

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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<b>Series:</b>	<b>Reformation Studies</b>		Pastor/Teacher
<b>Number:</b>	<b>13</b>		Gary L.W. Johnson
<b>Text:</b>	<b>Galatians 2:15, 16; James 2:14-26</b>		
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### PAUL AND JAMES ON JUSTIFICATION

We often hear the claim that Roman Catholicism has changed her views on justification since the Council of Trent in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, many voices within Evangelicalism celebrate the changes they see occurring in the Roman Catholic Church on the debate over justification.<sup>1</sup> However, upon closer analysis this claim proves to be false. Rome has not changed her view on the subject in any significant way. In Rahner and Vorgrimler's *Dictionary of Theology*, a recent Roman Catholic publication, we find this brief exposition of justification: "Justification is the event in which God, by a free act of love, brings man . . . into that relationship with him which a holy God demands of man. . . . He does so by giving man a share in the divine nature. This happens when God causes the Holy Spirit . . . to dwell efficaciously in the depths of man's being as the spirit of the adoption of sons, of freedom and of holiness, divinizing him, and gives him proof of this new creation . . . through the word of faith and the signs of the sacraments. This justice, which is not merely imputed in juridical fashion but makes a man truly just, is at the same time the forgiveness of sins. . . . There can be no reflexive certainty of salvation for any individual. . . . This justice, God-given and received, can also be lost if man rejects divine love by serious sin. . . . Man can both preserve and continually increase it [justification]."<sup>2</sup> An even more recent defense of Rome's vision states, "Christ accomplished our justification by dying on the cross. But the Bible teaches us that we are made holy over time (the process of sanctification), and this process involves suffering. Purgatory is just the final stage of sanctification for those in need of purification prior to entering the perfect and eternal banquet of heaven."<sup>3</sup> I pointed out last week that people today show little if any interest in theology per se, and especially in the doctrine of justification, because the Biblical understanding of sin has been lost. David Wells perceptively points out, "It is important to see what has happened if we are to understand where best to seek answers to the many dilemmas in contemporary life. Two problems in particular have come to the fore. First, we now have no transcendent reference point outside of ourselves. Second, sin has become a conceptual impossibility. However, since we continue to sin, much of our life has become inexplicable to us. These losses in understanding are lethal to our discovery of who we are as human beings and so to our identity."<sup>4</sup>

One of the reasons that sin in our times has become a conceptual impossibility even in our churches is due to neglect of the Law of God. Three things happen when the law is eclipsed. First and foremost, the Gospel is obscured. Second (and this may surprise some people), legalism spreads. "A low view of the law," said Machen, "leads to legalism, while a high view of the law makes a person a seeker after grace."<sup>5</sup> Third, hand in hand with legalism goes antinomianism. All three of these are characteristic of much that passes for modern Evangelicalism. This dramatically affects how we understand and proclaim the

Gospel. Paul's language in Romans and Galatians is crystal clear: justification is by faith alone – apart from the works of the law (or any other kind of works, cf. Ephesians 2:8, 9). What about those puzzling statements in the epistle of James, especially the one that categorically says: "You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone" (James 2:24)? There seems to be a glaring contradiction between Paul and James. Some have even said that James is specifically refuting Paul's teaching.<sup>6</sup> For those who accept the Bible as the very Word of God, this is unacceptable; Scripture does not contradict Scripture.<sup>7</sup> A careful examination of James will reveal that there is no contradiction between the two. Having said this, we must, however, be aware of a false harmonization. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, likewise seeks to bring both texts into harmony with their twofold justification. They consider the first justification (Paul's teaching) to be an infusion of grace and a renewal of life in the new birth. The second justification (James' teaching), they consider to be growth in the grace of justification in which, by means of works and merits, Christians grow (by sanctification) in their justification. In this scheme sanctification is unto justification. This is just the opposite of what the Reformers (and the Bible) taught – justification is unto sanctification.

- I. **THE SCOPE AND DESIGN OF JAMES.** The scope of James 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. R. C. Sproul writes, "Clearly Paul and James are not occupied with identical concerns. Neither are they addressing the same problem. Paul is concerned with the theological issue of how a sinner may be considered righteous before the tribunal. He is expounding the gospel of justification. James's concern is somewhat different. He specifies the question he is answering: *What good is it, my brothers, if someone says that he professes faith but does not have works? Can his faith save him?*"<sup>8</sup>
- II. **JAMES'S 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 is *legēi*, 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 entrusted to Christ. In other words, the faith that James is condemning is not the faith that Paul is commending."<sup>9</sup>
  - 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).<sup>10</sup>
  - C. **What Does James Mean by Justify?** James's 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."<sup>11</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** 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; i.e., 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 fruitage in works is dead, nonexistent. He is rather deepening the idea of faith and insisting that it include in its very conception something more than an otiose intellectual assent."<sup>12</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> M. A. Noll and C. Nystrom, *Is The Reformation Over? An Evangelical Assessment of Contemporary Roman Catholicism* (Baker, 2005). The answer they give is a somewhat nervous YES . . . sort of! I personally think that Noll and Nystrom have fallen prey to a verbal smokescreen. What do I mean by this? Just because the language being used is the same does not imply agreement. A better assessment is the one offered by Leonard De Chirico, who writes, "Roman Catholicism sees justification as a gradual and progressive process through which the righteousness of Christ is increasingly infused into a person and is therefore not seen as a declarative act of God through which the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the sinner. Justification is not a theological relic of a distant past. It is indeed key for grasping the good news of Christ. Roman Catholicism uses the same word but has a completely different understanding and explanation of the theology of that word, massively affecting its practice." Cf. his *Same Words, Different Worlds* (IVP, 2021), p. 49.

<sup>2</sup> As cited by A. A. Hoekema, *Saved By Grace* (Eerdmans, 1989), p. 168. I highly recommend anything written by Hoekema.

<sup>3</sup> M. Hart and J. Cady, *Truth Be Told: Basics in Roman Catholic Apologetics* (LifeTeen, 2012), p. 192.

<sup>4</sup> D. F. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why The Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Eerdmans, 1998), p. 123.

<sup>5</sup> J. G. Machen, *What is Faith?* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1979), p. 141.

<sup>6</sup> This position gained rapid acceptance in the 19<sup>th</sup> century due to the influence of F. C. Baur and the Tubigen school, in which Hegelian philosophy was used to analyze the New Testament documents. This mentality is still very much with as witnessed by the Jesus Seminar. They have announced that they will turn their attention to the epistles of Paul as their next project. What you will see is simply the Tubigen hypothesis dressed up in modern garb and trotted out as the latest in New Testament scholarship; i.e., the infamous "Jesus Seminar."

<sup>7</sup> Calvin said in this connection, "It is sure that the Spirit is not in conflict with himself." *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles (The Westminster Press, 1975), III, xvii, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Baker, 1995), p. 163.

<sup>9</sup> J. Gresham Machen's *Note on Galatians*, ed. John Skilton (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), p. 220.

<sup>10</sup> "It must be remembered," comments J. I. Packer, "that Paul is the only New Testament writer to use justify regularly for God's act of accepting man." *God's Words: Studies of Key Bible Themes* (InterVarsity, 1981), p. 146.

<sup>11</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Faith and Justification* (Eerdmans, 1954), p. 136.

<sup>12</sup> B. B. Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies* (rpt. P & R, 1968), p. 416.