

IS IT OUR FAITH IN CHRIST OR CHRIST'S FAITH IN US?

By David Burnfield

We're often told that we can't save ourselves and yet in order to be saved, those same people turn right around and tell us that we must take some sort of action.¹ And that 'action' is to have faith in Christ.

...nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus... (Gal 2:16 – NASB)

It's hard to see how Paul could be any clearer. To be justified, one must have faith *in* Jesus and therefore this is how most modern translations present this verse (i.e. NIV, NASB, NLT, ESV, etc.).

And while I do not doubt that we must have faith in Christ to be saved (although what constitutes "faith" might be up for debate), it is interesting that "an increasing number of NT scholars are arguing"² that the above passage should be translated as:

Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ... (Gal. 2:16 – KJV)

In other words, it's through the faith *of* Christ that we're justified, not our faith in Christ (See NET, ISV, and YLT).

What is the basis for the different interpretations of this passage? It comes down to how one interprets the Greek phrase, *pístis* [faith] *lēsoûs* [Jesus] *Christós* [Christ] which is found elsewhere in Paul's writings such as Rom. 3:22, 26; Gal. 3:22; Eph. 3:12; Phil. 3:9. The most popular rendering (i.e. *faith in Christ*) elects to take the objective genitive view³ while those that interpret it as

¹ I'm obviously referring to an Arminianist view and the idea of unlimited atonement. This statement does not apply to those who hold to the idea of a limited atonement whereby only God's elect will be saved.

² *The Net Bible*, First Edition (Biblical Studies Press, 2005), p. 2269 n. 23.

³ For a defense of the objective genitive view, see Moo, Douglas, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), pp. 224-225.

"*the faith of Christ*," takes the subjective genitive view.⁴ And while a detailed discussion as to the merits of each interpretation lies outside the scope of this devotional, it should be noted that the literal translation of the Greek phrase, *pístis Iēsoûs Christós* is the "faith of Christ."⁵

If the subjective genitive is the correct interpretation (i.e. *the faith of Christ*), it would certainly be strong support that, at the very least, we don't understand as much regarding the Lord's role in our salvation as we thought we did. Perhaps it isn't up to us to figure it all out so that we can come to Christ based on our own understanding? Maybe Christ is working on our behalf more than we've been led to believe.

I should make it clear that I am not promoting some sort of interpretive conspiracy whereby the "correct" translation, "*the faith of Christ*" was buried for the more traditional "*faith in Christ*" for regardless of how these passages of Paul are translated (i.e. *faith in/of Christ*), all translators believe the two versions are saying the same thing.⁶ However, as someone who thinks its possible that all *might* ultimately be reconciled to God (after proper purification has been completed), it is interesting that the subjective genitive (i.e. *faith of Christ*) seems to picture our Lord as having more say in our salvation than the traditional view has allowed. And this, to me, is very good news because, like David, I too prefer my destiny to be in the hands of God rather than men (2 Sam. 24:14⁷) for it is infinitely better if our salvation depends more on Jesus than on us.

"What if some did not believe and had no faith? Does their lack of faith and their faithlessness nullify and make ineffective and void the faithfulness of God and His fidelity [to His Word]? By no means!" Romans 3:1-4 (AMP)

⁴ For a defense of the subjective genitive view, see *The Net Bible*, First Edition (Biblical Studies Press, 2005), p. 2269 n. 23.

⁵ Vincent, Marvin, *Vincent's Word Studies in the New Testament*, Vol. III (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, reprint 2009), p. 41.

⁶ Admittedly, I'm no Greek scholar, but to me the two phrases, our "faith in Christ" and the "faith of Christ" could not be more different.

⁷ "Then David said to Gad, 'I am in great distress. Let us now fall into the hand of the Lord for His mercies are great, but do not let me fall into the hand of man.'"