

From the June 4, 2010 Issue

## **The Faith of Christ or Faith in Christ?**

Where does your right relationship with God come from? Does the Father forgive you and put you in a right relationship with himself because you believe in Jesus? If you listen to Evangelical Christians in America you will answer “yes” to this second question. American Evangelicalism says in essence: *You are born into this world in a messed up relationship with God. The way to fix this is to believe in Jesus. The moment you believe in Jesus God’s attitude toward you is changed. He forgives and adopts you as his child.*

How can we have lived so long without seeing that this is a message of works and legalism? If it is my faith in Jesus that makes me right with God then I am my own savior. My work at believing and having faith determines my standing with my Father in heaven. In fact, what do we even need Jesus for? If my salvation rests on my faith in God then let me just have faith that God is real and not worry about Jesus. Of course, this is where this theology becomes most sinister. The reason that Jesus exists in this theology is to appease the Father’s wrath and change him from angry to forgiving. In this theology Jesus changes a sinful God, not a sinful humanity.

In contrast to this theology of faith *in* Christ would be a theology of the faith *of* Christ. To speak of the faith *of* Christ is to say that the Son of the Father has been faithful to the Father from within his human nature as the man Jesus. That means that we have been brought into right relationship with the Father by Jesus’ faith and therefore we do not save ourselves. Jesus has saved us by having faith for us, and in us, when we cannot have faith ourselves. In this theology Jesus is vitally necessary. In this theology of the faith *of* Christ we are saying that Jesus must exist in order for faith itself to exist, in order for human beings to be in a right relationship with the Father, and in order for humanity to ever think or speak in a faithful way.

So what does the Bible say? Does the Scripture tell us that we are forgiven because of *our faith in* Christ or because of *the faith of Christ*?

Unfortunately, it depends on which English translation you are using. In the New International Version (NIV) the phrase “faith in Christ” appears 11 times and the phrase “faith of Christ” does not appear at all. However, in 4 of the places where the NIV says “faith in Christ” the King James Version (KJV) translates the phrase as “faith of Christ”. In Romans 3:22, Galatians 2:16 and 3:22, and in Philippians 3:9 the KJV says that we have been made right/justified/saved by the faith *of* Christ. In these same verses the NIV says we are saved by our faith *in* Christ.

What’s the reason for the difference in translation? To put it in simple terms, the Greek language of the New Testament (NT) era was not quite as precise in its vocabulary as English is today. The way prepositional phrases were constructed in NT Greek means that they are sometimes open to interpretation. The reader sometimes has to determine based on the vocabulary, the context of the sentence, and the author’s general theme, whether a prepositional phrase should be rendered in English as “in” or “of”. Modern translators have many different methods for making this determination, and there is no doubt that they are conscientious and careful in their decision making. The translators of the NIV did not take lightly their decision to break with the KJV on these or other translation issues. However, it is also true that any of us as translators will be

influenced by the theology we have already believed before we come to translate the Greek text. In the case of the NIV, the translators brought to their task their already firmly held convictions as Evangelicals. In contrast, the translators of the KJV were influenced by the theology of their times – the theology of the Protestant Reformation in England.

So how do we decide which translation we should go with? I believe we should always interpret – and translate – the Scripture in the way that is the most Christ-centered and the most Trinitarian.

It is far more Christ-centered to speak of the “faith of Christ” making us right with the Father. We know that the Father destined humanity for adoption as his children *through Jesus Christ* (Eph. 1:5). Therefore, it makes sense that it would be through Jesus’ faith shared with us that our salvation would be accomplished (Eph. 2:8.) This approach is also far more faithful to the Trinity. The Son has always had faith in the Father. When the Son became human he included humanity in that faith relationship with the Father. What we are experiencing in our lives with regard to faith is the Triune Life of the Father and Son being shared with us through the Holy Spirit. The Trinity is faith. We don’t bring our faith to the Trinity, the Trinity, through Jesus Christ, brings its faith to us.

Therefore, if there are places in Scripture that may be translated “faith of Christ” or “faith in Christ” then we should translate them “faith of Christ” because that translation is more Christ-centered and more faithful to who God is in his Triune nature. This brings us to what is really interesting about the two ways of translating the Greek: there are at least 4 places in Paul’s writing that should be translated “faith of Christ.” And all 4 of these times Paul is describing the actual mechanics of *how we are saved and made right with the Father*.

So, when Paul wanted to talk about *how* we are saved he said we are saved by the “faith of Christ.” When he wanted to talk whether we believe that we have been saved by the faith of Christ he talked about our “faith in Christ.” An honest evaluation of Paul’s thought, in the Greek, shows that Paul never described salvation as something that happens when people have faith in Christ. He always talked about salvation as something that has happened because of the faith of Christ and something that we participate in by having faith *in the faith of Christ*.

This is quite clear in the KJV translation of Galatians 2:16:

*Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.*

Think about what Paul is saying here. He says: *We know that humanity is justified by the faith of Christ. Therefore, we have believed in this faith that Christ has for us. And as a result we are made right by the faith of Christ.*

This is a far cry from the theology that most of us have been raised on. The Bible says that our faith is sandwiched in the middle of Jesus’ faith and our faith can only ever be a faith in Jesus’ faith.

What we are called to believe is not that Jesus is a real person and God will love us if we believe that. We are called to believe that Jesus is having faith for us, even when we cannot have faith, and to rest all our hope of the promise of the Father’s love in the faithfulness of Jesus to us.

~ Jonathan Stepp