

FAITH, WORKS, AND BAPTISM: PAUL vs. JESUS?

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INTRODUCTION

A. The apparent conflict between Paul and Jesus.

1. Paul clearly distinguishes faith from works, and relates salvation to faith, not works.
 - a. See Rom 3:28; 4:1-5; 9:32; 10:5-11; Gal 2:16; 3:2, 5; Eph 2:8-10.
 - b. In this connection it is usually just assumed that “works” means “something you do” in a very generic sense.
2. But Jesus clearly identifies faith as a work in John 6:28-29.
 - a. Faith is described as a work in the general sense of “something you do.”
 - b. Though it is a work in this sense, it leads to salvation: John 6:27.

B. What is at stake here? The meaning or purpose of baptism.

1. Most Protestants begin with Paul’s distinction between faith and works, and with his exclusion of works from the salvation process as contrary to grace (Eph 2:8-9).
2. Then they assume that baptism is a work *in the Pauline sense*, and thus deny that it is a saving event.
3. This is also a growing trend in the Restoration Movement. Examples:
 - a. “I have always believed that when a person sincerely comes to trust Jesus Christ as leader, forgiver, and Savior, and repents, the first step of obedience is to be baptized into Christ.” (Gene Appel, *Christian Standard*, 6/27/04, p. 6)
 - b. [In response to articles I wrote on the history of baptism:] The view that baptism is the time of salvation “invalidates the abundant work of God’s grace in the multitudes of church movements around the globe that accept the classic Reformation plea of ‘faith alone.’ . . . Baptism is an expected act of obedience in our church. It is not sidestepped or underplayed. But faith in Christ alone saves. Nothing more and nothing less.” (Letter by Steve Bond, *Christian Standard*, 8/22/04, p. 11)

C. The question now is this: How may we reconcile Paul and Jesus?

1. They must be using the term “works” in different senses, or they are in contradiction.
2. How can we sort this out?

I. Inadequate Answers to the “Paul vs. Jesus” Problem.

- A. Clearly we cannot continue to think of Pauline works simply as “something you do.”
 - 1. Jesus uses the term in this sense, and applies it to faith.
 - 2. Thus the *distinguishing* mark of Pauline works must be something else.
 - B. Perhaps Paul is using “works” in the sense of external (outward, overt) acts, in contrast with faith as an internal act of the heart. E.g., Norman Geisler says a *work* is “an overt action that flows from faith” (*Systematic Theology*, III:496). “Overt” = external, physical.
 - 1. This would allow us to treat repentance as a condition for salvation, in addition to faith. This is exactly what most Protestants do, and properly so.
 - 2. But as an overall solution to the “Paul vs. Jesus” problem this is not consistent with Paul’s treatment of confession in Rom 10:9-10. Here he presents confession as an exact equivalent of faith in reference to salvation, yet it is an overt act (“with the mouth”).
 - C. Perhaps Paul is using “works” in the sense of obedience to the Law of Moses, in contrast with obedience to New Testament commandments.
 - 1. This approach appeals to many in the Restoration Movement.
 - 2. This approach is also consistent with how many interpret “works of law” in Rom 3:20, 28.
 - 3. This proposed solution must be rejected, though, since the context of Rom 1-3 shows that Paul often uses the term “law” to include all law codes, not just the Mosaic law—especially in key verses such as Rom 3:20, 28.
 - D. A fourth possibility is that Paul’s “works” are *meritorious* works, good deeds motivated by a desire to earn or deserve salvation.
- II. A Suggested Solution: The “Paul vs. Jesus” dilemma can be resolved by recognizing that there are *two separate categories* of works (generically, “things we do”), and thus two kinds of obedience to the will of God.

“Things we do” = generic works (which include both--)

(1) “Obedience to the faith/gospel” (and)

(2) “Works of law”

- A. “Works of law” (Rom 3:20, 28).
 - 1. The term “works” as used by Paul must be more specific than “things we do,” because of John 6:28-29. I.e., *faith* is “something we do,” but Paul distinguishes faith from works.
 - 2. The key to this specific meaning is the phrase “works of law” in Rom 3:20, 28.
 - 3. “Works of law” cannot refer just to the Law of Moses, since the preceding context (1:18-3:20) is inclusive of the laws that apply both to Jews and to Gentiles, and since Abraham’s works are a major part of this discussion (Rom. 4:1ff.).

4. In Rom 3:28 this phrase refers to *both* acts of obedience *and* acts of disobedience to one's law code (contra just "observing the law," as in the NIV).
 - a. See the continuity of Paul's line of thought from 3:28 to 4:8. "Apart from works" in 4:6 (see 3:28) refers to *sinful* works in 4:7-8.
 - b. Disobedience to one's law code, i.e., sin, is thus a work in Paul's sense; obedience to one's law code is also a work--the "*good* works" of Eph 2:10.
 - c. "Apart from works of law" in 3:28 thus means "apart from a consideration of one's response to his applicable law code, whether good or bad."
5. The bottom line is this: Pauline "works" = one's response to the LAW commandments addressed to human beings as CREATURES by God in his role as CREATOR.

B. "Obedience to the faith/gospel."

1. See Acts 6:7; Rom 10:16; 2 Thess 1:8; 1 Pet 4:17. (The references that speak of DISobeying the gospel imply the concept of OBEDIENCE to the gospel.)
2. As Paul is using this expression (Rom, 2 Thess), it must be different from the way he uses "works," since he clearly relates it to salvation. If it means the same as his "works," he would be contradicting himself (e.g., Eph 2:8-9).
3. Since the term "obedience" is used (or implied), this must refer to a positive response to an imperative or command of some kind.
4. The bottom line is this: "obedience to the faith/gospel" = one's response to the GOSPEL commandments addressed to human beings as SINNERS by God in his role as REDEEMER. I.e., these are the instructions given to sinners on how to be saved.
5. The most obvious of these imperatives or instructions is "*believe*."
 - a. This is a command addressed to the lost: Mark 1:15; John 12:36; Acts 16:31.
 - b. Positively responding to the command to believe is thus an act of *obedience* (the sinner's "first act of obedience"); it is a *work* ("something you do") in this specific sense of obedience to the gospel.
 - c. This is obviously how Jesus is using the term "work" in John 6:28-29. Thus there can be no conflict between doing *works* in this sense and being saved by grace, especially in view of John 6:27.
6. Repentance is also obedience to a gospel command, an imperative addressed to sinners telling them how to be saved: Matt 3:2; 4:17; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 17:30; Rev 2:16. Thus it belongs to the same category of works as faith (see Mark 1:15).
7. Based on Rom 10:9-10, we must conclude that confession of Jesus as Lord is also part of our "obedience to the gospel" (10:16). This shows that this kind of works cannot be limited to inward, subjective acts such as faith and repentance.

C. In which category does baptism belong?

1. Is baptism a work? Of course it is, in the sense of “something you do.” But John 6:28-29 shows that a work in this sense is quite consistent with grace.
2. Is baptism an external work? Of course it is, but Rom 10:9-10 shows that even an external work may be parallel to faith and thus quite consistent with salvation by grace.
3. Is baptism a “work of law,” i.e., a work in the Pauline sense? NO.
 - a. While Paul excludes works of law from the salvation event, he speaks consistently of baptism in salvation terms.
 - b. Never in the New Testament is baptism an imperative given to Christians or to those already saved. It is consistently spoken of as something done by a sinner in order to receive salvation. E.g., Acts 2:38; 22:16.
4. Baptism then is a part of the “obedience to the faith/gospel” which is required for salvation.
5. See how Jesus separates baptism from the category of Christian good works in Matt 28:19-20.
 - a. Baptism thus is NOT “the first act of obedience” done by a Christian.
 - b. Baptism rather is the LAST act of “obedience to the faith/gospel” done by an unbelieving sinner.

CONCLUSION. Recognizing these TWO kinds of works does two things:

1. It shows the fallacy of all “faith-only” theories of salvation which put faith in a category by itself, and all other acts in the category of works.
2. It shows the error or works-righteousness that is inherent in the traditional Restorationist “plan of salvation,” which treats all commands alike (“believe, repent, confess, be baptized, live the Christian life”).
 - a. Response to the commands to “believe, repent, confess, and be baptized” is *obedience to the gospel*; response to the commands governing the Christian life is *works of law*.
 - b. An obedience response to all of God’s commands is *necessary*, but it is not the same kind of necessity.
 - 1) “Obedience to the gospel” is characterized by the *necessity of means*.
 - 2) “Works of law” are characterized by the *necessity of precept*.