

What Does The Phrase “Obedience of Faith” (Rom.1:5) Mean?

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“Through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the **obedience of faith** among all the Gentiles, for His name’s sake” (Rom.1:5 NASB, highlighted for emphasis).

“**Obedience of faith**” is a notable expression at the beginning and end of Romans (1:5; 16:26). This repetition is significant, serving as “bookends” in the most majestic piece of literature the Lord would ever commission His most prolific theologian – evangelist to write. In both instances Paul highlights his apostolic commission to make known the gospel to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles. His call was to evangelize primarily the Gentiles (Rom. 15:15-16). His goal is to bring about the obedience of faith for His name’s sake, that is, Jesus Christ will be honored and glorified.

What does “obedience of faith” (*hupakoē pisteos*) mean? Three different interpretations are possible:

1. Obedience to the faith - Taking *faith* here in an objective sense (grammatically objective genitive) as the body of truth or doctrine which Paul teaches; the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3). In this sense, obedience of faith means doctrinal commitment of believers. But when faith has this meaning, it is usually expressed with the definite article (“the faith” as in Rom.14:1). Though KJV and NKJV translate it as “obedience to the faith” (Rom.1:5), in the Greek text the word “faith” lacks the definite article. The context in Romans is not about “the faith” but about “faith” as trust or belief (1:8, 12, 16-17). The word faith (*pistis*) occurs forty times in Romans. Faith is the means by which we relate to God. It is the sole means by which we receive salvation. This is the primary meaning of *pistis* in Romans.

2. Obedience which is faith - This view interprets faith as an act of obedience. “Obedience of faith” is an expression defining saving faith. Obedience of faith means to obey the message of the gospel by believing. It is the obedience that leads to initial faith (as in Acts 6:7. See also Rom.10:16; 2 Thess.1:8). Obedience and faith are considered almost synonymous – obedience which is faith. William MacDonald favors this interpretation when he writes, “obedience of faith – that is, to obey the message of the gospel by repenting and believing on the Lord Jesus Christ” (*Believer’s Bible Commentary*, 1676). Saving faith is an act of obedience (grammatically the genitive might be epexegetic or genitive of equivalence, i.e., obedience which consists of faith). This is a fair understanding of the text. But Leon Morris rightly observes that “while faith and obedience go together, they are not identical. Why use two words for one meaning?But obedience is more than faith, and faith is more than obedience” (Leon Morris, *The Epistle To The Romans*, 50).

3. Obedience which springs from faith – This is obedience which faith demands (grammatically subjective genitive. For the possible grammatical nuances, see Leon Morris, *The Epistle To The Romans*, 49-50; Douglas Moo, *Romans 1-8, The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary*,

43-44; John Stott, *Romans*, 52-53). Saving faith results in obedience –obedience that results from faith; Justification leading to sanctification. Obedience is the fruit of faith. Faith alone justifies, but the faith that justifies is never alone. “So also faith by itself, if it does not have works is dead” (James 2:17). “By faith Abraham when he was called obeyed” (Hebrews 11:8). This is obedience of faith.

The NIV reading “to the obedience that comes from faith” favors the third option (NIV does an interpretive paraphrase than a translation). The NLT (New Living Translation) reading also favors this interpretation - “So that they will believe and obey Him.”

All three possible interpretations involve a reading of one’s theology into the text, at least to some extent. The first view, taking “faith” in an objective sense (“the faith”) may not be the best option. The second view is legitimate. **But the third view is preferable** in the overall context of Paul’s apostolic ministry. This interpretation also go well with the teaching of the New Testament in relation to faith and works (obedience). Faith produces obedience. This truth is powerfully portrayed in the great chapter on faith – Hebrews 11. Christ’s name is glorified among all the peoples of the world by means of the obedience of Christians which flows from their faith in Him. This is the great aim (the doxological purpose) of the gospel, Paul’s apostleship and our life. Everything is “for His name’s sake” (Rom.1:5).

Douglas Moo’s observation and insight are quite helpful in understanding this phrase:

“However, the subjective option places too much stress on postconversion teaching, the exegetical option too easily ignores the importance of this aspect of Paul’s ministry. Paul’s task was to call men and women to submission to the lordship of Christ (cf. 4b and 7b), a submission that began with conversion but which was to continue in a deepening, life-long commitment. This obedience to Christ as Lord is always closely related to faith, both as an initial, decisive step of faith and as a continuing “faith” relationship with Christ. In light of this, we understand the words *hupakoe* and *pisteos* to be mutually interpreting: obedience always involves faith, and faith always involves obedience. They should not be equated, compartmentalized or made into separate stages of Christian experience. Paul called men and women to a faith that was always inseparable from obedience – for the Savior in whom we believe is nothing less than our Lord – and to an obedience that could never be divorced from faith – for we can only obey Jesus as Lord when we have given ourselves to Him in faith. Viewed in this light, the phrase captures the full dimension of Paul’s apostolic task, a task that was not confined to initial evangelization but that included also the building up and firm establishment of churches” (*Romans 1-8, The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary*, 44-45).

MacArthur comments that “Although Paul does not use the definite article before **faith** in this passage, the idea is that of *the faith*, referring to the whole teaching of Scripture, especially the New Testament.....Affirmation of that faith leads to the practical, lived-out faithfulness without which a professed faith is nothing more than dead and useless (James 2:17, 20). Genuine faith is obedient faith. To call men to the obedience of faith is to fulfill the Great

Commission.....It is not that faith plus obedience equals salvation but that obedient faith equals salvation. True faith is verified in obedience. Obedient faith proves itself true, whereas disobedient faith proves itself false” (John MacArthur, *Romans 1-8, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, 24). It seems to me that MacArthur combines the first and the third views and sees the merit in both of them, while rejecting the second view.

The expression “obedience of faith” though appears to be simple, it is profound in its theological and practical implications. We should not ignore it as it was important to Paul in his proclamation of the gospel. We should also highly esteem its teaching. In an age of casual Christianity, superficial faith, and easy believism among evangelicals, the message this phrase conveys must be seriously heeded. In the name of free grace and faith alone, the teaching that a person can be saved at a moment in time, and then for the remainder of their life, live just the way they lived before they were saved, is far from what the Scripture teaches.

I whole heartedly agree with Swindoll’s simple explanation of the expression “obedience of faith.” “.....*the purpose of the gospel is to produce obedient faith (1:5).....*We are saved in order to surrender our lives to Christ (16:26). When you think of obedience, attach to it the synonym “submission.” Paul submitted everything to the will of God, from the time of his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus to the very end of his life” (Charles Swindoll, *Romans, Swindoll’s Living Insights New Testament Commentary*, 21).

Paul preached the Gospel not merely to bring people to conversion but also to bring about transformed lives that were consistently obedient to God. This is what the Great Commission is all about. Paul further illustrated this transformed life in a majestic description in Romans 12:1-2: “I urge you therefore, brethren by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”