Paul's Concept of Law and Grace and its Relevance for the Church Today

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ABSTRACT

This article is to provide a conceptual analysis of Paul's teaching on the law and grace in light of the salvation brought by Jesus the Christ and their relevance for today. The method adopted for writing this paper is hermeneutical analysis of Paul's view of law and grace in Romans which involves historical-critical method and application. This paper is limited in scope to selected passages in Romans 1-8. Internet sources, commentaries and textbooks on Paul's Epistle to Romans and journal articles are employed in the course of writing this paper. The writer discusses Paul's view of the law and covenant, his view of grace and salvation and his view about Christ's freedom from the law through grace and the relevance of this interpretation for Christians today.

The article is divided into four sections. Section one discusses the authors and his world, which has to do with the world of Paul. Section two discusses contextual matter in the text that involves Paul's view about the law, grace and salvation. Section three discusses the reader's world while the final section discusses the relevance of law and grace for the church.

INTRODUCTION

The decree issued by Claudius in 49 C.E had affected Christian Jews living in Rome. This edict was enacted to banish all Jews from Rome to Jerusalem.[99] N T Wright notes that many of the Christians who were left would undoubtedly have been erstwhile God-fearers or proselytes.[100] Unlike the Galatians church, these Gentile Christians were not eager to keep the Jewish law, but would be inclined, not least from social pressures within pagan Rome, to distance themselves from it, and to use the opportunity of Claudius's decree to articulate their identity in non-Jewish terms.[101] He notes that when the Jews returned to Rome in 54 CE upon Claudius's death, one may assume that the (Gentile) church leadership would not exactly be delirious with excitement.[102] Naturally the coming back of the Jews to Rome would create some tension between the Gentile Christians and the returning Jewish Christians who were already fanatical about the law and circumcision.[103] The Jews have the law and the covenant and it would be difficult to sit with the Gentile to fellowship. So, already a dichotomy has been created between the Jews and the Gentiles.[104] This is a challenge which Paul sought to address in Romans. Paul was tactful in his writing to the Christian Jews in Rome. He was not their Apostle; he sought recognition among them, so that his ministry can be acceptable and at the same time use Rome as his missionary base.[105] N.T Wright notes

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[99] N. T. Wright 'Romans and the theology of Paul' published in P*auline theology, volume iii*, ed. David m. Hay & E. Elizabeth Johnson, 1995, 30–67. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995.

[100] Wright

[101] Wright

[102] Wright

[103] James Dunn *Paul and His World*

[104] Dunn

[105] Dunn

'Paul intention was to use Rome as his base of operations in the western Mediterranean, as he had used Antioch for the eastern Mediterranean.

Antioch had, certainly on one occasion and possibly thereafter, virtually stabbed him in the back, undermining the theological foundation of his mission by insisting on the continuing separation of Jews and Gentiles within the Christian fellowship.' [106]

The so-called Antioch incident of Galatians 2 reflects Paul's opposition to any sense that Jewish Christians are superior to Gentile Christians.[107]

Mattila notes that the law that Paul discusses in Romans is Judaic law and is comprised of rules of conduct communicated by God to Moses and Abraham in the Old Testament.[108] Paul was not discussing the Roman laws nor was he discussing the laws in the Graeco-Roman world? What he was discussing is the law; Moses received on Mount Sinai in the wilderness. The law comprises of two aspects the rituals and the covenant. The rituals have to do with the cultus and ceremony while the covenant has to do with the moral code. These laws include regulations regarding actions, circumcision, food laws, and worship[109]. In Paul's view, when a man is obedient to God's law he is righteous in God's sight. Abraham was righteous in God's sight because of his obedience to the covenant.[110] The law is very stringent and inevitably every person falls short of the expectations of God's law. The law considers human being's imperfection and prescribes only one punishment for sin and that is death.

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[106] Wright

[107] John Stott. The Message of Romans

[108] Mattila

[109] J.D.G. Dunn 'Commentary on Romans' www.newtestamentgateway.com/romans/Dunn/htm. 2011.

[110] Matila

II. PAUL'S VIEW OF THE LAW AND COVENANT

Paul's view of the Law is probably one of the most debated topics in Pauline studies. [111] Daniel Wallace notes that "the problems and apparent contradictions in Paul's View of the Law are diverse."[112] Some commentators believe that Paul changed his view of the Law considerably between writing Galatians and Romans. However, a careful analysis of Paul's statements about the Law in both letters will show that they are complementary, not contradictory.[113] There are no contradictions in Paul's view about the law, Paul was writing to two different audiences. He has to employ different strategies to meet the needs of the people he was writing to. The Church in Galatia comprises majorly of the Gentiles with Jewish infiltration while the Church at Rome was basically Jewish Christians congregation.

Paul had to be tactful in his writing to the Romans so that his apostleship can be recognized by the church. That was not the case with the Galatians church. His speech and letter to the Galatians was sharp and straight forward because they were the zeal of his apostleship. This was not the case with the Romans. It was customary for Paul to react differently in various circumstances he found himself. F. Thielman citing E.P Sanders notes that Paul had no theology of the Law but merely responded in various ways to various circumstances which threatened his mission to the Jews and Gentiles. This is why he proclaimed the necessity of participation in Christ for salvation.[114] However, Paul's view about the Law in Romans and Galatians are not formal, systematic discussion but an ad hoc

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[111] K. Snodgrass, "Spheres of Influence: A Possible Solution to the Problem of Paul and the Law",*Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 32 (1988) 9.

[112] Daniel Wallace"Galatians 3:19-20: A Crux Interpretum for Paul's View of the Law," *WestminsterTheological Journal* 52 (Fall 1990) 225.

[113] Andrew Kulikovsky, 'Paul's View of the Law in Galatians and Romans' online pdf http://www.andrew kulikovsky.com/article/romans/htm. June 30, 1999 Accessed July 23, 2011.

[114]Rogers Bowen. *Guide to Romans* (London: SPCK, 1975), 22ff

documents dealing with specific pastoral issues.[115] Nowhere in the New Testament is there a complete discussion, so, all we can do is to make extrapolations from whatever Paul says in his corpus.

In Gen 12: 1-7;15:1-15; 17:1-8 God made covenant with Abraham that he would give him an inheritance that would be everlasting and that the land in which he lives now would become his. Therefore, the Jew's inheritance was based on God's promise, not on the Law (cf. Gal 3:15-18). Andrew notes that God's covenant with Abraham was based on faith and was not set aside or supplemented by the Law. Indeed, the Law was not issued until 430 years after the Abrahamic covenant was established (Gal 3:17). Paul reiterated this point in Romans 4:13-14, that the law did not come through the Law but through righteousness of faith.[116]

The Jews were already claiming that their religion and knowledge of the law made them superior to any other ethnic group in Romans 2:17-24. This boasting here is most probably "the belief that ethnic Israel is inalienably the people of the one true God and that her possession of the law, quite irrespective of her keeping of it, demonstrates this fact."[117] Paul, however, took them to task and exposed their ignorance. It is clear that the series of rhetorical questions in vv. 21-23 require negative answers.

Despite their knowledge of the Law, the Jews still broke it, and God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of it (v. 24). Hayes notes that "knowledge of the Law is of no value unless it is accompanied by obedience. Thus, the offence which

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[115] Bowen, 22

[116] Andrew Kulikovsky, 'Paul's View of the Law in Galatians and Romans' online pdf http://www.andrew kulikovsky.com/article/romans/htm.

[117] N T Wright, "Law in Romans 2", in *Paul and the Mosaic Law*, edited by J D G Dunn (Tubingen:

J C B Mohr, 1996) 139.

the Jews have committed is the breaking of the Law."[118]Just because the Jews have the Law does not mean they are righteous, or that they did not need to exercise faith. Although Leviticus 18:5 states that those who keep God's laws will live by them, T. R. Schreiner suggests that this does not teach that Israel should obey the Law in order to earn salvation, but rather, that obedience to the Law would be the intended result of God's saving work. He also points out that since sacrifices could be offered for sins committed, there would have been no thought that the Law could be obeyed perfectly, resulting in salvation.[119] Striving for righteousness was a legitimate goal for the people of Israel. Snodgrass notes that the goal was not wrong, but the path the people chose (i.e. works) were. The only way to achieve righteousness is by faith.[120]

III. PAUL'S VIEW OF GRACE (JUSTIFICATION) BY FAITH

Already in his epistle to the Galatians, Paul has made it clear that anyone who believes that through the Law s/he is made righteous before God is actually under God's wrath and curse (Gal. 3:10-12).[121] The only solution according to Paul is summarized in Romans 3:28, where he concludes that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law" (cf. Habakkuk 2:4).

In Romans, Paul develops justification by first speaking of God's just wrath at sin (Romans 1:8-3:2). [122] Justification is then presented as the solution to God's wrath.[123] One is said to be

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[118] R B Hays, "Three Dramatic Roles", in *Paul and the Mosaic Law*, edited by J D G Dunn (Tubingen: J C B Mohr, 1996) 152.

[119] T R Schreiner, "Paul's View of the Law in Romans 10:4-5", *Westminster Theological Journal* (Spring 1993) accessed from www.western theological Journal/page/article/romans/html. On July 24, 2011.

[120] Snodgrass 103.

[121]William Hendriksen. *Romans* (USA: Banner of Truth Press, 1980), 200.

[122]Ibid, 201.

[123]J. M. G. Barclay. *Obeying The Truth: Paul's Ethics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 99.

justified by faith apart from works of the law (Romans 3:28). Furthermore, Paul seems to strongly suggest that justification is by faith and not by works. Paul writes of sin and justification in terms of two men; Adam and Christ. Through Adam, sin came into the world; through Christ, righteousness came into the world bringing justification.[124] He believes that the death and resurrection of Christ are both the fulfillment of the Old Testament and therefore, the basis and anticipation of a final glory (8:17) with Christ at the climax of history.[125] According to Paul, history is divided into two *"eras"* and *"aeons,"* each with his own founder-Adam and Christ respectively.[126] And also each has its own ruling power; sin, the law, flesh, and death on the one hand; righteousness, grace, the spirit, and life on the other hand.[127] All humans start out in the "old era" by virtue of participation in the act by which it was founded, that is Adamic nature or sin of Adam (Romans 5:12).[128] But one can be transferred into a "new era" by becoming joined to Christ through faith, who is the founder of the new era (6:1-6).

According to V.P. furnish, "justification by faith is ultimately a determinative to Paul's salvation historical scheme."[129] Therefore, the person who lives after Christ's death and resurrection who has not appropriated the benefits of those events of the new era of faith in the old era, is enslaved to sin in the flesh, and doomed to eternal death. In relation to the church Westerholm rightly suggests that justification by faith is central to Romans and to Paul's theology because it expresses

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[124]Douglas Moo. *The Epistle of the Romans*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 29.

[125]Ibid, 26.

[126]Barclay, 98.

[127]Moo, 28.

[128]Westerholm E. *Romans*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 167.

[129]V. P. Furnish. *Theology and Ethics in Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968), 135.

a crucial element in Paul's understanding of God's work in Christ and by extension the church.[130]

There is a clear eschatological sense implied in Paul's usage of the term "justification." In chapter 8, Paul connects justification with predestination and glorification (Rom. 8:30).[131] He further states that those who are justified cannot be separated from Christ (8:33-39). The idea of justification or of a judicial act is not only applied on to the present process of the religious life, but also reserved for the last judgment; the divine justification, which was accomplished at the cross, is expected to be consummated on the last day, when there will be definitive acquittal.[132]

Paul clearly states that believers in Christ through faith, are already sons of God in the present, but their "adoption" is not yet fully manifest to the world (Rom. 8:16-19). John Robinson in his book *Wrestling with Romans,* likewise understands that *justification,* in the present tense in Romans 3:28, shows that the "process" of being made right before God is initiated in this life, and brought to completion in the final judgment[133] upon examining Paul's use of "justification," there is bound within justification, vindication for the believer that will not take place until the last Day.[134] While our salvation is secured through the death of Christ and applied to us through faith (Romans 6), vindication will be fully manifest in the completion of our justification at the final judgment of God (cf. Matthew 25).

A. Salvation Apart from Works

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[130]Westerholm, 168.

[131]D. A. Carson *Justification in the Bible and the World.* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1992), 67.

[132]Ibid, 68.

[133]John Robinson. *Wrestling with Romans.* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979), 121.

[134]Westerholm, 201.

Paul has made clear his doctrine of salvation apart from the works of the law in his epistle to the Galatians prior to his writing this epistle to the Romans. "What Paul develops in Galatians 2 and 3 responds to the specific need in a particular setting to argue against Judaizing tendencies. This is then given a further theological development in Romans, especially in chapter 3 and 4.[135]

As far as Paul is concerned, salvation is by faith in Christ, and not by the works of any individual. In Galatians, Paul is combating legalism, but here in Romans, Paul defends the acceptance of Gentiles apart from them not having received the Torah of God-just as Abraham did not receive the Torah but was justified by faith (Rom. 4:1-3). Justification is received through faith in Christ, the Torah, to whom the physical points of the law finds it end, and is therefore available to both Jews and Gentiles.[136]

Paul, in Romans advocates justification through faith in Jesus Christ, over justification through works of the law. In the Old perspective, Paul was understood to be arguing that Christians' good works would not factor into their salvation only their faith. According to the new perspective, Paul was questioning only observances such as circumcision and dietary laws, not good works in general.

IV. PAUL'S VIEW OF CHRIST RELEASING US FROM THE LAW THROUGH GRACE

In Romans 7:1-6, Paul argues that we are now released from the Law. In the same way that a woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives, we are bound to the Law "as long as we live." But now we have died to the Law because of Christ's death on the cross in our place. This means that our bond with

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[135]Ken, 18.

[136]Middle Town Bible Church "Did James Contradict Paul?" www.Paul page .com, Accessed 17/03/2011.

the Law has been broken and we have now been released. This is God's grace in action. This grace frees us from the bondage that law brings and sets us at liberty. In Galatians 2:19-20, Paul says;

'And I through the law die to the law that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ nevertheless I live but it's no longer I that lives but Christ that lives in me and the life I live now I live by the faith of the Son of God who loves me and gave himself for me.

Because of the Law, Paul was condemned to death, but this sentence was served by Christ in his place. This is expatiated in the next verse quoted above in Gal 2:20.

In Romans 8:1-2, Paul announces that there is now no condemnation for those in Christ, because "through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set us (Paul, Jews and Gentile inclusive) free from the law of sin and death." Cranfield suggests that since v.1 is the conclusion drawn from 7:1-6,[137] and given the use of *gar* (for)at the beginning of v. 2, it is likely that v. 2 is in some way parallel to the concluding sentence of 7:1-6. Being set free from the Law of sin and death by the Law of the Spirit of life is another way of saying that "we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code."[138]Sin is no longer our master, because we are now not under law, but under grace (Rom 6:14).

A. Paul's view of Christ as the fulfillment of Law

In Romans 10:4, Paul declares that "Christ is the end of the Law." The word translated "end" (NIV) is *telios* which could also mean "fulfillment" and there has been much dispute in regard to how or in what way Christ is the end/goal/fulfillment of the

[137] C E B Cranfield, *Romans* vol. I (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975) 374-375.
[138] Cranfield, *Romans* vol. II, 515..

Law.[139] Cranfield argues that the Law contains promises which look forward and bear witness to Christ. It has Christ as its goal by virtue of its revelation of God's will. It points to Christ who will be perfectly obedient and completely righteous (cf. Rom 10:5).[140] Furthermore, ceremonies and sacrifices only have real meaning when Christ is the Law's goal. However, this interpretation is unlikely given the context and the qualifying phrase, which implies that "Christ is the end of the law" only for "those who believe." Verse 3 speaks of how the Jews sought to establish their own righteousness based on observing the Law rather than submitting to God's righteousness based on faith. Therefore, as Schreiner suggests, Paul is stating that "Christ is the end of using the Law to establish one's own righteousness."[141] It is through faith in Christ that a person is able to attain righteousness.

B, Did Christ abolish the Law?

Paul was being diplomatic in Romans about his teaching on the law. He did not affirm the fact that Christ abolished the law. What he affirms was that he upholds the Law (Rom 3:31), yet he also says that we have died to it, been cut off from it, and released from it (Rom 7:4, 6)?[142] Indeed, in Ephesians 2:15, Paul explicitly states that the Law has been abolished![143] How can

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[139] Cranfield

[140] J Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* vol. 2, NICNT (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans,

1968) 50. Note that ei)j should be understood as meaning "with respect to." See BAGD (sec 5).

[141] Schreiner, "Paul's View of the Law in Romans 10:4-5"

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[142] Andrew Kulikovsky Paul's View of the Law in Galatians and Romans' online pdf

http://www.andrew kulikovsky.com/article/romans/htm. June 30, 1999 Accessed July 23, 2011

[143] This cannot be attributed to Paul because scholarly Ephesians was not part of Paul's letter. It was written by a disciple of Paul. See Bowen 82-84.

Paul reinforce the Laws commandments (Gal 5:14), expecting people to obey, then in v. 19 state that we are no longer under the Law?[144] Firstly, it should be noted that Paul was writing to a congregation who did not know him so he had to be diplomatic in his writing in order not to offend many people. Secondly Paul did not advocate antinomianism.[145] It is clear from Romans 6:1-2 that he had no sympathy for such a belief. However, in light of the clause "until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come" in Galatians 3:19, Wallace argues that Paul did, in some sense, see the Law as abolished.

On the other hand, since many of the Old Testament moral laws are still binding for Christians today, it is difficult to see how Christ is the absolute end of the Law.[146] Indeed, Thielman points out that Paul never implies each specific command in the Law is now obsolete. Rather, it is the code viewed as a whole which has now been superseded.[147] The message in Ephesians contradict the line of thought of Paul in Romans, therefore one cannot use this verse to support the argument which Paul puts forward in Romans.

V. RELEVANCE OF PAUL'S TEACHING FOR TODAY

In the light of Paul's teaching on law and grace in the Epistle to the Romans, some questions readily come to mind. How can this be applicable for today? What has Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome hundreds of years back has to do with the 21st century Christian. It is important to note that the teaching of Paul as it is relevant then so also it is now. It is relevant for every Christian all over the world.

First of all the theological relevance, Paul clearly and emphatically states that justification is by faith. (3:28). In other

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[144] Kulikovsky Paul's View of the Law in Galatians and Romans' online pdf .

[145] This is a doctrine that promotes sin at the expense of grace. They declared the more you sin the more the grace is available for you

[146] Wallace, 240

[147] Thielman 539

words a person is justified or declared not guilty as soon as that person believes in the saving power of the Lord Jesus Christ by faith. It should be noted that Paul is so clear about the fact that the only ticket that can guarantee a person's justification is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ alone, and nothing else. The implication of what Paul was saying to the Romans is that one's work, money, or influence cannot make one to be justified before God. The earthly position of a person and his or her philanthropic works does not make a man justified; the only pass to justification is the individual's faith in Jesus Christ. Paul's assertion here is a message to unregenerate wealthy men and women who profess to be Christians, but who have not had an encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ. Such people cannot be justified by their wealth but only through faith in Christ Jesus. It is fashionable to see Christian gathering especially along Lagos- Ibadan express way of Lagos and Ogun State in Nigeria, to attend different Christian program. Many people turn out in millions to attend Christian conference, crusades and the likes. However if Paul's assertion is anything to go by, then it is not the people's enthusiasm, or ability to shout loud "amen" and "Halleluyah" can make them justified before God; rather it is their faith in Christ, that will determine if they are or will be justified in the sight of God.

As a result of the prosperity messages and motivational talk on the pulpit today many people are enthusiastic about Christianity. The church herself like an entertainer have attracted church goers who only identify with the church all these are rituals and observances, this does not save anybody. It is through grace that people can be saved and this is the mind of Paul unless a person has an encounter with Christ such cannot be saved.

Ethically speaking, "works" are rejected by Paul as a means of salvation. Paul insists through works of law no man can be saved. Paul was referring to the rituals here. No matter how one tries to perform all the prescribed rituals in the covenant code that is not enough to earn that person any salvation. Today it

is not uncommon to see some individuals who give to aid the work of Christ. However, it should be noted that "good works" does not translate to salvation, although it is expected that a person who is saved should produce good works, it is not the ticket to salvation. Paul makes it clear that it is through faith in Christ alone that can save a person on the long run. Thus, Abraham was not justified by works of the law, but by faith when he believed God. Some have argued that James seems to contradict Paul; but a critical look at what Paul and James said would proof otherwise. Yet, the question remains: "If Abraham was completely justified by faith, why must he also have been justified by works?"

The answer to this can be found by identifying the difference between what James and Paul mean by justification. The emphasis in James is that faith is not living unless it is outwardly shown and demonstrated "yea, a man may say, thou has faith, and I have works: show me thy faith without thy works, and I will show thee my faith by my works" (James 2:18). This is because, as Paul states, faith is a personal belief that takes place in the heart, and thus cannot be seen in and of itself. Thus, while God knows whether or not someone has faith, there is no way for another person to recognize it, unless there are works to show it. Consequently, while Paul is dealing with the necessity of faith before God, James is concerned with an outward demonstration of such faith before men through works. Therefore, unlike Paul, who teaches justification before God, James portrays justification before men. However, their views on justification are complementary; Paul stresses acceptance before God entirely by grace through faith, whereas James presents the continual evidence before men of the initial transaction of faith. It should be note however, that it is not the intention of this writer to condemn work. However, works to earn or to be counted as being righteous is inconsistent with the scriptures. However, a believer who has been saved through faith must show that he/she is saved by exhibiting "good works."

Also, Paul notes that morality in itself cannot make a person justified. Some people feel their moral life of "self-righteousness," can save them. Paul clearly buttresses the point that humanity is divided into two-Adam and Christ, righteousness can only come through Christ, while the formal opened the door to sin and death (Romans 5). By implication, no matter how righteous one may think he/she is, that person remains a sinner without faith in Christ. It is faith in Christ that makes one righteous before God (2 Cor 5: 21), one cannot be righteous before God as a result of physical works or "self-imposed" righteousness. No man can make himself righteous before God by his morality.

Paul made it abundantly clear that no one can make himself righteous or justified before God by himself. After Paul explains in Romans 1:18-3:20 that no one will ever be able to make himself righteous before God ("for no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the Law," Rom 3:20), then Paul goes on to explain that "since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justify by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (Rom 3:23-24). God's "grace" means his "unmerited favour."[148] Because we are completely unable to earn favour with God, the only way we could be declared righteous or justified is if God freely provides salvation for us by grace, totally apart from our work (Eph 2;8-9; cf. Titus 3:7).

Christians should note that God did not have any obligation to impute our sin to Christ or to impute Christ's righteousness to us; it was only because of his unmerited favour that he did this for us. The implication of this is that even "faith" which may be seen by many as an individual's contribution to the act of justification will not be possible without God's grace. It is God's grace that makes our faith possible. Simply put; faith is "faith" because God's grace is available.

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[148]Bowen 49

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