

APPENDIX A



OBEDIENCE OF FAITH

Two passages seem to contradict the conclusion that faith is passive and not the cause of any change in behavior. These texts are:

Romans 1:5-6

Through whom [Jesus Christ our Lord] we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the *obedience of faith* among all the Gentiles for His name's sake, among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ (italics added).

Romans 16:25-27

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been make known to all the nations, leading to *obedience of faith*; to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen (italics added).

HOLD FAST

In Romans 1:5 and 16:26 Paul discussed an “obedience of faith.” Some understand these passages to teach that faith produces obedience. If so, faith would be active and the force behind behavioral change. So, do these texts actually contradict our conclusion that faith is passive? If not, what is the solution?

There are, in fact, three possible ways to understand “obedience of faith,” determined by faith’s grammatical form in the original language, as revealed in the following Chart, *Three Interpretations*.¹

THREE INTERPRETATIONS “Obedience of Faith”	
Form “of Faith”	Interpretation
1. Subjective ²	<i>Faith produces obedience</i>
2. Objective ³	<i>Body of doctrine to be obeyed</i>
3. Apposition ⁴	<i>Reception of the gospel message</i>

Position One

This view, that obedience is caused by faith, is widely held. In support of this view, John MacArthur writes, “True faith is *never seen as passive*—it is always obedient?”⁵ Appealing to John 3:36 as a proof text for Romans 1:5 and 16:26, MacArthur states, “Clearly, the biblical concept of faith is inseparable from obedience. ‘Believe’ is synonymous with ‘obey’ in John 3:36: ‘He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life.’”⁶ As a result, he writes, “Thus the test of true faith is this: does it produce obedience? If not, it is not saving faith. Disobedience is unbelief. *Real faith obeys*.”⁷ From this point of view, *obedience*

APPENDIX A

of faith means that *faith produces obedience*. Faith is then not only the source of obedience but it is active by nature and is the cause of obedience.

However, MacArthur fails to properly account for the parallel within John 3:36, which follows the similar parallel found in John 3:15-18. As the Apostle John penned this chapter, would it not seem strange that similar parallels are altered seventeen verses later? Eternal life is the result of “believing” in verse 16 (“whoever believes...has eternal life”) and in verse 36 (“who believes...has eternal life”). On the other hand, judgment is the result of “disbelieving” in verse 18 (“who *does not believe* has been judged”) but of “disobeying” in verse 36 (“who *does not obey*...wrath of God abides on him”). Shouldn’t correlating “disbelieving” (v. 18) with “disobeying” (v. 36) raise a question in the mind of any student of the Word?

In fact the word translated “disobeying” in verse 36 can be translated either “disobeying” or “disbelieving.” Examples of this variable translation are found in Acts 14:2 (“But the Jews who *disbelieved* or *disobeyed*”), Acts 19:9 (“when some were becoming hardened and *disobeying* or *disbelieving*”), and 1 Peter 2:7 (“This precious value, then, is for you who believe. But for those who *disbelieve* or *disobey*”). In each case disbelieving, rather than disobeying, is the preferred translation which is also true in John 3:36.⁸ Obviously the contextual parallels within John 3 would serve to support the translation “disbelieve” in both verse 16 and verse 36. A preferred translation, then, for John 3:36 is “He who believes in the Son has eternal life, but he who *does not believe* the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him” (italics added). For MacArthur to confuse “disbelieving” with behavior (“disobeying”) is inexcusable. Realizing that belief is not active by nature is of critical importance to understanding the relationship of faith and obedience. Faith is the *basis for* obedience, but surely *not the cause of* obedience. Conclusion: the first position cannot be supported.

HOLD FAST

Position Two

Obedience, which conforms to “the Faith,” assumes that scriptural teachings are “The Faith” and are the “body of doctrine that one is to obey.”⁹ When faith is so noted by a definite article “the,” it is customarily understood to represent “the body of apostolic truth.”¹⁰ However, this second position is typically rejected by commentators because the definite article does not precede faith in either Romans 1:5 or Romans 16:26. As a result, the second position must be discarded.

Position Three

Obedience, which is equal to the reception of the saving message, points to the context of the book of Romans. The first text (Rom. 1:5) is found in the introductory section of Romans and concerns Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles. Paul wrote, “through whom [Christ] we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles.” Then in the benediction, the closing section (Rom. 16:26), Paul wrote, “but now [Christ] is manifested and . . . has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith.” In between these two bookends, Paul clearly and emphatically taught that faith and works are diametrically opposite concepts. “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law,” Paul penned in Romans 3:28. And again in Romans 4:2, “For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God,” is followed with “But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness” (v. 5). The introduction and the benediction sections summarize Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles, bringing salvation by grace (God’s action) through faith (man’s reliance on Christ). Contextually, obedience in 1:5 and 16:26 does not refer to obedient works produced by faith. Rather, “obedience of faith” means receiving the saving message.¹¹

APPENDIX A

Obedience here is similar to its use in Matthew 7:21, which states that entrance into heaven is for the one “who *does* the will of My Father who is in heaven” (italics added). And in John 6:40, the Father’s will is explained. “For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and *believes* in Him will have eternal life; and I Myself will raise him up on the last day” (italics added). It should be concluded from these texts that “the will of the Father is to believe in His Son whom He sent.”¹² Obedience to the Father’s will is to receive the gospel message by faith. These and other passages harmonize to support that “obedience of faith” concerns the reception of the gospel message. For example, following the necessity of a preacher being sent so that the gospel could be heard and then believed (Rom. 10:13-15), verse 16 continues, “However, they did not all heed the good news [i.e., *obey the gospel*]; for Isaiah says, ‘LORD, who has *believed* our report?’” (italics added). This text indicates that *to believe* and *to obey the gospel* are synonymous.

In another passage Paul addresses the judgment of God on unbelievers who afflict God’s people. God will be “dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not *obey the gospel* of our Lord Jesus” (2 Thess. 1:8; italics added). Here not obeying the gospel results in receiving retribution. Likewise in Acts 6:7, Luke wrote that “the word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming *obedient to the faith*” (italics added). Each of these verses demonstrates that the expression “obedience of faith” refers to receiving the saving message.

Conclusion

So, what do we do with the references to *obedience of faith* found in Romans? It seems best to understand Romans 1:5 and 16:26 as referring to faith in the gospel message.

HOLD FAST

Appendix A, NOTES

1. Bob Wilkin, “The Obedience Which Is Faith—Roman 1:5 and 16:26,” *Grace In Focus*, Grace Evangelical Society, July/Aug, 1993; Bob Wilkin, “Obedience to the Faith—Roman 1:5,” *Grace In Focus*, Grace Evangelical Society, Nov/Dec, 1995; Rene A. Lopez, *Romans Unlocked* (Springfield, IL: 21st Century Press, 2005), pp. 33-34; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 51-52.
2. H.E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto: The Macmillan Company, 1955), p. 78.
“Obedience (noun) *of* (no preposition) faith (noun in genitive form)” in *Option One* is taken as a subjective genitive. Dana and Mantey provide the following insight:
The *Subjective Genitive*. We have the subjective genitive when the noun in the genitive *produces* the action, being therefore related *as subject* to the verbal idea of the noun modified (*italics his*).
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79.
“Obedience (noun) *of* (no preposition) faith (noun in genitive form)” in *Option Two* is taken as an objective genitive. Dana and Mantey provide the following insight:
The *Objective Genitive*. We have this construction when the noun in the genitive *receives* the action, being thus related *as object* to the verbal idea contained in the noun modified (*italics his*).
4. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
“Obedience (noun) *of* (no preposition) faith (noun in genitive form)” in *Option Three* is taken as a genitive of apposition. Dana and Mantey provide the following insight:
The *Genitive of Apposition*. A noun which designates an object in an individual or particular sense may be used in the genitive with another noun which designates the same thing in a general sense (*italics his*).
5. John F. MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), p. 32 (*italics added*).
6. *Ibid.*, p. 174.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 47 (*italics added*).

APPENDIX A

8. Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 99.

Arndt and Gingrich's Note #3 concerning "to disobey, to be disobedient" (ἀπειθεῖν) states, "Since in the view of the early Christians, the supreme disobedience was a refusal to believe their gospel... This sense, though greatly disputed... seems most probable in J 3:36; Ac 14:2; 19:9; Rom 15:31...."

9. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 52.
10. Lopez, *Romans Unlocked*, p. 34.
11. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 52.
12. Robert N. Wilkin, ed., *The Grace New Testament Commentary* (Denton, TX: GES, 2010), Vol. 1, p. 396.

