



Can a lonely faith justify?

"What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,' and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so, faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. But someone may well say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one. You do well. The demons also believe and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless. 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 the 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 the friend of God.' You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead."

James 2:14-26

Until now in this series of articles on justification, I have only set forth the doctrine of justification. In doing so, we have considered what is meant by the claim that *justification* is by *grace alone* on account of *Christ alone* through *faith alone*. I have attempted to present a Scriptural summary of what this great doctrine teaches us about God's grace. This teaching is succinctly stated by the Apostle Paul in Romans 3:28: *"Therefore, we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law."*

On the basis of this and other passages, we noted that justification has to do with God's declaration as Judge of our innocence. Upon the basis of the work of Christ on our behalf, God declares us to be acceptable to Him. Not only are our sins forgiven, but God also grants and *imputes* to us the perfect righteousness of Christ so that it becomes ours. This bestowal or *imputation* of Christ's righteousness to us is a free gift that we receive by the hand of faith alone. Faith is the exclusive instrument by which to receive what God grants to us by grace. Such faith repudiates all thought of merit, and finds its life and sustenance in Christ alone. Only in this way are we justified, and does God's grace receive all praise and honor in our salvation.

A common objection

There is, however, a common, oft-repeated complaint against this teaching. The apostle Paul anticipates it in Romans 6 when he says, *"Shall we sin then that grace abound?"* This complaint or objection is that, if we are saved by grace alone, quite apart from any works done in obedience to the law of God, and if all we need do is receive that with the empty hand of faith, will that not make us *"careless and profane"* (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 24)? If God justifies us by grace alone apart from works, will that not lead to what we sometimes call *"antinomianism"*? Will we not be tempted to conclude that we may live any way we please, since our salvation is a free gift? That, regardless of the kind of life we live, God will nonetheless regard us as acceptable to Him? These questions cannot be ignored or avoided. The sheer graciousness of God's grace toward us in Christ compels us to confront them.

We are also compelled to confront this objection because it is central to the continuing polemic of the Roman Catholic Church against the doctrine of free justification. It has been a standard part of Roman Catholic teaching from the time of the Reformation that the doctrine of free justification dangerously undermines the necessity and importance of good works in the Christian life. The

doctrine of free justification, so it is argued, represents a kind of "legal fiction": God regards us "as if" we were righteous, when in fact we remain sinners as we were before.¹ According to this complaint, sinners, when they are saved, are not really changed by God's grace, and their lives undergo no real amendment.

Now I noted in an earlier article, in reply to the charge that free justification is a kind of "legal fiction," that it is anything but fictional. When God justifies us upon the basis of the righteousness of Christ that He grants and *imputes* to us, He does something most real. There is nothing fictional about God's act of granting to us in Christ what we need to stand before Him. If I may be permitted a comparison, that would be like a person who says, "So-and-so paid bond for me and on that basis obtained my release from jail; but, because I didn't personally meet that bond obligation, it's not real that I've been released." We would say that such a person is talking nonsense. Of course it's a reality, not fiction!

But what ultimately lies behind this objection to free justification — that it is a legal fiction — is the contention that the doctrine of free justification means that, when God declares men to be acceptable to Himself, He also leaves them in their sins. God's work of grace ends, terminates, upon justification, and doesn't bring with it the grace of sanctification as well.

In this connection, I am reminded of a poem by W. H. Auden, entitled *Luther*. Perhaps you are familiar with it. In this poem, Auden expresses vividly this common objection to the doctrine of justification, that it encourages complacency and an indifference to good works in the Christian life:

*Conscience cocked to listen for the thunder.
The views of judgment fluttered in his head.
All works, great men, societies are altogether bad.
The just shall live by faith, he cried in dread.
And men and women of the world were glad,
Who'd never cared or trembled in their lives.*

The point Auden is making is not hard to discover. Luther and the Reformation, with their doctrine of justification by grace alone through Christ alone, encouraged a kind of lifeless and profane indulgence of the grace of God. This is a doctrine that gladdens the heart of sinners, not in the sense of a proper joy in God's work of salvation, but in the sense of encouraging them to continue in their cherished sins that grace might abound.

The teaching of James 2

Invariably, this objection to the teaching of free justification appeals to the teaching of James 2. When the Roman Catholic Council of Trent condemned the doctrine of the Reformation, no passage of Scripture was more frequently cited than this one. According to the authors of the Council, James 2 offers a convincing proof of the error of the Reformation's teaching regarding justification. Contrary to the insistence that justification is by grace alone through faith alone, apart from works, the Apostle James clearly teaches that we are also justified by our works. The believer's justification is based upon God's grace, to be sure. But this grace produces good works done in obedience to the law of God which are also a part of the ground for our justification.

For this reason, Luther — who, as you may know, was a bit impetuous and given to impromptu remarks that demonstrated sometimes perhaps more zeal than wisdom — on one occasion, in his preface to his 1522 edition of the New Testament, remarked that the epistle of James is a "right strawy" epistle. Though Luther had better things to say about James on other occasions, in this instance he expressed his readiness to consign it to the flames, rather than allow it to stand against the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

Because of the importance of the issue and this common appeal to the teaching of James 2, it is necessary that, before we conclude our consideration of the doctrine of justification, we consider this passage. What does it teach us about the role of good works in the life of the believer? And does it contradict what we have claimed regarding our justification by grace alone through faith alone?

Luther's critical comment regarding James 2 is well known. What is not as well known is that Luther is reported to have remarked on one occasion in his table conversation:

"'Faith alone justifies.' That stands in flat contradiction to 'faith alone does not justify.' If anyone can harmonize these sayings (that is, the sayings of Paul in, for example, Romans 3:28, and the apostle James in James 2:21, 24), I'll put my doctor's cap upon him, and I'll grant him the privilege to call me a fool."

That will be our challenge in what follows: to see whether we can earn the right to wear Luther's doctor's cap and say of Luther, on this score at least, "He was not wise" (to put it in terms more polite than his!).

What I propose to do then is to address the question: Does the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone contradict the necessity or diminish the importance of good works in the life of the true Christian? This question, expressed more precisely in terms of the teaching of James 2, is: Does James 2, as Catholicism historically alleges, contradict the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone?

As I hope to show, the argument of James amounts to the claim that "a lonely faith does not justify." A lonely faith — that is, a faith that is unaccompanied by good works and therefore an empty and lifeless thing — does not save. However, James does not teach that good works are the ground or basis for our acceptance with God.

As we study these verses, there are two headings that I would like to set before you. First, I am going to look at these verses under the heading, "What is the question?" And then second, I propose to look at these verses under the heading, "What is the answer or the resolution?"

What is the question?

As a seminary professor, I often have the task of evaluating student papers. In doing so, I have come to recognize that a good paper ordinarily has a clear statement of the question it addresses. Thus, one of the basic questions I raise in the course of my evaluation is — to what question is this paper addressed? When no question is being asked (and no answer is therefore given), it's likely not a very good paper.

Verse 14. I mention that because, as we look together at James 2, it becomes immediately evident that James is a good preacher by this standard. He tells us at the outset in verse 14, what question he wishes to address. It is a question consistent with the character of the epistle generally, which is full of practical instruction in the Christian life: *"What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him?"*

There are some things that require careful notice in this opening verse. Notice first that James is posing a question regarding a man who is presently claiming to have faith. He uses the present tense of the verb: *"What use is it, brothers, if a man says he has faith?"* The focus is upon a professing believer, someone who is claiming to be a Christian. Furthermore, James uses language to call attention to the kind of faith of which this man boasts. *"If a man says he has faith, but he has no works, can that kind of faith save him?"* Literally, the text reads, "Can the faith save him" (not "that kind of"). It has the definite article, suggesting that James means to emphasize that the faith of which this man boasts is a faith devoid of good works — an empty faith, you might say. And the precise question he is asking is: Can a man who boasts of his faith, but a faith of the kind that is empty of good works, be saved by means of that kind of faith? The force, moreover, of the language James uses is such as to imply the answer, "Certainly not." Like many rhetorical questions, the answer to this one is not left in doubt.

Now that's not an unusual or difficult thing for us to understand. We are likely familiar with the words of the Lord, *"This people comes near me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."* These words refer to people whose religion is of the lip and the teeth and the tongue alone. Or again, consider the words of our Lord in Matthew 7, addressed to those who professed to have done many mighty works in His name:

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord!,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."

It is the one who does the Father's will whom Jesus will acknowledge as truly one of His disciples. To those who do not do the Father's will, however, He will say, *"Depart from me, you who practice lawlessness."*

And so the question here in James chapter 2, beginning at the 14th verse, is the question: Can a mere profession of faith, though it be a faith devoid of good works, save anyone?

Verses 15-17. But now we must go on to verses 15 through 17. In these verses, James provides a concrete example of the kind of thing he is talking about:

"If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; be warmed and be filled,' and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so, faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself."

Of what use, James is asking, is a faith that has no company in good works, that is "by itself," all alone in the corner, having no fruit or evidence that it is alive?

The illustration James uses is a simple one. He describes a Christian brother or sister who comes needing clothing and food. What good would it do to wish such a person well, but without doing anything to help in his or her need, James asks. The expression James uses here, "Go in peace," is much like our English expression, "goodbye." What good would be accomplished by tossing out the expression, "goodbye," wishing the person in need well, but without any accompanying action to alleviate his or her need?

This illustration reminds me of our common practice of greeting people with the expressions — "How are you?", "See you later," or "Have a good day." Perhaps you have been caught up short, as I have, by someone who responds to one of these expressions as though you literally meant what you were saying. What happens when someone responds, for example, with a lengthy explanation of the terrible day that they have had? Or they ask you, when do you hope to see them next? Usually, you feel rather sheepish, recognizing that these expressions are only a "manner of speaking," and do not reflect any serious intention of any corresponding action on your part. At a deeper level, this is the kind of thing of which James is speaking here, when he uses this rather simple illustration of a professing believer who wishes someone well, but has no real intention whatsoever of acting upon their words.

Verse 18. But now we come to verse 18. If you read commentaries on James 2, you will find that some of them go on for pages on verse 18 alone, dealing with such questions as: Where does James begin to speak? Where does his interlocutor, or his objector, begin or end his speaking? Much of this discussion is beside the point, however. The point of what James says in this verse is not difficult to see. Suppose, says James, someone comes and says, *"You have faith, I have works. Show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works."*

The critical issue that this verse raises has to do with whether there is an inseparable link between (true) faith and works. Or is it possible to separate between them? Is a faith, separated from any good works, the real thing? Because the issue has to do with this relation between faith and works, James speaks a little later in this passage of faith "working together with" works. The term he uses in this expression is synergy. The implication of this is that we may not divide between, or tear asunder, what God has put together. Faith and works are two sides of a single coin; if you have the one, you will necessarily have the other. There must be a synergy of faith and works.

To summarize: the question that this passage addresses is whether a dead, lifeless faith can save anyone. Even before James proceeds to his answer, the implication is clearly that it cannot.

However, it is not enough to have a clear understanding of the question James is addressing in this passage. It is also critical to notice that it occurs in a very particular setting. That setting is one in which there is a question among men as to the genuineness of the faith of a professed believer.

The issue is not whether God is able to discern the genuineness of a believer's faith. No doubt, as One who alone is able to examine the heart, God knows precisely whether anyone is a true believer or not. But this dispute as to the genuineness of faith takes place among professed believers. The context of this question is a profession of faith which needs to be tested by others as to its genuineness. Though God knows perfectly well whether this claim to have faith is a valid one, the concern of this question focuses upon how others can be assured that this claim is true.

Though the importance of this setting for understanding the kind of question James is asking will become more clear in our next article, it seems quite apparent that God does not have to wait until our faith expresses itself in good works to know whether it is the genuine article or not. If I may run ahead a little bit in the text, did God have to wait until Abraham demonstrated his obedience in the matter of the sacrifice of Isaac in order to know for the first time that the faith that *"was reckoned unto him as righteousness"* in Genesis 15 was a true faith? Thus, the context for the question here is a dispute between and among those who profess to believe. I stress that, because the issue of justification, as we have previously argued, is where do we stand with God, not the question, is our faith confirmed, evidenced, and shown to others to be genuine by our doing of those works that proceed from faith?

Verses 19-20. Notice, as we go on in this passage, what is further stated in verses 19 and 20.

"You believe," says James, "that God is one. You do well. The demons also believe and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless or dead?"

In these verses it becomes especially clear that the faith of someone who professes to believe, but who does no good works, is no true faith at all. Such faith is the kind that even the demons possess. The apostle James uses vivid language in verse 19, *"The demons also believe and shudder."*

One commentator on the text observes that James uses an expression that suggests the behavior of a cat when it has been frightened by something. It draws itself up and, in a state of trembling and fear, faces off against its enemy. Similarly, the demons, though they know who "the Christ" is, tremble at the truth concerning Him. They know that God is one, but this knowledge is not the expression of a true and living faith.

Perhaps you are familiar with the common distinction in Christian theology between the three aspects of true faith — knowledge, assent, and trust. True faith requires, but does not consist only in, a knowledge of the truth (notitia), for example, that God is one, or that Christ is the Son of God, or that He made atonement for our sins. It also requires, in addition to the knowledge of the truth, a conviction of the truth of what is known (assensus). It involves a knowledge and an assent to what is known. However, even knowledge coupled with assent does not constitute true and saving faith. True faith includes more than such knowledge and conviction. One can know and even be convinced of the truth, and yet lack that trust (fiducia) that belongs integrally to true faith, namely, the confidence of salvation in Jesus Christ. Unless a person knows about, assents to, and trusts in the saving work of Jesus Christ, true faith is not present.

James, accordingly, argues that the faith of the demons is no true faith. For, though the demons believe, their believing is devoid of any conviction or trust in Jesus Christ unto salvation. The faith of the demons is not the rich and living reality of true faith. Contrary to true faith, which is marked by confidence in God's grace and works through love (compare Galatians 5:6), the faith of the demons yields only a fearful prospect of God's judgment. The language of verse 19 reinforces this contrast. This verse speaks of the demons believing "that God is one."

It doesn't speak of their believing "in" or "upon" God. However, in the New Testament, when the true faith of the Christian is described, it is commonly described as an act whereby someone believes "in" or "upon" or "into" Christ or the promises of the gospel.

Perhaps a simple analogy will prove helpful here. I have a daughter who is fifteen and only recently obtained her permit to drive. She has completed driver's training class, and I know she did well.

She even has a certificate to prove it! There is no doubt whatsoever in my mind that she has done all of this. I'm convinced that it's all true. However, the real test of faith at this point remains: Will I get into the car to go on the expressway with her as the driver? To press the analogy here, true faith includes not only a knowledge of and conviction about the truth of the matter, but a trusting confidence that readily acts upon the basis of what is known. That's the way it is with true faith. Unlike the faith of the demons, who shudder at the knowledge that God is one, the faith of the true believer brings joy and hope in God, and expresses itself in the way of Christian obedience.

Well, admittedly, that's a rather homely and perhaps not a very good analogy. But the basic idea should be dear. The faith of which James is talking here is not the genuine article. It's that orthodoxy that we call "dead," because it is lifeless and unproductive. That is the great question, then, of James 2: Can that kind of faith, namely, a lonely faith, separated from a life of good works, save anyone?

Thus far in our treatment of the teaching of James 2:14-26 we have concentrated only on the question that is raised in these verses. That question is: Can a lonely faith save? Can someone who claims to have faith, but whose life is empty and devoid of good works, be saved? This question is closely related to a common complaint against the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone. If we say that we are justified by faith alone, apart from works, won't this encourage the idea that good works are unnecessary or dispensable? Since the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, this complaint has been registered against the doctrine of free justification in a variety of forms. Whether the terms cheap grace, easy believism, or antinomianism, are used, the objection is the same: the teaching of faith alone wrongly encourages people to be careless and indifferent about the way they live.

Now that we have considered this question as it is posed in James 2, we are in a position to take up the answer that this passage gives.

The answer? Only a lively faith can save!

Verses 21-23. In order to answer the question whether an empty show of faith is able to save anyone, the apostle James appeals to the example of Abraham. He does so in order to show that the faith that saves is always active in good works.

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 the 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 and not by faith alone"* (emphasis mine).

What are we to make of this? 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 as 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 the one hand, and then say as well that a man is justified by works using the term exactly as in the previous expression. So what must we make of this?

I would propose 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.

There are two considerations that speak in favor of this interpretation. *First*, in the usage of the New Testament, the word *justify* is occasionally used in this way. For example, in Luke 7:35 our Lord declares that "*wisdom is **justified** by her children*" (emphasis mine). In this declaration, Jesus is saying that wisdom is known and demonstrated by its fruits or consequences. Consider the familiar proverb, a gentle answer turns away wrath. That's a piece of wisdom that reminds us of the connection between a gentle answer and its likely result. Just as an angry and exaggerated answer does more harm than good in settling an argument, so a gentle and understated response has a way of lowering the temperature of the dispute. That's an instance of wisdom showing itself by its fruits. Similarly, in Romans 3:4 the apostle Paul, quoting from the Psalms, says,

*"Let God be found true, though every man be found a liar, as it is written, that you may be **justified** in your works"* (emphasis mine).

The idea of this verse is that God may be proven true and reliable by the works that He performs. Or consider one other example from 1 Timothy 3:16, where we read: "*And by common confession great is the mystery of godliness: He who was revealed in the flesh, was **justified** in the Spirit.*" The justification spoken of in this text is the vindication or demonstration of Christ's glory and person in His resurrection from the dead.

If this is the sense of the term *to justify* in James 2, then Calvin is correct in paraphrasing James' point as follows: "*Man is not justified by faith alone, that is, by a bare and empty knowledge of God. No, man is justified by works, that is, his righteousness is known and proven by its fruits.*" The genuineness of Abraham's professing to believe is confirmed or justified by his works.

Now the *second* consideration is that this demonstrative use of the language of *justify* nicely fits the context of the argument in James 2, and the way in which the example of Abraham is cited. It's important to notice that the example offered in these verses, as it sets forth Abraham's act of being willing to sacrifice Isaac upon the altar, comes seven chapters later than Genesis 15:6, where it is said that Abraham's faith was reckoned to him for righteousness. What we have in Genesis 22 is a record of Abraham's work that demonstrates or confirms the genuineness of his profession of faith.

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 the 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.

Verse 24. In verse 24 James brings his argument to a conclusion: *"You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone."* A man is not justified, nor does he find favor with God, when his faith is the kind of faith that is like a barren desert, a desolate place, that produces nothing in the way of fruit. No, true faith exhibits its character in the way it works. Just as a tree expresses itself and is perfected by its fruit, so also faith. An apple tree is known, not by its lovely blossoms, but by the apples that it produces. So it is with the man of faith.

In short: James is not arguing against the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone. He is not joining the apostle Paul in arguing against self-righteousness or legalism, the teaching that we are justified before God on the basis of the works of the law. Rather, he is opposing the error of the person who makes an idle boast of faith, but whose faith is not productive. An empty or infertile faith, one barren of any good works, is demonstrably false. Such a lonely faith cannot save.

Two concluding observations

On the basis of our treatment of the argument in James 2, there are two concluding observations that I would like to make.

The *first* conclusion has to do with the relation of Paul and James. Contrary to the suggestion of some, they do not contradict each other. Their teachings can be harmonized. When the apostle Paul teaches that faith alone justifies, he is not speaking of an empty show of faith. As he says in Galatians 5:6, true faith works through love. When the apostle James, on the other hand, teaches that Abraham was justified by works, he is not speaking of justification in the sense of our right standing with God. He is speaking of the confirmation of the genuineness of Abraham's faith in his act of obedience in the sacrifice of Isaac.

Throughout the history of the Christian church, there has been a considerable debate regarding the precise relation between James and Paul. Some argue that James, writing after the apostle Paul, deliberately seeks to correct Paul's erroneous teaching. Others take just the contrary position: Paul, writing after the apostle James, deliberately seeks to correct James' erroneous teaching. Still others maintain that James is only seeking to correct a wrong understanding of Paul's teaching. In this last view, James does not disagree with the apostle Paul, but only wishes to emphasize the indispensability of good works in the Christian life.

In my view, none of these proposals is correct. Each of them mistakenly reads the writings of Paul and James as though each was directly answering the other. A better approach is one that recognizes that they are not replying in any direct way to the teaching of the other. They are addressing different questions and facing off against quite distinct opponents. One commentator has suggested that Paul and James should not be viewed like two men in a ring fighting each other, but rather like two men standing back to back, one addressing the evil of legalism, the other the opposite evil of antinomianism. Both affirm that the faith which justifies can only be a living and active faith.

Speaking to this point, John Owens, in his *Faith and Its Evidences*, says, *"The design of the Apostle James is not at all to explain the meaning of Paul in his epistles, as is pretended, but only to vindicate the doctrine of the gospel from the abuse of such as use their liberty for a cloak of maliciousness and, turning the grace of God into lasciviousness, continue in sin under a pretense that grace had abounded unto that end."*

Though using more difficult and precise language, Francis Turretin offers the same kind of explanation in his comments on this question:

"The question is not whether solitary faith, that is, separated from the other virtues, justifies, which we grant could not easily be the case, since it is not even true and living faith; but whether it alone concurs to the act of justification, which we assert: as the eye alone sees, but not when torn out of the body. Thus the particle alone does not modify the subject, but the predicate. That is, faith alone does not justify, but only faith justifies; the coexistence of

love with faith in him who is justified is not denied, but its coefficient or cooperation in justification."

What Turretin is arguing is that, put grammatically, the "alone" in faith *alone* justifies is adverbial, not adjectival. It is faith that *alone justifies*. It alone acts and is operative with respect to justification. But this is not the kind of faith that can be denominated an "alone faith." That's the point that Turretin labors in this somewhat complicated sentence. But it becomes clear, doesn't it, when he says, "The eye alone sees"? That's its function; that's its assignment; that's its office. But it would be an absurd thing to have an eye that saw, apart from the remaining members of the body as an organism. So also, the faith that justifies is never by itself.

Or to cite one last comment, this one from Thomas Manton: "*By the righteousness of faith, we are acquitted from our sin, and by the righteousness of works, we are acquitted of hypocrisy.*" That says it well, and in a way that can be easily understood.

My *second* concluding observation has to do with the significance of James 2 for combating the error of antinomianism. Within the evangelical church today, there are indications that this error has been given new life. What is particularly distressing is that the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone has been linked in our time with the most objectionable kind of antinomianism. This is evident, for example, in the recent debates regarding lordship versus non-lordship salvation. Zane Hodges, a defender of the non-lordship position, has argued that a person can be justified by a faith that is inactive and dead. He has even argued on the basis of James 2 that people can be saved, though their faith is unproductive or unfruitful! What makes this so distressing is that Hodges maintains that his teaching is nothing more than a defense of the Reformation doctrine of free justification by faith alone.

However, none of the reformers, including Luther, ever taught that the faith that alone justifies could ever be an unfruitful thing. Luther, in his preface to his commentary on Romans, speaks of faith as a living, active thing. "*Faith overflows,*" says Luther, "*in good works.*" True faith is always a *fides viva*, a "living faith." No reformer ever taught that you could tear asunder justification and sanctification. None would disagree with what we have argued regarding James 2.

And so we have to be as firm in our opposition to antinomianism as we are to legalism. We must defend the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone, on the one hand. But we need also to preach James 2 in a way that emphasizes how God's work of grace is not only a work outside of us (*extra nobis*) in Christ, but that it is also a work in us (*in nobis*) by the Holy Spirit, on the other. The believer's salvation includes both the conferral of Christ's righteousness in justification, and sanctification.

Calvin offers us some helpful comments at this point. Calvin often insisted that you could no more tear apart justification from sanctification than you can tear apart the two natures of Christ. Though distinct, they are nonetheless inseparable. Calvin also maintained that you could no more separate justification from sanctification than you can separate Christ and His Spirit. Whenever Christ indwells the hearts of believers, He always subdues them to obedience by His Spirit. In the fulness of His office, Christ is not only a priest but also a king. And as king He rules in the hearts of His people by His Spirit and Word. That is the teaching not only of James but also of all the leading reformers in the sixteenth century. It is also the teaching of the Reformed confessions and represents the consensus conviction of the Reformed tradition. May it be our doctrine as well.

Though it is incidental to James' purpose, perhaps it is appropriate to remark here that he provides no encouragement to the kind of preaching or teaching in the church that "leaves the application" to the hearer. James' teaching involves the exposition and *application* of the Word of God. The preacher of the Word of God who only expounds, but neglects to apply the text of Scripture has neither done his duty nor followed the example of the apostles.

Cornelis P Venema

¹ This is often expressed as well in the complaint that the formula, *simul iustus et peccator* (the justified is "at once righteous and yet a sinner"), encourages a dangerous indifference to the necessity of good works in the Christian life. However, this formula was never intended to deny the necessity or reality of good works in the life of the believer. It was aimed at the idea that our good works could ever be, in the whole or in part, the ground of our justification.