

## The Gift of God

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Most Calvinistic commentators believe that the gift of Ephesians 2:8 is saving faith rather than salvation: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8–9). This interpretation leads some to a hyper-Calvinistic doctrine of faith, which in turn leads to an unscriptural plan of salvation.

For example, Shedd says: "The Calvinist maintains that faith is wholly from God, being one of the effects of regeneration."<sup>1</sup> This results in a strange plan of salvation. Because the sinner cannot believe, he is instructed to perform the following duties: 1. Read and hear the divine Word. 2. Give serious application of the mind to the truth. 3. Pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit for conviction and regeneration.<sup>2</sup>

Thus an unscriptural doctrine of total depravity leads to an unscriptural and inconsistent plan of salvation. Doubtless the sinner is "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1b). If this means that regeneration must precede faith, then it must also mean that regeneration must precede all three of the pious duties Shedd outlines for the lost. A doctrine of total depravity that excludes the possibility of faith must also exclude the possibilities of "hearing the word," "giving serious application to divine truth," and "praying for the Holy Spirit for conviction and regeneration." The extreme Calvinist deals with a rather lively spiritual corpse after all. If the corpse has enough vitality to read the Word, and heed the message, and pray for conviction, perhaps it can also believe. Incidentally, it would seem evident that the person who would pray earnestly for conviction must already be under a deep state of conviction.

Arthur W. Pink agrees with Shedd. He says the sinner is to "ask God ... to bestow upon him the gifts of repentance and faith."<sup>3</sup>

L. Berkhof's position is similar: "This faith is not first of all an activity of man, but a potentiality wrought by God in the heart of the sinner. The seed of faith is implanted in man in regeneration."<sup>4</sup>

The tragedy of this position is that it perverts the gospel. The good news becomes only a hopeful possibility. The sinner is wrongly instructed to beg for that which God is already

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<sup>1</sup> W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, Vol. II, p. 472.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. II, pp. 512, 513.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God*, pp. 198, 199.

<sup>4</sup> L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 503.

beseeking him to receive (2 Cor. 5:20). He is given no assurance that his prayer will be answered. He is really being told that the condition of salvation is prayer instead of faith.

The one verse which seems to teach that saving faith is the gift of God is Ephesians 2:8. But a careful study of this verse and its context shows clearly that it is salvation which is the gift of God. The Wycliffe Bible Commentary gives this explanation: "The word *that* refers not to grace or to faith, but to the whole act of salvation."<sup>5</sup> This is also the interpretation of Calvin, Meyer, Ellicott, Alford, Eadie, and others. The Greek text favors this meaning because the relative pronoun *that* (τοῦτο) is neuter while the word *faith* (πίστις) is feminine. In addition the whole context, especially verse 9, makes clear that the issue is salvation by grace opposed to the ever-present error of salvation by works. The same conclusion is reached by the grammarian J. Harold Greenlee.<sup>6</sup>

Sir Robert Anderson's footnote on Ephesians 2:8 is well stated: "Eph. 2:8. 'The gift of God' here is *salvation by grace through faith*. Not the faith itself. 'This is precluded,' as Alford remarks, 'by the manifestly parallel clauses "not of yourself," and "not of works," the latter of which would be irrelevant as asserted of *faith*.' It is still more definitely precluded, he might have added, by the character of the passage. It is *given* to us to believe on Christ, just in the same sense in which it is given to some 'also to suffer for His sake' (Phil. 1:29). But the statement in Ephesians is *doctrinal*, and in that sense the assertion that faith is a gift, or indeed that it is a distinct entity at all, is sheer error. This matter is sometimes represented as though God gave faith to the sinner first, and then, on the sinner's bringing Him the faith, went on and gave him salvation! Just as though a baker, refusing to supply empty-handed applicants, should first dispense to each the price of a loaf, and then, in return for the money from his own till, serve out the bread! To answer fully such a vagary as this would be to rewrite the foregoing chapter. Suffice it, therefore, to point out that to read the text as though faith were the gift, is to destroy not only the meaning of verse 9, but the force of the whole passage."<sup>7</sup>

There are those who agree that Ephesians 2:8 does not prove that saving faith is the gift of God, but they believe the doctrine is taught by other passages, such as: Acts 5:31; 11:18; Phil. 1:29; 3:9; Romans 12:3; 2 Peter 1:1; 2 Timothy 2:25; and John 6:44–45. A careful look at these verses yields no proof that faith or repentance, as a synonym for faith, are special gifts of God.

"Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins" (Acts 5:31). If repentance in this verse refers to a special

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<sup>5</sup> The Wycliffe Bible Commentary, p. 1306.

<sup>6</sup> J. Harold Greenlee, *A Concise Exegetical Grammar of the New Testament Greek*, p. 77.

<sup>7</sup> Sir Robert Anderson, *The Gospel and Its Ministry*, footnote, p. 54.

gift for salvation, then all Israel would be saved. It is evident that the reference is to God's general offer of repentance, which most of the Jews rejected. The same explanation applies to Acts 11:18 where the Gentiles are in view.

"For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake" (Phil. 1:29). Sir Robert Anderson's comment on this verse has been noted: "It is given to us to believe on Christ, just in the same sense in which it is given to some 'also to suffer for his sake.'"<sup>8</sup>

"And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith" (Phil. 3:9). It would be a strange and strained interpretation of this verse to make "the faith of Christ" refer to a gift of faith from Christ, which Paul then exercised as his own in order to receive the righteousness of God. The ASV renders the phrase "through faith in Christ." Even if the AV rendering is accepted, the expression clearly refers to the gospel as centered in Christ, and not to the manner in which Paul obtained his personal faith.

"For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith" (Rom. 12:3). The novice in Bible study would recognize that this section of Romans deals with the exercise of faith with the gifts for service (cf. Rom. 12:6) and has nothing to do with saving faith.

"Simon Peter, a servant and an apostle of Jesus Christ, to them that have obtained like precious faith with us through the righteousness of God and our Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 1:1). Here Peter states that believers have "obtained" their faith, but he does not say how it was obtained. To use such a verse to prove that saving faith is a special gift of God is only to show how desperate the advocates of this theory are for Scriptural proof.

"In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth" (2 Tim. 2:25). The gift of repentance of this verse is clearly to recover members of the church out of the snare of Satan, and has nothing to do with saving faith. Even this gift is not an unqualified sovereign bestowal because it is dependent on the instruction of Timothy and the co-operation of the one ensnared, as the context (vs. 26) indicates.

"No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me" (John 6:44–

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

45). It should be noted, first of all, that these verses do not say that saving faith is the gift of God. This is an assumption based on other assumptions. The method of obtaining faith is by hearing and learning of the Father. This is in harmony with Romans 10:17. Later the Lord explained his strong statement by the simple proposition that some could not come to him because of their unbelief (vss. 64–65), not because they did not receive a gift of faith. Some could not believe because they were interested in free bread and board, but not in the true bread from heaven. The sovereignty of God in salvation is a profound mystery that has its place in theology, but it need not be invoked to explain a problem which the Lord Himself explains in a far simpler way. The moral state of the enemies of Christ precluded their coming to the Father or Christ. The same situation is seen and clearly explained in John 5:44: "How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only?"

In the Bible there is no clear and dogmatic statement that saving faith is a gift of God. On the other hand, the Bible clearly states the way in which faith is obtained: "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17). The Scriptures speak of saving faith as "thy faith" (Luke 7:50), "his faith" (Rom. 4:5), and "their faith" (Matt. 9:2); but never as the faith of God."

It can be agreed that saving faith is the gift of God in the broad sense in which all things come from God (1 Cor. 4:7; Rom. 11:35, 36). However, this is entirely different from the position that an unsaved person cannot believe until he first receives a special gift of faith from God. Such a doctrine is opposed by the "whosoever" passages of the Bible, and by passages which beseech the sinner to be saved (i.e., John 3:16; 2 Cor. 5:20).

But it is argued that if the sinner has sufficient ability to hear the Word of God and be saved, then salvation is by works, or partly by works. Not at all! "Faith is no more than an activity of reception contributing nothing to that which it receives."<sup>9</sup>

Machen, himself a Calvinist, agrees emphatically that faith is not a kind of good work: "The faith of man, rightly conceived, can never stand in opposition to the completeness with which salvation depends upon God: it can never mean that man does part while God merely does the rest; for the simple reason that faith consists not in doing something but in receiving something."<sup>10</sup>

A gift from a good man to a beggar does not cease to be a gift because the beggar stretches forth his hand to receive it.

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<sup>9</sup> J. I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, p. 172.

<sup>10</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *What Is Faith*, p. 172.

On the other hand, it is the hyper-Calvinist who is open to the charge of teaching salvation by works. Prayer *is doing something*, and the man who prays hard and gets saved could justly believe that he had made his contribution to the plan of salvation. Those who deny the sinner the ability to believe end by imputing to him the impossible and unscriptural ability to find God through pious works.

Calvin did teach that faith is a gift of God, but his conclusion was not based on Ephesians 2:8. Contrary to popular opinion, Arminius also believed that justifying faith is the gift of God. He said: "Faith is the effect of God illuminating the mind and sealing the heart, and it is his mere gift."<sup>11</sup> However, he believed that God bestows sufficient grace upon all men to believe if they will. Thus he held a position in harmony with a sincere proclamation of the gospel to all men. But did not both Calvin and Arminius go beyond the authority of the Bible in teaching that saving faith is a special gift of God?

Many passages, and whole books of the New Testament, are written to prove salvation is a gift of God and not the reward of good works. But where are the passages to prove saving faith is the gift of God? Is not this theory a deduction from the doctrine of election rather than an induction from the teaching of the Word?

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<sup>11</sup> *The Writings of Arminius*, I, 384.