

St. Paul on Faith

The topic of faith is prominent in St. Paul's writings. In addition, interpretations of the Apostle's teaching on faith were at the center of the controversies during the period known as the Reformation, issues that linger 400 years later. This led to Luther's battle cry, "faith alone" – *sola fide*. Faith is a vital element in understanding Paul's treatment of justification, that is, how do we become just in God's eyes?¹

The saint's extraordinary encounter with the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus flipped this zealot's upside down thinking right side up. Instead of relying on his strict observance of the Law (Phil 3:6, Gal 1:14), Paul now relied on faith in Jesus (Phil 3:7-8). Indeed, Christ became the goal of his existence:

"I press on," he wrote, "to make it [righteousness based on faith in Christ] my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own" (Phil 3:12).

Imbedded in this profound observation is St. Paul's keen understanding that God's amazing love is always personal and individual:

"I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved *me* and gave himself for *me*" (Gal 2:20).

Would that we would all so ardently embrace God's profoundly personal love for us!

Paul places two irreconcilable paths at the center of his message: one seeks to be justified before God by works of the Law; the other is founded on the unmerited gift of faith in Christ. By the Law, the Apostle meant the Torah according to the Pharisaic interpretation that Paul has once assiduously studied and made his own. It was a set of complex codes of conduct that included circumcision, dietary prescriptions, rules for the observance of the Sabbath, and ritual purity in general. These observances safeguarded the Hebrew people's social, cultural and religious identity as a barrier against the prevailing pagan culture.

Paul's initial reaction to Christianity was to view it as a threat to the Jewish identity. When he encountered the Risen Jesus, Paul recognized that the wall between Israel and the Gentiles was no longer necessary. Only Christ can protect men from the deceptive inroads of paganism, because he alone unites us with the one true God in a way that transcends the diversity of cultures. The observances of the Law were not only no longer needed; indeed, they had become an obstruction.

In his reflection on St. Paul Pope Benedict XVI made a statement that surprised many: "For this reason Luther's phrase: '*faith alone*' is true, if it is not opposed to faith in charity, in love. Faith is looking at Christ, entrusting oneself to Christ, being united to Christ, conformed to Christ, to his life. And the form, the life of Christ, is love; hence to believe is to conform to Christ and to enter into his love."² It is in this context that great missionary wrote to the Galatians:

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Saint Paul*, p. 78.

² *Saint Paul*, p. 82.

“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love” (Gal 5:6).

Pope Benedict XVI’s perceptive observation ignored the polemics of the Reformation and penetrated the heart of St. Paul’s understanding of faith. The faith that saves is never a mere intellectual acquiesce to truth, but the embrace of the God-man, Jesus Christ in the gift of faith. It is this dynamic communion with Christ, who is Love, which empowers us to live according to the Spirit (Gal 5:22-26), and not according to the flesh (Gal 5:19-21). True faith in Christ creates a life lived in charity.

The passages from Galatians need to be quoted here in its entirety:

“Now the works of the flesh are plain: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us have no self-conceit, no provoking of one another, no envy of one another” (Gal 5:19-26).

Pope Benedict XVI gives us this summary: “This faith, however, is not a thought, an opinion, an idea. This faith is communion with Christ, which the Lord gives to us, and which thus becomes life, becomes conformity with him. Or to use different words, faith, if it is true, if it is real, becomes love, becomes charity, is expressed in charity. A faith without charity, without this fruit, would not be true faith. It would be a dead faith.”³

What is the practical implementation to St. Paul’s understanding of faith to our daily lives? It is the lifetime challenge of living a life of committed self-sacrifice for others. Thus Pope Benedict XVI rightly proclaimed: “it is on this criterion that we shall be judged at the end of our lives”⁴ Every time the New Testament speaks about judgment it indicates that God will judge us on what we have done. Jesus goes so far as to make the measure of his love for us, the criteria of judging an authentic Christian. It’s a passage that strips away our façades and penetrates our hearts:

“A new commandment I give you that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:34-35).

The reason Christian love is so demanding is that it springs from Jesus’ total love and claims us to respond in kind, so we can no longer live for our self closed in on our own selfishness. So instead of love being opposed to faith, it demands faith as its starting point and it is its authentic expression.

³ *Saint Paul*, p. 84.

⁴ *Saint Paul*, pp. 85-86.

This leads to the sharp contrast between the robust faith in the Risen Christ that Paul boldly preached, a faith that empowered Jews and Gentiles to make the committed gift of themselves, and the vapid counterfeit of Christianity adhered to in the secular West that saps Christians of their meaning and vitality. The one leads to a life of purpose, joy and peace even amid the trials of life. The other leads to a smoldering anger and frustration in a lonely existence that seems devoid of meaning.

In the last chapter in the book that bears his name, Joshua gave the Hebrew people a challenge: serve the Lord or serve the false gods of the Amorites. Then he made his choice clear: “But as for me and my house we will serve the Lord” (Josh 24:15). Here we witness the dynamic power of authentic faith. Where is it found today? The answer is found in the lives of those men and women who have surrendered to the Risen Lord in faith.

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