

BOOK REVIEWS

A Salvation by Works

Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King, by Matthew W. Bates.
Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017.

In *Salvation by Allegiance Alone* (hereafter *Allegiance*), Matthew W. Bates, assistant professor of theology at Quincy University, observes that “contemporary Christian culture often comes prepackaged with functional ideas and operative definitions of belief, faith, works, salvation, heaven, and the gospel that in various ways truncate and distort the full message of the good news about Jesus the Messiah that is proclaimed in the Bible” (2-3). Based on this observation, he attempts to help Christians rethink the gospel, faith, and salvation (5). At the center of this reconsideration is the proposal that πίστις (*pistis*), the Greek word rendered “faith,” insofar as it relates to salvation, really means and should be rendered “allegiance” (8). He considers that *allegiance*, which includes the meaning of “embodied loyalty” (5, 89), a form of works, better captures Paul’s meaning when he uses *pistis* in connection with salvation in his Epistles. Bates, however, is hardly able to support this claim from Scripture. Instead, he leans on extra-biblical literature and the cultural context at the time of Paul’s writing to establish his proposal.

In addition to an introduction, Bates structures his arguments into nine chapters: three addressing faith (chs. 1, 4, and 5), two addressing the gospel (chs. 2–3), two examining the result of salvation (chs. 6–7), one reconsidering justification (ch. 8), and the last elaborating on what it means to practice faith as allegiance (ch. 9). In his own words, the essence of his arguments is:

1. The true climax of the gospel—Jesus’s enthronement—has generally been deemphasized or omitted from the gospel.
2. Consequently, *pistis* has been misaimed and inappropriately nuanced with respect to the gospel. It is regarded as “trust” in Jesus’s righteousness alone or “faith” that Jesus’s death covers my sins rather than “allegiance” to Jesus as king.
3. Final salvation is not about attainment of heaven but about embodied participation in the new creation. When the true goal of salvation is recognized, terms such as “faith,” “works,” “righteousness,” and “the gospel” can be more accurately reframed.
4. Once it is agreed that salvation is by allegiance alone, matters that have traditionally divided Catholics and Protestants—the essence of the gospel, faith

alone versus works, declared righteousness versus infused righteousness—are reconfigured in ways that may prove helpful for reconciliation. (9)

The first three chapters of *Allegiance* are foundational to Bates’s central claim that *pistis* should be understood as allegiance. In those chapters, he presents what he considers to be misconceptions of faith (15-25) and outlines his understanding of the true gospel (29-38). Among other matters, Bates highlights two points that are foundational to his thesis in these chapters. The first is that *pistis* is not the opposite of works. He claims that in some New Testament contexts where *pistis* is rendered “faithfulness,” *pistis* might include the meaning of works, but not works of law (22). His second crucial point is that the climax of the gospel is the exaltation of Jesus as Lord (37). He argues that the exaltation of Christ is the most important part of the gospel today because “Jesus’s reign corresponds to the present epoch of world history that we find ourselves in now” (67). That is, Christ’s incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection do not occupy the same position of importance because they are past events (39, 67). This assertion, however, neglects the fact that the New Testament writers emphasized different aspects of Jesus’ accomplishment, especially His resurrection, according to the need of their recipients (2 Tim. 2:8; 1 Cor. 15:3-4; Acts 3:15-16, 26; 4:10; 10:40; 13:30-38; Rom. 4:24-25).

In the fourth chapter, “Faith as Allegiance,” Bates arrives at the heart of his thesis. Based on his conclusion that Jesus’ reign as King is the most important part of the gospel, he asserts: “The gospel reaches its zenith with Jesus’s installation and sovereign rule as the Christ, the king. As such, *faith* in Jesus is best described as *allegiance* to him as king” (77). He puts forth four arguments as support for this view: (1) *pistis* sometimes has the meaning of allegiance in apocryphal texts composed around the time of the New Testament; (2) since Paul regards Jesus as Lord, the most natural way for him to speak of how people relate to Him is in terms of allegiance; (3) understanding faith as allegiance seems to resolve some puzzling matters in Paul’s letters; and (4) *pistis* as allegiance fits into the broader context of the New Testament world (78).

Bates’s arguments are problematic from several standpoints. First, the fact that his primary argument requires him to look outside of the Scriptures to find the exact meaning of *pistis* that he desires should raise a question in the mind of the reader. If the meaning

of *pistis* as allegiance is evident in the Scriptures, why does Bates need to look elsewhere to establish the claim? Second, even if we accept Bates's examining of various apocryphal texts—including 3 Maccabees 3:2-4; 5:32; 1 Maccabees 10:25-27; and Esther 13:3-4—in order to give “examples where *pistis* must carry the precise meaning of allegiance” (79-80, 4), none of the texts where he finds this meaning are related to the gospel, the scope that Bates defines for the use of *pistis* as allegiance. Thus, his understanding of faith as allegiance is little more than reading meaning into the text of the New Testament. Third, when Bates does give attention to New Testament passages to support his claim, he mainly notes that since the final instance of *pistis* in Romans 3:3 must be translated as “faithfulness” (i.e., God's faithfulness), then the nuance of fidelity in the word *faithfulness* should not be excluded from the meaning of *pistis* in Paul's presentation of justification by faith in Romans 3:21 and following verses (81). Of course, merely exporting meaning from one location to another without

foregrounding allegiance makes excellent contextual sense in all of these crucial passages” (82). Yet, he gives no explanation as to why foregrounding allegiance makes contextual sense. Fourth, Bates claims that the most obvious way to speak of relationship to a king is loyalty or allegiance and applies this to Paul's writings, yet he never cites a portion of these writings in support of that understanding. He merely jumps to the conclusion that understanding *pistis* as allegiance must be true because the relationship of kings to subjects in the natural realm is that of loyalty (83).

Setting aside all of Bates's unsubstantiated claims, the ultimate purpose of *Allegiance* is to advance an understanding of “final salvation” by works (205-213). To this end Bates argues,

The relationship between *pistis* and works is not one of cause to effect but rather of overlapping nested categories. The larger category or set (*pistis* as allegiance) can include a portion of the smaller category or subset (works as embodied allegiance) as the Holy Spirit empowers us for right living. (110)

This concept flies in the face of Paul's words in Ephesians 2:8-9. Indeed, when Bates addresses Paul's assertion in that passage, he is able to state only that faith in Ephesians 2:8 should be understood as allegiance; he does not address the following verse: “Not of works that no one should boast” (Eph. 2:9). Whereas Bates suggests on several occasions (22, 110-112) that when Paul rejects works-based salvation, he is actually rejecting works related to law, not works related to allegiance, Ephesians 2:9 clearly excludes works of any kind (cf. Rom. 4:2-5). One should believe that the apostle Paul would specify works of law if he intended to exclude only works of law. After all, in other portions of the Scriptures, such as Galatians 2:16 and others that Bates happily cites (115-117), Paul specifies “works of law” when he means works of law.

Perhaps Bates's concern, as with many who choose to advance a works-based salvation, is that salvation by faith as it is popularly announced and misunderstood may lead believers into a living that is not befitting of the Christian or of Christ. True as this may be, the solution is not to opt for a salvation dependent on works, which is contrary to the Scriptures, but to see the truth concerning the kingdom reward and discipline, which serve as an incentive and a warning to the believers concerning their living today. Whereas *Allegiance* may be the result of a genuine desire to help the believers, it does more to distract the believers, obscure their understanding of salvation, and weaken their faith than it does to help.

by I. Joel Oladele

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consideration of context is not a reasonable way to substantiate a claim. Nevertheless, instead of analyzing the other portions of the New Testament that he cites for evidence (Rom. 3:21-25; 5:1; Gal. 2:16, 20; 5:4-6; Phil. 3:8-11; 1 Cor. 1:21; 15:1-2), Bates simply translates πίστις and πιστεύω in those portions as, respectively, “allegiance” and “to give allegiance” and concludes that “if we remember that the allegiance concept welds mental agreement, professed fealty, and embodied loyalty,

A Commendable Exploration of Pauline Faith

Faith as Participation: An Exegetical Study of Some Key Pauline Texts, by Jeanette Hagen Pifer.
WUNT 2/486. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019.

In *Faith as Participation* Jeanette Hagen Pifer, Professor of New Testament at Biola University, offers a compact and insightful study of the Pauline conception of faith, rooted in meticulous exegesis and guided by noble convictions. This study, a lightly revised version of the author’s doctoral thesis, is motivated by the basic question of what Paul means by faith (1, 37). In her introductory chapter Pifer clarifies that her interest is not simply in the meaning of the word *pistis* in Paul’s Epistles but, more broadly, in Paul’s concept of faith generally and in the role that faith plays within the broader scope of his theology (37–38). She also reveals that “the primary conviction driving this study is that an accurate understanding of the way that Paul portrays faith should provide clarification to a number of notorious debates, namely on the centre of Pauline theology, on the relation between human and divine agency, and on the interpretation of the phrase *πίστις Χριστοῦ*” (37). (These three debates are unpacked in the introductory chapter and revisited throughout the monograph.) In terms of methodology, Pifer focuses her exegetical study in her chapters 2 through 6 on four Pauline Epistles: 1 Thessalonians (ch. 2), 1 Corinthians (ch. 3), 2 Corinthians (ch. 4), and Galatians (chs. 5–6).

As Pifer works through these four Epistles, she successfully draws out many fine details concerning Paul’s conception of faith. She notes, for example, that faith entails an “actively passive receiving” of Christ (44), a confident and continuous standing upon Christ (79), and the “simultaneous act of renouncing self-confidence and exercising full dependence on Christ” (118). One of her broader claims, reiterated throughout her study, is that faith serves as the believers’ mode of existence. Faith is “the mode of existence in which one is firmly grounded and dependent on Christ” (51), the “sphere of the believer’s existence” (72), the “chief description for the human mode of existence for those ‘in Christ’” (172), an “ongoing state of dependence on Christ” that is “descriptive of a believer’s entire life in Christ” (221). In one of her fuller definitions of Pauline faith, she writes that faith is “the mode of existence by which the believer participates in the Christ-event and appropriates all the benefits thereof; as such, it is necessarily self-negating and thus self-involving in the person and work of Christ” (159).

In Pifer’s reading of Paul, this conception of faith—

as the believers’ mode of existence—is closely related to the Pauline theme of participation in Christ, which she describes as “an important thread” in her discussion of faith (11n59). She explains that her use of the term *participation* “conveys an attempt to synthesize Paul’s many prepositional expressions (e.g. *ἐν Χριστῷ*, *σὺν Χριστῷ*, *εἰς Χριστὸν* and related phrases) with larger themes such as ‘dying and rising with Christ,’ ‘the body of Christ,’ and possession and indwelling of the Spirit” (11n59). As the title of her monograph indicates, Pifer intuits that faith and participation are so tightly interwoven in Paul’s understanding that it is possible to speak of faith *as* participation, and she attempts to accentuate this participatory view of faith in chapter after chapter. In chapter 2, on faith and participation in 1 Thessalonians, she perceives a close connection between the Thessalonians’ faith in Christ and their participation in His death and resurrection. Drawing on 1 Thessalonians 4:14 and related verses, she suggests that the Thessalonians’ “faith in a future participation in the resurrection is based on the experience of participation in Christ through faith in their earthly life” (61). She further suggests that “by faith, the believer is wrapped up in the Christ-mediated process of salvation through identifying with the Christ-event (past), living in a new mode of dependent existence upon a new Lord (present), and living always with hope of being reunited with him in the future” (62). Faith, then, is “absolutely and fundamentally participatory in nature” (62). In chapter 3, on faith and participation in 1 Corinthians, she claims, based on her exegesis of 1 Corinthians 1–2, that faith is “a form of participation in Christ” (74). In chapter 4, on faith and participation in 2 Corinthians, she writes that it is “by faith”—understood as “a human appropriation of divine enablement”—that “one participates in Christ” (118). In subsequent chapters she observes such a tight connection between faith and participation, especially in Galatians, that she equates the two, claiming that “faith is participation in Christ” (173). Referring to Galatians 2:19b–20 as the “*crux interpretum*” for the idea of faith as participation, she explains that the life that the believers live in identification with Christ’s crucifixion “occurs in the mode of *πίστις*,” which “is participation in Christ” (219). As she navigates through Paul’s Epistles, Pifer thus finds that faith is the mode of participation in Christ and, perhaps more profoundly, that faith *is* participation in Christ.

Throughout her monograph Pifer attempts to show how this participatory understanding of Pauline faith, with its many nuances, elucidates the three broader debates over Paul’s theology foregrounded in her introductory chapter. Concerning the debate over the center

of Paul's theology, Pifer rightly rejects the notion that justification by faith and participation in Christ are somehow at odds in Paul's theology and argues instead that the apostle successfully holds these two matters together. More pointedly, she claims that faith is crucial to both justification and participation, demonstrating throughout her monograph that "faith is not simply the entry point to justification" but is "descriptive of a believer's entire life in Christ" (221). Concerning the debate over the relationship between human and divine agency, Pifer observes early in her study that Paul's theology of faith rests on the axiom that "faith arises and remains in a believer always and only through a prior divine act" (46). As her study progresses, she reiterates this underlying idea, emphasizing that the believers' faith expresses their complete dependence on divine agency. "Human faith," she argues, "is a response to and an absolute dependence upon the divine" (153); it is

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"a mode that is wholly Christ-focused and empowered by divine agency" (170). Pifer concludes that her study of faith ultimately clarifies "the quandary of agency in that faith defines what kind of agents humans are—agents wholly dependent on the divine" (223). Concerning the debate over how the Pauline expression πίστις Χριστοῦ should be interpreted, Pifer favors an objective genitive reading ("faith in Christ") over a subjective genitive reading ("faith(fulness) of Christ"). She worries that the subjective genitive reading diminishes the human element of faith by shifting the focus from the believers' faith in Christ to Christ's own faith or faithfulness. As a result, "human agency becomes

obfuscated" (222). Pifer's preference for the objective genitive reading seems largely driven by her broader understanding of how divine and human agency are related. She reasons that "the objective genitive reading preserves the theological priorities held by those who advocate the subjective genitive reading while also conveying the vital role of human faith that pervades the Pauline corpus" (222). According to Pifer the faith of which Paul speaks is a human faith in the sense that humans are the subject of faith, but at the same time it is "thoroughly Christocentric" because it is "the chief way for humans to express that Christ alone has accomplished everything for salvation" (222). In her mind the objective genitive reading comports well with the essential principle in Paul's theology that "the power of God precedes and elicits the πίστις of humans" (222).

Readers who follow Pifer throughout her study should, at the very least, come away with a fuller understanding of Paul's notion of faith and a greater appreciation of its significance for the Christian life. In terms of her core thesis, Pifer largely succeeds in demonstrating that the believers' faith is closely related to their participation in Christ, which encompasses their union with Christ and their ongoing, subjective experience of His death and resurrection. We find Pifer's persistent attentiveness to the participatory dimensions of faith to be one of the more commendable features of her monograph. However, there is some ambiguity, if not inconsistency, in her monograph regarding faith's exact relationship to participation: in some passages faith is presented as the means of participating in Christ, whereas in others faith is presented as participation itself. Clarifying whether a meaningful distinction exists between these two conceptions of faith's relationship to participation would strengthen the monograph's core thesis. Additionally, Pifer's discussion of the debates surrounding the expression πίστις Χριστοῦ is constrained by a common assumption in Pauline studies: that the genitive (Χριστοῦ) must be either subjective or objective. But there are other interpretative possibilities that Pifer does not consider, namely that the genitive can be read as an appositive, or exegetical, genitive, with the sense 'the faith that Christ Himself is'. Given Pifer's central thesis that faith is participation in Christ, consideration of this exegetical possibility could have significantly bolstered her case. These limitations aside, Pifer's *Faith as Participation* proves to be a fruitful exegetical endeavor.

by John-Paul Petrash