

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Galatians		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	17		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Galatians 3:6-14; Romans 4:1-4; James 2:14-26		
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PAUL AND JAMES ON JUSTIFICATION

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 work, 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.¹ For those who accept the Bible as the very Word of God, this is unacceptable. Scripture does not contradict Scripture.² 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.** 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*. “James,” wrote the old Dutch Puritan Wilhelmus à Brakel, “had to deal with a group of people who were loose in their lifestyle, and agreed with the truth that man can only be justified by faith without works. They abused this truth by suggesting that it was not necessary to live a godly life and to perform good works. James therefore did not need to convince them that one can be justified by faith without the works of the law for in this they agreed. James states this very clearly in 2:23, *and the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness*. We observe that Paul and James use the very same words and they thus agree with each other.”³
- 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 is *legei*, 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.”⁴

NOTE: In order to completely capture the Biblical understanding of faith, the Reformers spoke of faith in a threefold 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 threefold understanding of the word *Fides*.

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 other words, this faith is declarative, i.e., it manifests, that is, it is genuine.

C. ***What Does James Mean by Justify?***⁵ 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

CONCLUSION: Alexander Comerie (1706-1774) came from a long line of Scottish preachers. He captured the essence of the human condition, writing, "That person who in some measure takes religion seriously will generally espouse the misconception and pernicious error through his innate blindness that he will please God and will indeed be saved if he can refrain from sin and practice the religious virtues demanded of him. This misconception is to be observed not only among the virtuous heathen but even among those that profess Christianity. What other purpose does the entire theological construction of the Pelagians, papists, Socinians, and Arminians serve but to stir up a man to exercise his free will in order to please God and be happy? It is lamentable that this error has become so deeply rooted in the depraved nature of every professor of the truth even though the gospel has been placed upon the candlestick in its clarity. Every person who in some measure understands that he cannot be saved if he continues in the way of sin begins zealously to commit himself to performing duties. He is very much at peace and is confident that God is his God upon detecting some progress in this performance. Yes, this misconception has so infected fallen man as a sickness and leprosy, and none but God Himself, by His Spirit, is able to bring about some healing. Moreover, such healing progresses but slowly when it has been initiated in some measure, and it will only come to fruition upon death."⁷ Paul and James would both wholeheartedly agree! 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, non-existent. He is rather deepening the idea of faith, and insisting that it include in its very conception something more than an otiose intellectual assent."⁸

ENDNOTES

¹This position gained rapid acceptance in the 19th century due to the influence of F. C. Baur and the Tübingen school in which Hegelian philosophy was used to analyze the New Testament documents. This mentality is still very much with us 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 Tübingen hypothesis dressed up in modern garb and trotted out as the latest in New Testament scholarship.

²Calvin 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, 11.

³W. á Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service* II, translated by Bartel Elshout (Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1993), p. 365.

⁴J. Gresham Machens *Notes on Galatians*, ed. John Skilton (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), p. 220.

⁵"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.

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

⁷Alexander Comerie, *Distinctive Marks of Saving Faith* (rpt. Reformation Heritage Books, 2024), p. 9.

⁸B. B. Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies* (rpt. Presbyterian and Reformed, 1968), p. 416.