

“Faith” and “Faithfulness”

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“Faith and obedience are not antithetical. They belong exactly together. Indeed, very often the word ‘faith’ itself could properly be translated as ‘faithfulness’, which makes the point just as well.”

N.T. WRIGHT,
*What Saint Paul
Really Said*, p. 160

The Greek word *pistis* can mean, in English translation, both “faith” and “faithfulness”; no one disputes that fact (for the latter, see Rom. 3:3). N.T. Wright, however, takes two steps that cannot be fairly evaluated without understanding how they are integrated into his broader understanding of how the Bible fits together. First, in the handful of instances where our English translations have “faith in Jesus Christ” or “faith in Christ” or the like (Rom. 3:22, 26; Gal. 2:16; 3:22; Phil. 3:9), expressions in which Christ is the object of our faith, in every instance Wright takes the expression to mean “faithfulness of Jesus Christ” or its equivalent. In other words, what is at issue is the faithfulness that Jesus Christ exercised by being the faithful Israelite, doing His Father’s will and going to the cross, not the faith that Jews and Gentiles alike exercise, with Jesus Himself as faith’s object. At the level of mere grammar, the Greek expression (which does not use prepositions akin to English “in” or “of”) could be read either way. Second, in

some instances Wright thinks that when Paul speaks of the “faith” of Christians, he is really talking about their “faithfulness,” more-or-less equivalent to their obedience. What shall we make of these steps?

First, in defense of Wright, it is important to recognize that he does not deny that human beings must place their faith in Christ. Rather, he argues that in some passages what is at issue is not human faith in Christ but either human faithfulness or the faithfulness of Jesus Christ Himself. Thus Romans 3:22, as he understands it, asserts that the righteousness of God that comes by (either) “faith in Christ” or “the faithfulness of Christ” is in any case for all who believe.

Second, although the theme of Jesus being faithful and obedient to His heavenly Father is quite a strong one in the New Testament (especially in John and Hebrews, but witness also Phil 2:5–11; Gethsemane in the Synoptics), it is far from obvious that the theme is found in the half-dozen “faith/faithfulness of Jesus Christ” passages. The issues, frankly, are

complex. A fair reading of the contexts of these passages shows that wherever the verb “to believe” is used, the object is invariably Jesus or the gospel; it would take extraordinary evidence to hold that the cognate noun “faith” is used in some different way. Wright thinks that the evidence is extraordinary — especially the way he reads the Bible’s storyline. He understands the high point of salvation to turn on God’s “righteousness” (more-or-less God’s “covenant faithfulness”) in sending Jesus to function as the faithful Israelite who goes to the cross and is vindicated by His Father, such that all who are in union with Jesus, Jews and Gentiles alike, are constituted God’s covenant people. The kindest assessment of this understanding of biblical theology — and shouldn’t all of us want to be kind in assessing others? — is that it is not so much wrong as guilty of putting emphasis in the wrong place. Wright concedes that Christ on the cross deals at some level or other with sin, righteousness, guilt, condemnation, and holiness, but for him these are relatively minor themes compared with the controlling themes of God’s faithfulness to the covenant and of Christ’s obedient faithfulness to His role as the ideal Israelite. In the insightful assessment of Douglas J. Moo, Wright backgrounds what the New Testament foregrounds, and foregrounds what the New Testament backgrounds.

Third, Wright’s penchant for finding “faithfulness” instead of “faith” seriously misses the point in many

Pauline passages. For instance, consider Abraham as described in Romans 4. Many Jewish documents of the time argue that Abraham received many great gifts from God — he became father of many nations, was called the friend of God, had his prayers answered — precisely because he was found to be faithful (for example, Sir. 44:19–20; 1 Macc. 2:52; Jub. 19:8–9). By contrast, when Paul in Romans 4:3 quotes Genesis 15:6 (“Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”), the apostle sees that God justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5). In dominant Jewish understanding, God’s justifying of Abraham is entirely appropriate: Abraham deserved it, for he was “faithful.” In Paul’s understanding,

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God’s justifying of Abraham is in defiance of Abraham’s ungodliness. Small wonder: for Paul, the justification of sinners turns absolutely on Christ crucified.

Mistakes of this sort accumulate in Wright’s reading of Paul until one fears the bishop is leading his flock astray. ✦

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