

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Bogus Faith

J Gresham Machen in his excellent book, *What is Faith?*, writes, “At the beginning of the Christian life there is an act of God and of God alone. It is called in the New Testament the new birth or (as Paul calls it) the new creation. In that act no part whatever is contributed by the man who is born again. And no wonder! A man who is dead- either dead in physical death or “dead in trespasses and sins”- can do nothing whatever, at least in the sphere in which he is dead. Such a man who is dead in trespasses and sins is raised to new life in the new birth or the new creation. To that new birth he himself cannot contribute at all, any more than he contributes to his physical birth. But birth is followed by life; and though a man is not active in his birth he is active in the life that follows. So it is also in the spiritual realm. We did not contribute at all to our new birth; that was an act of God alone. That new birth is followed by a new life, and in the new life we have been given by Him who begat us anew the power of action; it is that power of action that is involved in birth. Thus the Christian life is begun by an act of God alone; but it is continued by co-operations between God and man. The possibility of such co-operation is due indeed only to God; it has not been achieved in slightest measure by us; it is the supreme wonder of God’s grace. But once given by God it is not withdrawn. Thus the Christian life in this world is not passive but active; it consists in a mighty battle against sin. That battle is a winning battle, because the man that engages in it has been made alive in the first place by God, and because he has a great companion to help him in every turn of the fight. But, though a winning battle is it a battle all the same; and it is not only God’s battle but ours. The faith of which we have been speaking consists not in doing something but in receiving something; but it is followed every time by a life in which great things are done.”¹

I. THE SCOPE AND DESIGN OF JAMES

James’ scope is totally different from Paul’s, as a reading of the context makes clear. James is not dealing with the meritorious ground of justification- Paul is. James is contending with a type of antinomianism, which in effect is reducible to what we would call *easy-believism*. At this point, it may be remembered that both Martin Luther and John Calvin responded rather explicitly to the Roman Catholic analysis of these assertions of James. As Calvin says: “That we may not fall into that false reasoning which has deceived the Sophists [the Romanists], we must take notice of the two-fold meaning of the word justified. Paul means by it the gratuitous imputation of righteousness before the tribunal of God; and James, the manifestation of righteousness by the conduct, and that before men, as we may gather from the preceding words, ‘Show me thy faith.’”²

II. JAMES TERMINOLOGY

James and Paul do indeed use the same words in speaking of faith and justification, but they are not used in the same way.

A. What Does James Mean by Faith?

Everything hinges on how this word is being used by James. Note the context: “If a man claims to have faith...”(2:14). The word-translated *claim* in the NIV and *says* in the ESV is LEGA which means ‘to say’ or simply ‘profess.’ The same thought is stated again in verse 19.

“You *believe* that there is one God. Good! Even the demons *believe* that- and shudder.” In this context, the word believe is being used in the sense of affirmation or assent. It is what I would call head-nodding faith. “What Paul means by faith is something entirely different; it is not mere intellectual assent to certain propositions, but an attitude of the entire man by which the whole life is intrusted to Christ. In other words, the faith that James is condemning is not the faith that Paul is condemning.”³ Mark Devers writes that “The problem, in part, is with this English word believe,” because in our vocabulary it refers to an intellectual concept. When I say, “I believe the world is round,” I am stating that my mind “believes” the world is round even though I have never seen the earth from outer space or walked around the whole planet. My “belief” refers to an intellectual concept, not necessarily to a deep and abiding trust. But in the Bible, “belief” refers not to just an intellectual recognition but also to a deep and abiding trust. When we fail to understand this, we begin to misinterpret parts of the Bible. For example, John 3:16 reads, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” We hear that and tend to think it refers simply to a cognitive belief. *The Amplified Bible* captures well what John 3:16 means: “For God so greatly loved and dearly prized the world that He (even) gave up his only-begotten (unique) Son, that whoever believes in (trusts, clings to, relies upon) Him shall not perish (come to destruction, be lost) but have eternal (everlasting) life.” Did you catch that? Believing is a clinging to, a relying on, a trusting in. That is the biblical idea of “belief,” and that is what James is talking about in chapter 2. A believer is not one who intellectually recognizes God but does not employ his or her faith. Rather, a believer is one who lives our God’s Word. We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves us never alone. It is always accompanied by visible acts and evidences.”⁴

B. What Does James Mean by Works?

Again, we need to carefully distinguish what James means by works and what Paul means. Paul is referring to those things which are intended to earn or merit salvation by human effort. James is talking about that which is the fruit of faith, that which is evidence of genuine faith (which Paul likewise alludes to in Galatians 5:21). In question 91 the Heidelberg Catechism discusses the Scriptural truth concerning good works. Briefly it tells us that good works are “only those which proceed from a true faith, are performed according to the law of God, and to his glory; and not such as are founded on our own imagination, or the institutions of men. They are not works that are based on our own imaginations or upon the institutions of men, according to the Heidelberg Catechism but that are in harmony with the law of God. As far as their material is concerned, therefore, good works are always those that are in accord with the will of God as revealed unto us in Scripture and as briefly expressed in the moral law. God alone is good and his will is good. And he alone has the prerogative and is able to determine what is good. Good works therefore are first of all characterized by unconditional and unquestioning obedience to the will of God. When God speaks, we are silent. When He commands, we obey without murmuring, without objection and without reservation. We never assume the authority to determine for ourselves what shall be called good. In Romans 12:1 the apostle writes: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.” And in Galatians 5:13,14: “For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” And in Ephesians 2:10: “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.” The last quoted passage is especially significant, for it emphasizes the truth that our good works are the fruit of grace of God, and that they were ordained by God evidently for all eternity, that we should walk in those works. God’s workmanship we are. He performed in us in order that we should do good works. But even these works were ordained for every one of us before the foundation of the world by God Himself. For the believer⁵ it is a God-given privilege that he may walk in those good works.

C. What Does James Mean by Justify?

James' meaning is clear from his illustration of Abraham. Note that this is drawn from Genesis 22. Abraham's act in that passage is the demonstration of what is stated in Genesis 15:6, "The statement of Genesis 15:6 is seen as fulfilled, completed, incarnated in the concrete reality of Abraham's obedience of Genesis 22."⁶

SUMMARY: It is remarkable that James appeals in this way to the example of Abraham. Whereas the apostle Paul appeals to the example of Abraham to prove that we are justified freely, by grace alone through faith alone apart from works, James appeals to Abraham as an example of someone whose faith was lively and active in good works! Just as Paul cites Genesis 15:6, which speaks of Abraham's faith being reckoned by God as righteousness, so does James. But the point seems to be utterly different, even contradictory. When the apostle Paul cites the example of Abraham in Romans 4, he does so in order to prove the doctrine that we are justified quite apart from works done in obedience to the law. This is the point that Paul labors to illustrate throughout Romans 4: Abraham was justified before he received the seal of the righteousness of faith in circumcision. Before Abraham had done anything in the way of obedience, his faith was reckoned to him for righteousness. But James appeals to Abraham in order to make a different point: "Was not Abraham, our father, justified by works, when he offered up Isaac, his son, on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of works, faith was perfected. And the scripture was fulfilled which says, 'And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness, and he was called a friend of God.' You see that a man is justified by works not by that kind of faith."⁷ What are we to understand James to be telling us in answer to the question that he has put before us? Is he teaching that Abraham found acceptance with God on the basis of his works? On a superficial reading of James' argument, one might conclude that he is arguing that Abraham's standing before God rested, not upon faith alone as it embraces Christ, but upon his work. The crux of the difficulty here can be put in the form of a question: Is James using the language of justification in these verses in the same way the apostle Paul in Romans? If he is, then the conclusion seems unavoidable: James is contradicting Paul. Contrary to Paul's teaching that Abraham was justified by faith alone, James is teaching that he was justified by his works. We are faced here with a flat contradiction. Either Paul is right or James is right. But they cannot both be right! You cannot say that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law on one hand, and then say as well that a man is justified by works using the term exactly as in the previous expression. I agree with Venema, when he writes, "that we need to bear in mind the different problems that Paul and James are addressing, respectively. Paul is opposing the idea that we are justified on the basis of our works. James is opposing the idea that the faith that saves can be a dead and inactive thing. In the context of James' argument and the question he seeks to address in James 2, James is using the term justify in one of its common senses. The term justify can be used as a synonym for demonstrate, confirm or prove true. In this sense of the term, Abraham was justified by works in the sense that his faith was proven genuine by its works. Just as a tree is known by its fruit, so faith is known by its deeds. For example, in the case of Abraham, his willingness to sacrifice Isaac in obedience to God's command was proof of the genuineness of his faith."⁸

CONCLUSION: Accordingly, we may conclude that the term justify in James 2 has, to use the language of theology, a probative or demonstrative meaning. Such a meaning is in harmony with the question posed in these verses, namely, how genuineness of faith is manifested before others. That's also why James concludes this appeal to Abraham by saying "and the Scripture was fulfilled." Abraham's act of faith in being willing to sacrifice Isaac, which is recorded in Genesis 22, was a fulfillment, a confirmation, of what was earlier declared about him in Genesis 15:6. Though Abraham was justified by faith alone, the faith by which he was justified proved itself genuine in his act of obedience. His obedience was the fruit of his trust in God (and not, as Shepard contends, the grounds for his justification). James, contrary to Roman Catholic teaching, does *not* teach that Abraham's faith in Genesis 15:6 was at first imperfect, incomplete and then gradually, was progressively made full by his works. Genesis 22 gave evidence that Abraham's faith was real faith and had always been the right kind of faith and so was completed. Faith, in the Biblical sense is always validated as a living faith, e.g. it is fruitful and productive. If there had been no fruit forthcoming, Abraham's faith would not have been

genuine and would not have counted for anything to begin with. “In short,” writes Warfield, “James is not depreciating faith: with him, too, it is faith that is reckoned unto righteousness (2:23), though only such a faith as shows itself in works can be so reckoned because a faith which does not come to fruition in works is dead, no-existent. He is rather deepening the idea of faith, and insisting that it includes in its very conception something more than an otiose intellectual assent.”⁹ The late James Boice put it this way “ What is really bothering James is that this intellectual, ineffective, useless, incomplete and dead faith is without works. And when he is speaking about works, he does not mean the kind of works that arise out of our own corrupt natures, that Paul says God curses. He means rather the works that come out of the heart of a man of woman who has been reborn and has entered into a lifetime of obedient service based upon union with Jesus Christ. If such works are not present as an expression of our union with Christ, then James denies the reality of the union at all.”¹⁰

ENDNOTES

¹ J Gresham Machen, *What is Faith?* (opt. Eerdmans, 1979) pp.207-208

² *Calvin's New testament Commentaries III* (Eerdmans, 1972), p.286

³ J. Gresham Machen's Notes on Galatians. Ed. John Skilton (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), p.20. In order to completely capture the Biblical understanding of faith, the Reformers spoke of faith in three-fold sense. First, faith must rest on knowledge. It must have content. This they called NOTITIA (English words like notice, notify, and cognitive, are derived from this Latin word). Faith must involve the mind, but not merely in terms of information. It must include assent or agreement as a necessary component. This is ASSENSUS. But by far the most important element of FIDES (faith) is what the Reformers called FIDUCIA, which simply translated, means trust (words like *fiducial* and *fidelity* are derived from this). Thus when the Reformers referred to *Sola Fides*, they had in mind this three-fold understanding of the word *Fides*. Calvin wrote “ we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence towards us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.” Calvin emphasizes what is stated by Paul in Romans, namely, that true faith is in God's freely offered salvation through the work of Christ. But he adds, as Paul suggests in Ephesians 2:8-10 though not in Romans 3, that this is the work of the Holy Spirit in us. As cited in J.M. Boice, *Romans: An Expository Commentary I* (Baker, 1991), p.388.

⁴ M. Dever, *The Message of the New Testament* (Crossway, 2005) p.434

⁵ This section is adapted from Herman Hoeksema, *The Triple Knowledge: An exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism III* (Reformed Free Publishing, 1972), pp.104-106

⁶ G.C. Berkouwer. *Studies in Dogmatics: Faith and Justification* (Eerdmans, 1954), p.136.

⁷ Translations differ as to whether the final phrase is best understood as “faith by itself is dead” or it is “*that kind* of faith is dead by itself” i.e., in its very essence. The first could be called a tautology that would amount to a strong emphasis by James upon the “aloneness” of this dead faith. The other viewpoint would emphasize the faith that a workless faith is, by nature, dead or lifeless. Cf. James White, *The God Who Justifies: The Doctrine of Justification* (Bethany House, 2001). P.338

⁸ Venema, op.cit. I am indebted to Dr. Venema and his insightful handling of this passage in James.

⁹ B.B. Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies* (rpt. Presbyterian and Reformed, 1968). P.416

¹⁰ J.M. Boice, *Sure, and Believe- So What!* (Christian Focus Publication, 1994), p.63