

Matthew W. Bates

Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King

Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA, Baker Academic, 2017, 234.

Occasionally when one sees the title of a new book, one thinks “this is a book I would have liked to have written.” That was the case for me with regard to Matthew Bates’ *Salvation by Allegiance Alone*. Indeed, when I first saw the title, I immediately thought “this is a book I might have written,” or at least, a topic I very much wanted to explore in more detail. This is so because, like many others familiar enough with koine Greek, I was aware that the Greek πίστις had a fairly broad semantic range, including the ideas of “faithfulness” or “loyalty” as well as “faith” or “belief.” That recognition opens up many intriguing questions for the meaning of this important term in many NT passages.

In short, Bates argues that in current usage, the English translation of πίστις as “faith” in the New Testament is insufficient, and possibly misleading. In contemporary English usage, “faith” is usually understood as belief that something is the case (intellectual agreement), or as trust, often in the sense of trust in someone or something against all odds or despite contrary evidence. While Bates concedes that πίστις can mean simply belief in certain NT contexts, he argues that “allegiance” is rather the best English term to capture the broader semantic range of possible meanings of πίστις. Clearly, rendering πίστις as “allegiance” across the New Testament has significant implications for New Testament soteriology and the understanding of the Gospel.

The book is written with a broader audience in mind than just specialists, a move the author concedes is a bit risky. But Bates considers his thesis important for the contemporary church as a needed corrective to a truncated or even distorted Gospel message. Moreover, the author covers much ground; the work is not simply a word or concept study of πίστις, although it could have gone in that direction. Rather, *Saved by Allegiance Alone* is best understood as a work of New Testament theology for the church that attempts to realign thinking on soteriology, the nature of the Gospel, new creation, and justification based on Bates’ πίστις thesis.

After an introduction that succeeds in setting the course of the work and whetting the reader’s appetite for the allegiance thesis, Bates begins by arguing in chapter one for what “faith is not,” addressing misunderstandings or half-truths about “faith” that are common today. Thus, “faith” in the Biblical texts (read πί-

στῆς) is not the “opposite of evidence-based truth” nor a do-nothing false confidence that God will take care of all one’s problems, nor a “leap in the dark.” Bates rightly shows that the Biblical examples often read that way (for example Hebrews 11) rather portray faith as decisive action in the world by God’s people for reasons not immediately apparent, yet compelled by their experienced reality of God and in response to his revealed commands.

Bates further argues here that faith is not “opposition to works,” nor reducible to mere intellectual assent to certain Gospel truths. These latter two assertions are more central to the core theological arguments of the book, and are perhaps the claims that potential readers will find most challenging. For Bates, because these inadequate notions of “faith” are so prevalent and entrenched not only in common culture but also among Christians, it is preferable to translate the Biblical πίστις with a different term altogether, “allegiance.”

Chapters two and three then consider the Gospel itself, both in Pauline perspective (ch. 2) and in the teaching of Jesus (ch. 3). Bates notes that many Christians in fact teach and believe a “truncated Gospel” that reduces the good news to a message about Jesus’ atoning death for the forgiveness of sins aimed toward the individual. While the author affirms that Jesus’ death is one core element of the full Gospel, he contends the Gospel is more comprehensive and that forgiveness of sins for the individual is an effect of belief in the Gospel, but not the Gospel itself. Bates goes on to show, building on the work of C. H. Dodd (*The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*), that both in Paul and the Gospels, there are eight core elements to the Gospel, or “good news” story: Jesus’ preexistence, his taking on human flesh as Davidic heir, his death for sins in accord with the scriptures, his burial, his resurrection on the third day in accord with the scriptures, his post-resurrection appearances, his exaltation to God’s right hand as Lord, and his coming return in judgement. These eight elements constitute the “Gospel” and humans are then called to respond to his Gospel message with πίστις, that is, “allegiance.”

Crucial to Bates’ argument is that Jesus’ exaltation as the Messiah, or king, is not only a part of the “Gospel” but its climax. The resurrected and exalted Jesus now reigns with the Father in heaven, and so the call to have or give πίστις in or to the king entails more than mere intellectual assent or appropriating his atoning death as the means to attain eternal life. Rather, it entails giving allegiance, or fidelity, to the rightful king. In chapter four Bates thus addresses key texts to make his case for understanding πίστις in this manner. First, Bates provides examples from second temple literature in which πίστις **simply must be translated** with something like “loyalty” or “fidelity” (for example 1 Macc. 10:25–27; 3 Macc. 3:2–4; and numerous examples from Josephus [see Bates, 80]). Next, Bates shows where Paul uses πίστις to depict God’s faithfulness to his people (Rom

3:3), as well as NT texts (Rom 3:21) which may be understood to use πίστις to describe Jesus' own disposition to God as one of "faith" or "faithfulness" (πίστις). Moreover, Bates makes an insightful point that the Roman rulers were "spreading their own versions of the good news," and that the expected response from their subjects certainly entailed belief, trust and fidelity. Confessions of Jesus as Lord and statements of giving πίστις to him in the Greco-Roman world would thus have been seen as expressions not only of religious belief but also of political allegiance.

For Bates, then, these examples and others prove the wider semantic domain of πίστις, and while belief and trust are aspects of πίστις, so is the idea of fidelity. Thus, Bates argues, "allegiance" is able to express all of these ideas better than "faith." He concludes by laying out his view of three core elements of what πίστις entails in the NT: intellectual agreement with the eight-part Gospel; a public confession of loyalty to Jesus as Lord; and to "embodied fidelity" to Jesus that is a "genuine, albeit not perfect, obedience."

While many readers will readily affirm the first, and possibly the second of these three aspects of πίστις, many will no doubt balk at the third; is Bates here confounding faith with works? Is he wanting to return to a law-based salvation? The author anticipates these and other similar questions in chapter five, entitled "Questions about Allegiance Alone." Bates here affirms that he views salvation as a gift from God (grace) and not something that can be earned or deserved. Nevertheless, it does not necessarily follow that the gift-giver does not require an obligatory response. Following John Barclay (*Paul and the Gift*), Bates asserts that "it is a misunderstanding of "grace" in antiquity, and in Paul's letters, to suggest that grace could not truly be grace if it requires obedience as an obligatory return" (p.104). One might put it this way: God is not obliged to save humans by anything or anyone outside of himself, but it appears that he freely chooses to require that the response to his gift not only include an intellectual assent to the Gospel and a trust in his ability to bring about final salvation, but also an obedient and lived out loyalty. Indeed, with some exceptions (i.e. the "free grace" movement) most Christian theologians would affirm, even if they use different ways of formulating the idea (i.e. even if they separate it from πίστις), that a truly Christian life must bear the fruits of obedience and good works in order for it to prove to be authentic (i.e. perseverance). Moreover, as Bates stresses, this allegiance to Christ is not a quantitative but qualitative idea; it is a "settled conviction and basic disposition." Asking how much allegiance is required is to ask the wrong question, it is rather better to ask what sort of allegiance is required or to whom one owes it—one thinks here of the rich ruler in the Gospels whose one failing (in Matthew's version), in this reviewer's view, appears to be a failure to give undivided allegiance to Jesus. Bates puts it this way:

Initial declared allegiance (*pistis*) to Jesus the king forges a union with the king and his body (the church), and this union is upheld subsequently through embodied allegiance, an enacted loyalty that is inclusive of good deeds.

This union with Christ enables the believer to share in the righteousness of Christ, who has already been declared righteous. The author develops these ideas further in chapter eight.

At first, chapters six (“Resurrection and New Creation”) and seven (“Restoring the Idol of God”) are surprising because they seem somewhat disconnected from the flow of the previous chapters and while correspondences with the allegiance thesis do emerge, they are not as explicit as they could have been and an explanatory transition here would have been welcome. Nevertheless, the two chapters stand out as stimulating discourses on the important biblical-theological topics of new creation and the image of God. It becomes apparent to the reader at this point that the argument is widening in scope to a more comprehensive consideration of New Testament salvation. In chapter six Bates rightly shows that New Testament salvation is not primarily concerned with the individual soul reaching heaven but with God’s re-creation of heaven and earth and the bodily resurrection of God’s people. Chapter eight then parses out further the implications of salvation for humans as the transformed image bearers of God in the new creation who mirror Jesus the Christ, the authentic and full bearer of the image of God.

Chapter eight is clearly presented as the crucial and climactic chapter of the book, where Bates considers the allegiance thesis in terms of justification and the righteousness of God. Bates argues that the New Testament evidence does not provide a systematic “order of salvation” of which justification is one step in the process. Rather, along with many contemporary theologians, Bates stresses the primacy of the union of believers with Christ. However, he stresses that justification is a past, present and future reality of the believer as evidenced by ongoing participation with the Christ.

Eschewing both a strictly imputational (Reformed, Protestant) view and the impartation (Roman Catholic) view, Bates proposes that the righteousness of God in Paul is “*God’s resurrection-effecting verdict that Jesus the wrath-bearing, sin-atonement, allegiant king is alone righteous—a verdict that all who are united to Jesus the representative king share.*” Yet, Bates thinks separating the righteousness of salvation from the righteousness of sanctification—typical in most protestant formulations—does not bear out the scriptural evidence. Rather, righteousness is at once “*declared, realized and effective,*” beginning at baptism and the receipt of the Holy Spirit—the initial union with Christ—and continuing via union with Christ as ongoing allegiance (πίστις). Bates calls this view “**incorporated righteousness.**”

The concluding chapter (9) then considers concretely how to “practice allegiance.”

Here, Bates encourages the reader to focus on the whole Gospel story of Jesus, and on Jesus as king, instead of on a procedure which tends to individualize and reduce the Gospel to a formula, and in the worst case scenario, present a false assurance. Accordingly, Bates writes that “discipleship is salvation,” and that “final salvation is not possible apart from a path of genuine discipleship.”

Salvation by Allegiance Alone is an important book even if one does not fully agree with its thesis because it brings to the fore important exegetical theological questions with view to Christian praxis. It will certainly prove to be a conversation starter. In my view, Bates gets at something very true about the nature of Biblical πίστις. I am not yet certain if adopting “allegiance” as a replacement word for “faith” is the best way forward, and I certainly doubt that such a change will be made broadly in Bible translations. However, that concepts like “allegiance,” “loyalty,” or “fidelity” are present in the semantic range of πίστις is clear, and Bates’ argument will help teachers of scripture be more aware of this wider and deeper aspect of the term and concept. In short, the church needs to do better in teaching what “faith” actually means, and Bates’ work will be a meaningful contribution to that development. I also note here the helpful questions provided at the end of each chapter, making the book an excellent resource for a course on New Testament soteriology.

However, I have observed what I think are missing elements that could have strengthened the argument. First, although I applaud Bates’ call to a more full Gospel, inclusive of and climaxing in Jesus’ kingship. However, I wonder why, in the eight-part full Gospel, the specific teaching and works of Jesus (see Acts 10:38–39) find no place. Whether or not and to what extent the teaching of Jesus is an underlying presumption in Paul’s letters, it is clearly a central focus in the Gospel accounts. In other words, Jesus did not just teach *about* his own story, but he taught about how to live as a subject in the kingdom of God. Perhaps this is meant to be implicit in #2: “Jesus took on human flesh,” but it is not explicitly stated.

Relatedly, Bates seems to put the accent on Pauline theology, as the climax of the book is clearly in chapter eight with lengthy discussions on justification and righteousness. But I would think the author would have benefited from more emphasis on the Gospels themselves. Most Gospels scholars understand that the evangelists, to some degree, portray the disciples in a transparent way, such that readers are meant to identify with them as they follow Jesus within the narrative. Since the teaching of the Messiah himself very explicitly includes a call to follow and even to “take up one’s cross,” the idea of allegiance is very explicit in the Gospels’ presentation of discipleship. Not following Jesus is consequently portrayed

as a lack of belief in him. Thus, more of a focus on discipleship in the Gospels, and Jesus' own teaching on righteousness would have strengthened the thesis of the book.

Other ideas that in my view would have also contributed to Bates' argument are "covenant" and "love." Clearly "covenant" is a very important OT concept and one that is applied in the NT writings as well in relationship to Jesus' atoning death. While διαθήκη ("covenant") is not that common of a term in the NT, it nevertheless lies in the Jewish background of the period and is a term that rightly understood in its OT context is a relationship of gift and responsibility (allegiance) between God and his people. In the main, both trust and allegiance are integral to Israel's covenant responsibilities with YHWH and Jesus' own faithfulness to God the Father should be seen in light of his covenant keeping as a faithful Jew of the first century. What is new then is the advent of Jesus as Israel's Messiah who initializes the new covenant of the messianic age, so that now the Messiah King is the one to whom allegiance must be given. I wonder then if πίστις is a term that well describes the new covenant in Christ. Romans 3:3 and its concept of reciprocal πίστις surely is suggestive of covenant.

Furthermore, "love" (i.e. ἀγάπη) as the underlying act of covenant faithfulness is a major NT concept that is compatible with faith as fidelity. "Allegiance" by itself and without explanation could be taken to mean a kind of dutiful loyalty without any sort of emotional relational content. For me, this is a significant problem with this particular term, even though I fully agree that allegiance is an important and neglected aspect of πίστις. But the love command, both taught by Jesus and alluded to throughout the New Testament, is not simply one of the ways people faithfully respond to Jesus, it is the basis of how one shows allegiance to Jesus. Indeed, if one could best summarize what fidelity to the Messiah should look like, could one do better than the great commandment? Love, or, ἀγάπη rightly understood, is a necessary component of faith(fulness), and in my view may have served Bates well as the crucial factor of embodied fidelity.

Emphasizing "love" here is also a reminder that, like "faith," and perhaps like other crucial biblical terms, for example "grace" or "glory," too much familiarity with a word without a deeper understanding of the underlying concept in historical context can often breed distortion, incompleteness, and error. Clearly "love" is another word that carries a very different meaning in our wider culture that influences its use in the church. Theologians and Biblical scholars must continue to labor faithfully at exegeting these concepts in context so that the teaching of the Messiah remains fresh and clear across cultures and in new generations. Thankfully, Matthew Bates has given us a good example of exegetical retrieval and realignment in his study of πίστις as allegiance. Readers themselves will have to decide whether to generally jettison "faith" for "allegiance" or to rather keep

“faith” with a more robust understanding of its full meaning. At the very least, exegesis of individual texts where πίστις occurs will need to wrestle with the possibility of the allegiance argument.

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Brant M. Himes

For a Better Worldliness: Abraham Kuyper, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Discipleship for the Common Good.

Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018, 214 pages.

In a book of intriguing title, which ensued from a doctoral dissertation, Brant M. Himes connects life and thinking of two Christian theologians about discipleship. What does a Dutch Calvinist, founder of a university and a political party, pastor, journalist, and prime minister (Abraham Kuyper) have in common with a German Lutheran pastor, theologian, spy, and a co-conspirator on Hitler's life (Dietrich Bonhoeffer)? Apart from the obvious answer that both were Christians, they shared a rich theological and practical commitment to following Jesus Christ in discipleship that did not stop at their personal or even ecclesial lives but continued to influence the world. Indeed, both were “worldly” Christians, not in terms of their engagement with immorality and sin as Christians most commonly use this term, but in terms of their commitment to the well-being of the world.

Himes has delimited his study to the last ten years of their lives. His book attempts to answer the question what it means to follow Christ (14) by comparing historical and theological motifs from Kuyper and Bonhoeffer's lives. In their writings, he recognizes “a four-movement framework (or hermeneutic) of discipleship,” involving God's revelation as its foundation, sovereignty of Christ as its reality, belief-obedience as its action, and common good of the world as its possibility (13). The first part of the book is devoted to Kuyper. In the first chapter, the author locates this framework of discipleship, primarily in his work *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology: Its Principles* (23), which Kuyper wrote to train “everyday citizens for the kingdom of God” (24). According to Kuyper, theology is soteriological in its means but not in its end. In other words, God did not send his Son only to save those who will believe in Him but also to show love towards the world. Christ's incarnation confirms the goodness of God's first creation and of his promise of re-creation. Holy Spirit forms the church as an organism and empowers “belief and obedience” (32). Discipleship is an everyday task of the church in a world that is “ever changing and adapting,” which means that “possibilities of discipleship were contextually unique and culturally challenging” (34).