, and that I am still ever prone to all that is evil, nevertheless, God, without any merit of my own, out of pure grace, grants me the benefits of the perfect expiation of Christ, imputing to me his righteousness and holiness as if I had never committed a single sin or had ever been sinful, having fulfilled myself all the obedience which Christ has carried out for me, if only I accept such favor with a trusting heart . . . .

Q: Why do you say that you are righteous by faith alone?

A: Not because I please God by virtue of the worthiness of my faith, but because the satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ alone are my righteousness before God, and because I can accept it and make it mine in no other way than by faith alone . . . .

Under the first question, the inaugurators of the Catechism (Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus) offered seven citations from the book of Romans. There is therefore little doubt as to the importance of Paul's letter for this approach to the concept of faith. Moreover, it stems in very large measure (if not entirely) from Luther's dichotomy between faith and works which portrayed faith as passivity and works as activity. But as we intend to show, this doctrine bears no resemblance at all to Paul's concept of "faith in Jesus Christ" versus "the works of the law of Moses." Rather it reflects the issues of the sixteenth century A. D., e.g. the battle between Luther and the Catholic hierarchy. When seen in this light, there is little difficulty in understanding either what Paul meant in his epistle or the pirating of the letter's words by the Wittenberg scholar and those who have succeeded him.

**Must Faith Be Passive To Be Faith?**

Perhaps the question that heads this section is the wrong one to ask. For wherever the Bible mentions passive and inactive faith, it condemns it. The dissertation of James in chapter 2 came out so strongly on the subject that it led Luther to label it "a right strawey epistle," saying that "there is not much of the gospel in it." With the heavy emphasis upon activity in faith in the letter to the Hebrews, especially chapter 11, he treated that book the same way. For Luther, Romans was "the chief part of the New Testament and the very purist Gospel." It causes us to wonder when we read modern authors who endeavor to justify what they call "Paul's doctrine of justification by faith alone" and the teachings found in James and Hebrews. At least Luther was candid! As a matter of fact it is not possible to make those two views complementary. They are as different as day and night and contradict one another as clearly as do capitalism and communism. But I would never identify the "doctrine of justification by faith alone" as Paul's. It is Luther's doctrine and he should be credited with it and discredited by it! Paul never authored any such doctrine. The Bible does not contradict itself; Paul does not contradict James; but Luther and his spiritual heirs contradict both.

Let me begin by going to the Old Testament and looking at faith in that body of literature. For it is certain that Paul used a word and a concept that was well-known and much used in the scriptures of the prophets. There, if a writer has reference to some requirement made by God upon man, then if the term "faith" is used in such a context, it clearly intends both the acknowledgement of the requirement and man's obedience (Deut. 9:23; Ps. 119:66; 2 Kgs. 17:14). And it was out of that context that Paul penned his Roman letter. As a matter of fact, the passage which represents the cornerstone of Paul's argument as well as the introduction to the theme of the letter (Rom. 1:16-17), has as its Old Testament basis the divine remark recorded in Habakkuk 2:4. Plainly, that passage has reference to "faithfulness" and not just "belief" or even "trust." The footnote to the RSV of that text offers this meaning for the word. This puts a whole new slant on the Pauline usage, since the idea of "faithfulness" in every way demands activity and withstands the connotation of passivity. Habakkuk is in his book announcing impending and imminent doom for Israel, whereas God allows that only those who remain patient and faithful will live through that crisis. Moreover, it is through their steadfastness and faithfulness that they will live. Utter and total belief in, dependence upon, and faithfulness to God are all embraced within the divine demand. To suggest that he intended anything less is simply out of the question. And to say that Paul gave the concept any different intention is just as much so.

A second observation needs to be explored as we consider the Old Testament background of Paul's use of the term. This is the little-appreciated fact that in the Old Testament "to believe" was one of the works of the Jewish law (Ex. 14:31; Num. 14:11; 20:12; Deut. 1:32; 9:23).

Once more, this gives us a different perspective for seeing Paul's meaning clearly. How can it be viewed as purely a passive thing for man when it was indisputably seen as an activity under the law? Obviously it can not. What is more, that point could not have been made any more clearly than it is in Rom. 4:4-5 where the apostle uses the Greek word *pistis* with the meaning of "faithfulness" or "fidelity." It is explicitly implied here that Abraham at an advanced age had relations with his aged wife with a view toward the conception of a son in fulfillment of God's promise. He was not passive but active. "He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead because he was about a hundred years old, or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb.. ." (vs. 19).

It appears very odd, to me at least, based upon the preceding and the implications which necessarily follow, that Luther's approach to the concept of faith in Romans has any modern adherents at all. Nevertheless, all are aware that it does and in very large numbers. Yet, it is interesting that modernists are fairly outspoken in rejecting the Lutheran interpretation of Paul. For instance, the liberal theologian Werner Georg Kummel in his book The Theology of the New Testament (New York, 1973) brazenly declared that, "faith in Paul's sense is by no means adequately described therewith (acknowledgment of the Christian message). Faith in its actual nature is not intellectual acknowledgment of a state of affairs, but obedience . . . . Faith is the response of the man who has encountered in the preaching of the gospel the message of God's saving action at the end of time which produces righteousness and who obediently embraces the grace of God which is offered in this message" (pp. 201-202). Rudolf Bultmann, just as forthrightly labeled it a "free act of obedience." Further, in his article on *pisteuo* in the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (Vol. IV, p. 205) he said that "'to believe' is 'to obey' as in the Old Testament."

In this case the modernists have shaken off the shackles of denominational tradition and orthodoxy and returned to the simple sense of the text. We could wish that we could encourage those with some conviction regarding the value of Scripture to do likewise.

**--- Continued in Next Week’s *Reason for Hope* ---**