

## SYSTEMS OF LAW AND FAITH

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A fellow-traveler, total stranger, once told me of some odd people he had met who thought they could “save themselves”. I asked, “*From this untoward generation?*” (Acts 2:40). He was a bit flustered, but explained, “I mean, they thought they could work out their own salvation.” To this I added, “*with fear and trembling*” (Phil. 2:12). All he could say was, “You must be one of them.” When we try to improve on God’s way of saying things, we get into trouble. God can save by “grace” and at the same time, call upon man to “obey the gospel”. And incongruity we may think we find here is in our thinking, *not* in God’s.

When Cled E. Wallace wrote the preface for K. C. Moser’s book, *The Way of Salvation*, he accurately described the author’s aim as being that of demonstrating “the utter futility of human reliance on any system of legal justification.” He wrote, “It is argued in a most convincing fashion that no act performed by man, whether it be dipping in water or any other act, can be relied on for salvation which is not related to Jesus Christ as the one and only Savior...” To this I must agree. Apparently brother Moser felt that some brethren of the thirties were placing such stress upon the acts of obedience, per se, that they were neglecting that which gave meaning to their obedience—and equally important—that which God did to be both “just and the justifier” of imperfect man. Moser’s aim was noble, and if one will remember his definitions (Ex.: “works” is “an effort on man’s part to save himself”) and apply them throughout, many of his seemingly shocking statements can be explained. But in the author’s zeal to erase obedience from the picture of salvation he equates “obedience” with “works”, and rules out both as “human righteousness”. (“Indeed, it seems to be difficult even at the present time for many to grasp the idea of a righteousness that does not depend upon human effort.” p. 115) Legal justification and humble efforts on man’s part to obey the Lord are not one and the same thing. Moser, and brethren of today, would be less “misunderstood” if they would make a more clear distinction here.

When Paul contrasted “*law*” and “*faith*” (Rom. 3:20-22), he was not negating the place of divine authority, nor of man’s need to obey. “*Do we then make void law through (the) faith? God forbid: yea, we establish law.*” (Rom. 3:31) (Study footnotes in American Standard, or consult Greek text.) The futility of seeking justification by *any* system of law (i.e., law *alone*) has been demonstrated through lengthy arguments to show that “*all have sinned*” (Rom. 1:18-3:23). The point is that *forgiveness, mercy*, must be sought—and this is found in the self-sacrificing offering of Jesus Christ for sinful man (Rom. 3:24-26; 5:8-9). *The law* (of Moses) was under consideration only as prime example of a *system of law*. As “*law*” it made sin the more apparent and pointed up the need for actual forgiveness. It also bore witness to the coming Messiah (3:21-f) and justification through (using logical comparison) the *system of faith*. “*Law*” and “*faith*” are used here as general terms that characterize the two systems (John 1:17 is a good example of such

use of terms. There is “*law*” under Christ, just as there was “*truth*” under Moses; but this contrast of terms helps us to understand contrasting *systems*).

The same point is made to the Galatians (3:10-12) as Paul writes, “*For as many as are of the works of law* (i.e., seek justification via law-RT) *are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is everyone that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them. But that no man is justified by law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith. And the law is not of faith: but, The man that doeth them shall live in them.*” To be “*justified*” means to be pronounced (in justice) “free from guilt”. Under law and law alone, the only way one could be “free from guilt” was to “*do...all*”—the key words in the Galatian passage. If one perfectly kept whatever law he was under, *never* “missed the mark”, then he would stand justified, and that by merit. Here is the crux of the matter. At no point in the Roman or Galatian arguments does Paul ridicule humble, submissive obedience—he doesn’t call such “human righteousness” or “pulling up by one’s own boot-straps”. He urges obedience (Rom. 2:6-10). The “*righteousness of God*” (Rom. 10:3) must be known and submitted to; the gospel must be heard—in the sense of obeyed (10:16). But Paul recognized man’s failure to *perfectly* keep *any* law, and on this basis extolled the blessings offered us in the crucified Savior. (He became a “*curse*” for us, by hanging on a tree—Gal. 3:13)

People under the Law of Moses were not “*under the curse*” because there were laws to be obeyed, nor because the laws were numerous and complicated. But the Old Covenant, being a system of “*law*”, offered justification only on the basis of *perfect law keeping*; there was no means of “*forgiveness*” as yet, for the perfect sacrifice had not been offered. If one looks to the New Covenant as another system of law, and that alone, the curse remains. The teachings of Jesus raised the standards rather than lowered them. Jesus said it was not enough to refrain from killing; one must not be angry without cause (Matt. 5:21-22). It was not enough to refrain from the act of adultery; but “*whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart*” (5:28). I believe this is not so much a *change* in commands, as an opening to us of their true meaning—but it is clear that if *perfect law-keeping* under Moses was impossible, it is, under Christ, the more so. Thanking God for Jesus Christ (Rom. 7:25), is not Paul’s expression of thanks for a different list or code of laws, but Paul’s thanks that God sent His own Son *as an offering for sin* (study Rom. 8:3; 2 Cor. 5:21).

With such truths in mind, read Rom. 4. When Paul says, “*If Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory...*” he refers to *perfect* works, not the humble efforts at obedience which Christ requires of all who would be saved. Again, (vv. 4-5), “*to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt.*” “*Worketh*” (in context) refers to seeking justification by perfect obedience—“free of guilt” because no sin, no guilt, was there. To make this say “to him that obeys the Lord in baptism” or some like matter, is to completely ignore the context and pervert the passage. The “*faith*” of v. 5, is that trust in Jesus Christ which we must manifest by looking to Him (according to His instructions) for the forgiveness of our sins. Verse 6 and following explain: God can

account a man acceptable “*without works*” (i.e., in the absence of *perfect* obedience) and this is done on the basis of (vv. 7-8) *forgiveness*. Since Christ died for the sins of the world, God can be both *just* (fairly exacting penalty of sin) and the *justifier* “*of him which believeth in Jesus*” (Rom. 3:25-26).

Now, what is embraced in the word “*faith*”? Moser says that faith is a “natural” requirement, and repentance is a “natural” requirement; and he labors to show that confession and baptism are really just expressions of repentance and faith, so they cannot be called “works” or “human righteousness”. His “natural” arguments are profusely scattered throughout the book and seem to me to be quite arbitrary. What determines “natural”? Apparently his concept of what is necessary to sustain salvation by “grace and faith”. I believe these need no such subjective reasoning. Christianity is a system of grace, being based upon the love and mercy of God; and it is a system of faith because the individual benefits only as he trusts in Christ as Savior. The scriptural reasoning that makes baptism an “expression of faith” *will make all acceptable obedience expressions of faith*. All “doing” to be acceptable, must come from a humble, submissive heart, conscious of and dependent upon Jesus Christ as Savior. The act, per se, is not the savior. *I believe this is what Moser really wants to say*, but his views of the nature of man, direct indwelling and influence of the Holy Spirit, and efforts to maintain a quasi-faith-only atmosphere, lead him through pages of specious writing.

He says,

“Man’s faith receives God’s grace. Then why is some other act than faith made a condition of salvation? Where is the place for it? What can it do? Has chaos joined hands with order? Have compatible and the incompatible found fellowship?”

On the same page (p. 97)

“Grace and ‘faith’ are corrective terms. They are, so to speak, equations. If something is added to faith, does not the equation cease?...Grace calls for faith, but grace does not call for faith *plus*.”

Of course it seems to me that faith and the works of faith are also correlatives (See Gal. 5:6; 1 Thes. 1:3; Jas. 2:20-f). No doubt some brethren view obedience in a “legal justification” light. Preachers may have led them that way by terminology and illustrations employed in the battle with “faith only” adherents. Well, let’s do a better job of teaching. But building another “faith only” atmosphere, using Calvinistic terminology, is NOT the way to do a better teaching job.

Calvinistic reasoning runs like this, “If man must do something (respond, or obey) in order receive God’s blessings, then man’s deed is responsible for his salvation.” Answer: there is no saving power in the act itself, but when it is done in response to

divine command it is an act of faith and, yes, in this way each individual is responsible for his standing before God.

In turn, we ask the Calvinist, “Do you not say a man must believe in order to receive God’s blessings?” He answers, “God does not save *because* he believes—i.e., his faith does not *earn salvation*. Man only expresses his willingness to receive God’s blessings by believing.” And Paul says he expresses his willingness by an *obedient* faith!! But the strict Calvinist will dig a bit deeper. He will now say that *God gives faith to the elect*, it is not man’s doing at all. (They interpret Eph. 2:8 as saying “*faith*” is the gift of God.) And this brings us to the core of all true Calvinistic issues, viz., whether or not man has a *choice* in the matter of his salvation. I believe each man does have such a choice; Calvinists say either he never had true and absolute choice, or that having had it, this choice was lost when Adam chose to sin against God. Neither Moser, nor any current brethren of my knowledge, accept these extreme positions.

Surely we can teach the truth on salvation by grace through faith without adopting terminology and arguments which smack of such unwarranted theology. If we must correct our exegesis of the Roman letter, let us do it by studying the Roman letter—not by adopting the Calvin-tinted arguments of the commentaries and “*Present Truth*” or other current neo-Calvinistic literature.

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