

ZAP THEOLOGY VERSUS PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Some emphasize that regeneration must come before faith, while I see them both happening simultaneously.

“The question comes up, 'Do we first believe and then are born again, or are we born again and then believe?' They both happen at the same instant, and so it's a question of logical, not chronological, order. ...There is mystery here that we can't fully resolve. Suffice it to say that your responsibility is to believe in Christ for salvation and to urge others to believe in Christ. But whenever we believe in Christ, we can't take credit for our faith or our wise decision.” – **Steven Cole**

John wrote the entire gospel of John so that we might believe. His purpose statement in John 20:31 says, he wrote so that, “believing you may have life in His name.” Note, he doesn't say I wrote so “having life you may believe” but rather the other way around, “that believing you may have life”. John's order here is believing comes first - then life. Life is the result of believing. I would see the same ORDER in John 1:12-13.

John 1:12–13 (NKJV)

12 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name:

13 who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

The word “born” in verse 13 is in the aorist passive form. The aorist emphasizes FACT of action but necessarily TIME of action. The priority of thought is that it is only those who receive/believe who are granted the right to become the children of God. Therefore, verse 12 gives the reason for the new birth, while verse 13 gives the source of it. So, my view is that logically faith comes first, but in fact, they happen simultaneously. The moment one believes they are born again. One cannot claim regeneration without faith, and one cannot claim faith without regeneration. They are inherently and indissolubly bound together.

Those who hold to “zap theology” believe that faith is a gift of God in the sense that human response is essentially removed from the equation. God “zaps” the elect with faith while the non-elect are the “un-zapped.” It is this type of thinking that believes that somehow God imparts the seed of faith in babies related to infant baptism.

Since God just gives faith, he can give it any time He wants to, including to babies that cannot even yet mentally process gospel truth. Of course, infant baptism is foreign to the Scriptures, and saving faith involves people being able to comprehend “the knowledge of the truth” (cf. 1 Tim. 2:4).

There are various Scripture references used by those who emphasize that faith is simply a gift of God, independent of human responsibility and human response. The KEY one is Ephesians 2:8-9.

Ephesians 2:8–9 (NKJV)

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God,

9 not of works, lest anyone should boast.

Faith means to agree with God concerning His Son and His finished work (cf. Gen. 15:6; Rom. 10:9-10; 1 Jn. 5:9-13). Faith means to rely upon, to depend upon the gospel truth of God. Faith means to count it to be so, personally, in your heart. God says that Jesus is Lord, and in your heart, you count it to be so. God says that Jesus is Savior, and in your heart, you count it to be so. It is true that no one can come to this point apart from the work of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3). However, that reality does not cancel out human response in the process (1 Cor. 15:11).

Faith is taking God at His Word and personally appropriating it, personally applying it to yourself. Faith, in the Bible, is always connected to the Word of God. Most simply, faith is taking God at His Word.

In Ephesians 2:8 the little pronoun “**that**” in the phrase “that not of yourselves” has caused quite a stir in the theological community in terms of how to understand it. There are essentially three views:

1. It refers to **faith**, because it is the closest antecedent.
2. It refers to the whole previous phrase, “**For by grace you have been saved through faith,**”.
3. It refers to the subject of **salvation**, which in context is the major topic of discussion. I hold to this view.

Those who say that the pronoun “**that**” refers to the **faith** just mentioned emphasize that faith itself is the gift of God. This position is consistent with Calvinistic theology that desires to champion the grace of God.

In taking this position, they desire to minimize or even eliminate human responsibility and human response in how a person is saved. They argue that even faith itself is the gift of God, so all the glory goes to God for our

salvation. Now, while I agree that all the glory goes to God and that it is all of grace, I do not agree with this understanding of this text.

The problem is that the pronoun “*that*” is neuter in form, and the word “*faith*” (and also “*grace*”) is feminine in form. Therefore, **grammatically**, “*that*” must be referring to the whole idea of salvation under discussion in the context. Paul’s whole train of thought is dealing with the subject of salvation, so this makes sense. Even Calvin saw this truth.

“Many persons restrict the word gift to faith alone. But Paul is only repeating in other words the former sentiment. His meaning is, not that faith is the gift of God, but that salvation is given to us by God, or, that we obtain it by the gift of God.” – **John Calvin**

This again brings us into the whole discussion of God’s sovereignty in tension with human responsibility. Underneath it all is the grace of God, and yet, that does not negate human responsibility, nor human response. All the glory goes to God, and yet, human response is involved. There is balance and mystery here. I think the wording here in Ephesians 2:8-9 maintains the perfect balance of such tensions.

“Grace is God’s part, faith ours. And *that* is neuter, not feminine and so refers not to faith or to grace (feminine also), but to the act of being saved by grace conditioned on faith on our part.” – **A.T. Robertson**

It is important to understand that faith in the New Testament is not seen as something that is contrary to grace – rather, it is in perfect keeping with grace.

Romans 4:16 (NKJV)

16 Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all

Faith is non-meritorious. It is simply the channel by which we receive of the grace of God – the gift of salvation. But I hasten to add that even this faith is on the basis of grace. We do not arrive at faith on our own.

Acts 18:27 (NKJV)

27 And when he desired to cross to Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him; and when he arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace;

Regarding Ephesians 2:8, the position that the whole process of salvation (by grace through faith) is in view in the pronoun “*that*” is further supported by the **parallelism** of “*not of yourselves*” and “*not of works*”. This further qualifying phrase, “*not of works,*” fits better with the idea that Paul is simply emphasizing that the whole of salvation is a gift. Otherwise, it is a superfluous elaboration of the obvious – namely, that faith is not of works.

A third point to keep in mind is that this interpretation is completely consistent with the larger picture of **theological** truth – namely, that Christ died for the sins of all – but it is efficacious only to those who believe. As such, the gift of salvation is made available to all. The grace of God has appeared to all men, but it must be procured by personal faith (cf. Titus 2:11; 1 Tim. 4:10; Heb. 10:29).

“In conclusion, the ‘gift’ is that which is outside of ourselves and is to be received. Therefore, the gift of salvation has its origin in God, its basis is of grace, and it is received by means of faith.” - **Harold Hoehner**

Another KEY verse emphasized by those holding to the idea that faith is a gift of God independent of human response is found in Philippians 1:29.

Philippians 1:29 (NKJV)

29 For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake,

It is true that grace has brought us to belief. No one on their own ever seeks after God (Rom. 3:11). However, some read so much theology into Philippians 1:29 so as to eliminate any human response in saving faith.

“**Granted**” in Philippians 1:29 is a form of the word “*charis*”, meaning grace. Paul is saying they have been graced – favored – privileged to have been brought to believe in Christ and likewise they are graced to be able to suffer for Him (cf. Acts 5:41). Certainly this is true, but does this nuance cancel out human response in the act of faith.

God created mankind in His image, which involved the ability to choose (cf. Gen. 2:16-17). In the fall the image of God in mankind was marred but it was not completely removed (cf. Gen. 9:6; James 3:9). In Cain’s fallenness God came to him and set before him a clear CHOICE for which he was accountable (Gen. 4:7). The rest of the Scripture builds on this model. People are accountable to the truth that God reveals to them. It’s God’s grace that brings people to believe, and yet that is not divorced from human responsibility and human response (cf. 2 Cor. 6:1-2). There is mystery

here. All the glory for our salvation goes to God, and yet that does not negate human responsibility in the process.

Philippians 1:29 should not be considered in isolation. Philippians 1:29 does not contradict the truth of Philippians 3:8-9, where Paul, in sharing his personal testimony, emphasizes the response of saving faith. There he emphasizes that he counted “all things loss” that he might “gain Christ”. That involves human response and human responsibility that is not in conflict with Philippians 1:29.

In Philippians 3:9 Paul goes on to emphasize having righteousness which is “through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith”. The nature of this faith is described in verses 7-8 where he emphasizes that he counted all things loss so that he might gain Christ.