

# Is Faith a Gift of God?

## Ephesians 2:8 Reconsidered

by Gary L. Nebeker

---

From various theological quarters it has been argued that the NT teaches that saving faith is a gift of God. One of the favorite passages cited in this connection is Ephesians 2:8: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God" (NASB).

From a cursory reading of this verse, it appears that the relative pronoun *that* (v 8b) has *faith* (v 8a) as its grammatical antecedent. However, in its Greek construction *that* is a demonstrative pronoun with adverbial force used in an explanatory phrase. This particular construction uses a fixed neuter singular pronoun (*that*) which refers neither to faith, which is feminine in Greek, nor to any immediate word which follows. (See Blass, Debrunner, Funk, 132, 2.) What all this means is that the little phrase *and that* (*kai touto* in Greek) explains that salvation is of God's grace and not of human effort. Understood accordingly, Ephesians 2:8 could well be translated: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, that is to say, not of yourselves, it is the gift of God."

Moreover, there is a parallelism between *not of yourselves* in v 8b and *not of works* in v 9. This parallelism serves as a commentary to v 8a ("For by grace you have been saved through faith") which speaks of salvation in its entirety. It is difficult to see how *faith*, if it is the gift of God, harmonizes with *not of works* of v 9. We must conclude, then, that in Ephesians 2:8 *salvation* is the gift of God.

Not only are there exegetical problems with saving faith as a gift of God, there are theological problems as well.

First, there is the problem of describing faith as an infused or transmitted substance. Faith is not analogous to a current of electricity that passes through a conduit and results in a release of mechanical energy. Neither is faith to be likened to water sprinkled upon a seed planted in potted soil. These illustrations of faith confuse the *instrument* of salvation, faith, with the *agent* of salvation, the Holy Spirit. It should instead be suggested that faith is a human response, i.e., a Spirit-prompted conviction of the truth of the redemptive merits of Christ.

Second, the concept of infused faith for salvation bears a marked resemblance to the sacramentalism of the Roman Catholic Church. That is to say, faith becomes a transmitted and efficacious element which God gives to men for salvation. Again, it must be emphasized that faith is not a substance, but a human response prompted by the Holy Spirit.

Third, if faith is a gift, then men no longer bear the responsibility to believe the Gospel. The term *believe* becomes an equivocal expression if regeneration occurs before faith (i.e., the view of those who consider faith to be a gift of God).

Fourth and finally, an infused idea of faith engenders a less-than-balanced view of sanctification, i.e., victory in the spiritual life is viewed as a virtual guarantee. If God gives believers faith to live the Christian life, then the difficult aspects of progressive holiness commanded in Scripture tend to be soft-pedaled.

To conclude, it is inaccurate to suggest that God gives men a special gift of faith so that they may be saved and subsequently sanctified. Instead, God has sent His Holy Spirit into the world to convict men of sin and to enlighten darkened and depraved minds to the saving truths contained in Scripture (John 16:8; Rom 10:17; Eph 3:9). When one is regenerated, it is yieldedness to the filling ministry of the Holy Spirit, not infused faith, that results in good works. From Ephesians 2:8 and the collective whole of NT data, God is presented as the gracious initiator who, through His Holy Spirit, woos and wins men to Himself. Man is depicted as the responder who, in his spiritually destitute state, is convicted and enlightened by the Holy Spirit, and answers in simple faith to the promises of the Gospel. In view of such exquisite grace, it is only fitting to contend that salvation is a superlative expression of divine favor, yea, even a *gift of God!*

---