

The 5 Solas- Faith Alone (Sola Fide)

The Cambridge Declaration and Sola Fide

We reaffirm that justification is by grace alone through faith alone because of Christ alone. In justification Christ's righteousness is imputed to us as the only possible satisfaction of God's perfect justice.

We deny that justification rests on any merit to be found in us, or upon the grounds of an infusion of Christ's righteousness in us, or that an institution claiming to be a church that denies or condemns sola fide can be recognized as a legitimate church.

"Faith Alone" The Erosion Of The Chief Article...

Justification is by grace alone through faith alone because of Christ alone. This is the article by which the church stands or falls. Today this article is often ignored, distorted or sometimes even denied by leaders, scholars and pastors who claim to be evangelical. Although fallen human nature has always recoiled from recognizing its need for Christ's imputed righteousness, modernity greatly fuels the fires of this discontent with the biblical Gospel. We have allowed this discontent to dictate the nature of our ministry and what it is we are preaching.

Many in the church growth movement believe that sociological understanding of those in the pew is as important to the success of the gospel as is the biblical truth which is proclaimed. As a result, theological convictions are frequently divorced from the work of the ministry. The marketing orientation in many churches takes this even further, erasing the distinction between the biblical Word and the world, robbing Christ's cross of its offense, and reducing Christian faith to the principles and methods which bring success to secular corporations.

While the theology of the cross may be believed, these movements are actually emptying it of its meaning. There is no gospel except that of Christ's substitution in our place whereby God imputed to him our sin and imputed to us his righteousness. Because he bore our judgment, we now walk in his grace as those who are forever pardoned, accepted and adopted as God's children. There is no basis for our acceptance before God except in Christ's saving work, not in our patriotism, churchly devotion or moral decency. The gospel declares what God has done for us in Christ. It is not about what we can do to reach him

Sola Fide: Faith Alone...What Do We Mean?

Again, all sides agreed to the necessity of faith for salvation. But is faith alone sufficient? Do our works contribute anything? Our baptism? Our penance? Just what does God require?

The “material principle” of the Reformation was this principle of “Faith alone,” and it follows from *solus Christus* and *sola gratia*. If Christ does the work that saves so that we are saved by grace alone, then *human works and merit are excluded*...salvation is by faith alone. *With every other means of approach to God stripped away, and recognizing our utter inability to contribute anything to our own salvation, we abandon ourselves to Christ, resting in him (alone!) to save us.*

Here B.B. Warfield shows the relationship of faith and Christ and salvation:

...Faith is sometimes said to rest upon some element in the saving work of Christ, as, for example, upon His blood or His righteousness (Rom. 3:25, 2 Pet. 1:1)...obviously such a singling out of the very thing in His work on which faith takes hold, in no way derogates from its ***repose upon Him, and Him only, as the sole and sufficient Saviour.***

The saving power of faith resides thus not in itself, but in the Almighty Saviour on whom it rests. It is never on account of its formal nature as a psychic act that faith is conceived in Scripture to be saving,—as if this frame of mind or attitude of heart were itself a virtue with claims on God for reward, or at least especially pleasing to Him (either in its nature or as an act of obedience) and thus predisposing Him to favour, or as if it brought the soul into an attitude of receptivity or of sympathy with God, or opened a channel of communication from Him. ***It is not faith that saves, but faith in Jesus Christ: faith in any other saviour, or in this or that philosophy or human conceit (Col. 2:16, 18, 1 Tim. 4:1), or in any other gospel than that of Jesus Christ and Him as crucified (Gal. 1:8, 9), brings not salvation but a curse. It is not, strictly speaking, even faith in Christ that saves, but Christ that saves through faith.*** The saving power resides exclusively, not in the act of faith or the attitude of faith or the nature of faith, but in ***the object of faith***; and in this the whole biblical representation centers, so that we could not more radically misconceive it than by transferring to faith even the smallest fraction of that saving energy which is attributed in the Scriptures solely to Christ Himself.

(“Biblical Doctrine of Faith” in The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield, Vol. 2, p. 503–4)

Faith Alone...The Historical Background of the Issues

J.V. Fesko

In 1647, a group of Reformed pastors and theologians meeting at Westminster Abbey in London completed a set of documents we now know as the Westminster Standards, which include the Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. The divines (theologians) sought to codify Reformed teaching in order to create a unified Reformed church in the British Isles. In question and answer 33 of the Shorter Catechism, they summarize ***one of the chief pillars of the Reformed tradition: What is justification? Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.***

Wrapped up in this brief statement is the idea that sinners are justified sola fide—by faith alone. But ***what does sola fide mean? Before we delve into its meaning, a little historical context is essential for appreciating its significance. A person can truly appreciate a brilliant light only against the backdrop of darkness.***

A Backdrop of Darkness

When Martin Luther nailed his Ninety- Five Theses to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg in 1517, it took some time for the implications of his action to ripple through history. The fruit of his labors surfaced in a number of Lutheran and Reformed confessions that stated that sinners are declared righteous in God's sight, not on the basis of their own good works but by faith alone in Christ alone by God's grace alone—sola fide, solus Christus, and sola gratia. ***The Roman Catholic Church was compelled to respond and did so at the famous Council of Trent, which offered a series of proclamations on the doctrine of justification in its sixth session on January 13, 1547.***

Among the many points Rome offered, chief among them were several key claims: (1) that sinners are justified by their baptism; (2) that justification is by faith in Christ and a person's good works; (3) that sinners are not justified solely by the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ; and (4) that a person can lose his justified status.

All of these points coalesce in the following statement:

If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone, meaning thereby that no other cooperation is required for him to obtain the grace of justification, and that in no sense is it necessary for him to make preparation and be disposed by a movement of his own will: let him be anathema. (Canon IX)
The Roman Catholic Church clearly condemned sola fide—it did not confess that sinners are justified by faith alone.

A Light in the Darkness

Against this backdrop, we can appreciate how the Shorter Catechism biblically defines the doctrine of justification and explains that it is sola fide. **For Rome, sinners are justified by faith and works. Its doctrine of faith is introspective—a person must look within to his own good works in order to be justified. The Shorter Catechism, on the other hand, argues that faith is extrospective—sinners look outside themselves to the perfect and complete work of Christ for their justification.**

But what, specifically, do sinners receive by faith alone?

The first benefit of justification is that God pardons all of our sins, past, present, and future. The divines cite Paul's quotation of Psalm 32: "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered" (Rom. 4:7; see Ps. 32:1).

The second benefit of justification is the acceptance of the sinner as righteous in God's sight "only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us." To have the status of "righteous" conferred upon oneself is quite amazing. When a judge declares a person innocent, it simply means he is not guilty of breaking the law. But if a judge declares a person righteous, it means that not only is he innocent of breaking the law but that he has also fulfilled the requirement of the law. Let us take theft as an example. For a person to be righteous in this case, he must refrain from stealing. But in addition to this, he must also protect the property of others. He must fulfill both the negative and positive demands of the law against theft. **By justification, a sinner is accepted as righteous, not just for one part of the law, but for the whole law—every single commandment, every single jot and tittle. He is counted as one who has kept every dimension of every law.**

From whence does this righteousness arise?

The righteousness, or obedience, belongs to Christ. The divines cite two key passages of Scripture to substantiate the imputation, or accrediting, of Christ's righteousness to the believer. First, they cite 2 Corinthians 5:21: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." According to the Scriptures, Christ was the spotless Lamb, perfect and sinless (1 Peter 1:19; Heb. 4:15). Yet, Christ bore the sin of His people—it was accredited to Him and He carried it. **The manner by which Christ was accredited with our sin so that He could bear the law's curse (imputation) is the same manner by which we receive Christ's perfect obedience—His fulfilling of every requirement of the law.** The divines cite Romans 5:19 to this effect: "For as by the one man's disobedience the many were constituted sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be constituted righteous" (translation mine).

Adam's disobedience was accredited to all who are united to him, and the obedience of Christ, the last Adam, is accredited to all of those united to Him (1 Cor. 15:45).

Ne'er the Twain Shall Meet

If it is not already apparent, the Westminster divines' view of justification is diametrically opposed to the view of the Roman Catholic Church. ***For Rome, a sinner's justification is an attempt at doctrinal alchemy, trying to mix the works of Christ with those of the believer in order to produce the gold of justification.***

Reformed theology, on the other hand, codified in the Shorter Catechism and reflecting the teaching of Scripture, rests the sinner's justification solely upon the work of Christ. The only means by which Christ's perfect work is received is by faith alone—sola fide. We have no other embassy of peace to find shelter from the just wrath of God save for the perfect righteousness and suffering of Christ; and there is no other bridge between man and Christ but faith alone.

<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/faith-alone>

Sola Fide: The Reformed Doctrine of Justification (Excerpts)

J I Packer

“The confession of divine justification touches man’s life at its heart, at the point of its relationship to God. It defines the preaching of the Church, the existence and progress of the life of faith, the root of human security, and man’s perspective for the future.” So wrote G.C. Berkhouwer of the doctrine of justification by faith set forth by Paul and re-apprehended with decisive clarity at the Reformation; and in so writing he showed himself a true heir of the Reformers. For his statement is no more, just as it is no less, than a straightforward spelling out of what Luther had meant when he called justification by faith...***the point of belief which determines (not politically or financially, but theologically and spiritually) whether the church stands or falls.***

With Luther, the Reformers saw all Scripture as being, in the last analysis, either law or gospel—meaning by “law” all that exposes our ruin through sin and by “gospel” everything that displays our restoration by grace through faith—and the heart of the biblical gospel was to them God’s free gift of righteousness and justification. Here was the sum and substance of that sola fide—sola gratia—solo Christo—sola Scriptura—soli Deo gloria which was the sustained theme of their proclamation, polemics, praises and prayers. And to their minds (note well!) proclamation, polemics, praise, and prayer belonged together, just as did the five Latin slogans linked above as epitomizing their message.

Justification by faith, by grace, by Christ, through Scripture, to the glory of God was to them a single topic, just as a fugue with several voices is a single piece. This justification was to them not theological speculation but a religious reality, apprehended through prayer by revelation from God via the Bible. It was a gift given as part of God's total work of love in saving us, a work which leads us to know God and ourselves as both really are—something which the unbelieving world does not know. And to declare and defend God's justification publicly as the only way of life for any man was at once an act of confessing their faith, of glorifying their God by proclaiming his wonderful work, and of urging others to approach him in penitent and hopeful trust just as they did themselves.

So, where Rome had taught a piecemeal salvation, to be gained by stages through working a sacramental treadmill, the Reformers now proclaimed a unitary salvation, to be received in its entirety here and now by self-abandoning faith in God's promise, and in the God and the Christ of that promise, as set forth in the pages of the Bible. Thus the rediscovery of the gospel brought a rediscovery of evangelism, the task of summoning non-believers to faith. ***Rome had said, God's grace is great, for through Christ's cross and his Church salvation is possible for all who will work and suffer for it; so come to church, and toil! But the Reformers said, God's grace is greater, for through Christ's cross and His Spirit salvation, full and free, with its unlimited guarantee of eternal joy, is given once and forever to all who believe; so come to Christ, and trust and take!***

It was this conflict with the mediaeval message that occasioned the fivefold "only" in the slogans quoted above. Salvation, said the Reformers, is by faith (man's total trust) only, without our being obliged to work for it; it is by grace (God's free favor) only, without our having to earn or deserve it first; it is by Christ the God-man only, without there being need or room for any other mediatorial agent, whether priest, saint, or virgin; it is by Scripture only, without regard to such unbiblical and unfounded extras as the doctrines of purgatory and of pilgrimages, the relic-cult and papal indulgences as devices for shortening one's stay there; and praise for salvation is due to God only, without any credit for His acceptance of us being taken to ourselves. ***The Reformers made these points against unreformed Rome, but they were well aware that in making them they were fighting over again Paul's battle in Romans and Galatians against works, and in Colossians against unauthentic traditions, and the battle fought in Hebrews against trust in any priesthood or mediation other than that of Christ. And (note again!) they were equally well aware that the gospel of the five "onlies" would always be contrary to natural human thinking, upsetting to natural human pride, and an object of hostility to Satan, so that destructive interpretations of justification by faith in terms of justification by works (as by the Judaizers of Paul's day, and the Pelagians of Augustine's, and the church of Rome both before and after the Reformation, and the Arminians within the Reformed fold...) were only to be expected.***

So Luther anticipated that after his death the truth of justification would come under fresh attack and theology would develop in a way tending to submerge it once more in error and incomprehension; and throughout the century following Luther's death Reformed theologians, with Socinian and other rationalists in their eye, were constantly stressing how radically opposed to each other are the "gospel mystery" of justification and the religion of the natural man...salvation by self-effort IS a principle that the fallen human mind takes for granted.

...When justification falls, true knowledge of God's grace, in human life falls with it. When Atlas loses his footing, everything that rested on his shoulders collapses too.

...What justification is, said the Reformers, must be learned from Paul, its great New Testament expositor, who sees it clearly and precisely as a judicial act of God pardoning and forgiving our sins, accepting us as righteous, and instating us as his sons.

Augustine, who studied the Bible in Latin was partly misled by the fact that justificare, the Latin for Paul's Greek expression, naturally means "make righteous"... so the Mediaevals had defined justification as pardon plus inner renewal, as the Council of Trent was also to do; but the Reformers saw that the Pauline meaning is strictly forensic.

So, Calvin defines justification as "acceptance, whereby God receives us into his favour and regards us as righteous; and we say that it consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ."⁷ Justification is decisive for eternity, being in effect the judgment of the last day brought forward. Its source is God's grace, His initiative in free and sovereign love, and its ground is the merit and satisfaction that is, the obedient sin-bearing death-of Jesus Christ, God's incarnate Son.

Behind Calvin's phrase, "the imputation of the righteousness of Christ," lies the characteristic "Christ-and-his-people" Christology which was the center of reference-the hub of the wheel, we might say-of the Reformers' entire doctrine of grace....By incarnation He entered into solidarity with us, becoming through His Father's appointment the last Adam, the second head of the race, acting on our behalf in relation to God. As man, He submitted to the great and decisive exchange set forth in II Corinthians 5: 21: "For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

...The Reformers were explicit in grounding our justification on Christ's penal substitution for us under the punitive wrath of God.

...Satisfaction, in other words, was by substitution; vicarious sin-bearing by the Son of God is the ground of our justification and hope.

...Luther, commenting on Galatians 3:13, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us,” states penal substitution like this:

We are sinners and thieves, and therefore guilty of death and everlasting damnation. But Christ took all our sins upon him, and for them died upon the cross . . . all the prophets did foresee in spirit, that Christ should become the greatest transgressor, murderer, adulterer, thief, rebel, blasphemer, etc. that ever was . . . for he being made a sacrifice, for the sins of the whole world, is now an innocent person and without sins . . . our most merciful Father, seeing us to be oppressed overwhelmed with the curse of the law, and so to be holden under the same that we could never be delivered from it by our own power, sent his only Son into the world and laid upon him all the sins of all men, saying: Be thou Peter that denier; Paul that persecutor, blasphemer and cruel oppressor; David that adulterer; that sinner which did eat the apple in Paradise; that thief which hanged upon the cross; and, briefly, be thou the person which hath committed the sins of all men; see therefore that thou pay and satisfy for them. Here now cometh the law and saith: I find him a sinner, and that such a one as hath taken upon him the sins of all men, and I see no sins but in him; therefore let him die upon the cross. And so he setteth upon him and killeth him. By this means the whole world is purged and cleansed from all sins, and so delivered from death and all evils.¹²

Calvin speaks less vivid and dramatically, but to the same effect:

Because the curse caused by our guilt was awaiting us at God’s heavenly judgment seat, . . . Christ’s condemnation before Pontius Pilate . . . is recorded, so that we might know that the penalty to which we were subject had been inflicted on this righteous man . . . when he was arraigned before a judgment-seat, accused and put under pressure by testimony, and sentenced to death by the words of a judge, we know by these records that this role was that of a guilty wrongdoer . . . we see the role of the sinner and criminal represented in Christ, yet from his shining innocence it becomes obvious that he was burdened with the misdoing of others rather than his own. This is our acquittal, that the guilt which exposed us to punishment was transferred to the head of God’s Son. . . .

At every point he substituted himself in our place to pay the price of our redemption.

This is the characteristic doctrine of the Reformation concerning the death of Christ. It was an act of obedient substitution on His part, an acceptance in His own person of the penalty due to us, in virtue of which the holy Judge declares guilty sinners immune from punishment and righteous in His sight. The great exchange is no legal fiction, no arbitrary pretense, no mere word-game, on God’s part, but a costly achievement.

The divinely established solidarity between Christ and His people was such that He was in truth “made sin” for us, and “bore in his soul the dreadful torments of a condemned

and lost man,” so that in our souls the joy of knowing God’s forgiveness and favor might reign forever. This, to the Reformers, was the heart and height of the work of divine grace, not to be wrangled over, but to be trusted and adored.

The means of justification. Justification, said the Reformers, is by faith only. Why so? Not because there are no “good works” in the believer’s life (on the contrary faith works by love untiringly and the knowledge of justification is the supreme ethical dynamic), but because Christ’s vicarious righteousness is the only ground of justification, and it is only by faith that we lay hold of Christ, for His righteousness to become ours.

Faith is a conscious acknowledgment of our own unrighteousness and ungodliness and on that basis a looking to Christ as our righteousness, a clasping of him as the ring clasps the jewel (so Luther), a receiving of Him as an empty vessel receives treasure (so Calvin), and a reverent, resolute reliance on the biblical promise of life through him for all who believe.

Faith is our act, but not our work; it is an instrument of reception without being a means of merit; it is the work in us of the Holy Spirit, who both evokes it and through it ingrafts us into Christ in such a sense that we know at once the personal relationship of sinner to Saviour and disciple to Master and with that the dynamic relationship of resurrection life, communicated through the Spirit’s indwelling. So faith takes, and rejoices, and hopes, and loves, and triumphs.

One of the unhealthiest features of Protestant theology today is its preoccupation with faith: faith, that is, viewed man-centeredly as a state of existential commitment. Inevitably, this preoccupation diverts thought away from faith's object, even when this is clearly conceived—as too often in modern theology it is not. Though the Reformers said much about faith, even to the point of calling their message of justification “the doctrine of faith,” their interest was not of the modern kind. It was not subject-centered but object-centered, not psychological but theological, not anthropocentric but Christocentric.

...A. M. Stibbs echoed the Reformers’ “object-centered” account of faith with precision when he wrote:

The faith of the individual must be seen as having no value in itself, but as discovering value wholly and solely through movement towards and committal to Christ. It must be seen as simply a means of finding all one's hope outside oneself in the person and work of another; and not in any sense an originating cause or objective ground of justification. For true faith is active only in the man who is wholly occupied with Christ; its practice means that every blessing is received from another. For this reason faith is exclusive and intolerant of company; it is only truly present when any and every contribution towards his salvation on the part of the believer or on the part of the Church is absolutely and unequivocally shut out.

Justification must be seen and received as a blessing dependent wholly and exclusively on Christ alone, on what he is and what he has done--a blessing enjoyed simply through being joined directly to him, through finding one's all in him, through drawing one's all from him, without the interposition of any other mediator or mediating channel whatever.

To the Reformers' doctrine of justification by faith alone Reformed theology has held down the centuries, maintaining it to be both scriptural in substance and life-giving in effect. This tenacity has, however, involved constant conflict, as it still does. ***Two things have long threatened the truth as stated; first, the intruding of works as the ground of justification; second, the displacing of the cross as the ground of justification. Both are familiar weeds in the church's garden; both express in very obvious ways the craving for self-justification which lurks (often in disguise!) in the fallen human heart. Something may be said about each.***

First, the intruding of works. This happens the moment we look to anything in ourselves, whether of nature or of grace, whether to acts of faith or to deeds of repentance, as a basis for pardon and acceptance.

Reformed theology had to fight this tendency in both Romanism and Arminianism. The Council of Trent (1547, session VI) defined justification as inner renewal plus pardon and acceptance, the renewal being the basis of the pardon, and went on to affirm that the "sole formal cause" of justification, in both its aspects, was God's righteousness imparted through baptism as its instrumental cause. "Formal cause" means that which gives a thing its quality; so the thesis is that the ground of our being pardoned and accepted by infused grace is our having been made genuinely righteous in ourselves. ... In reply, a host of Reformed divines, continental and British, Episcopal and non-episcopal, drew out at length the Reformers' contention, discussed above, that ***the "sole formal cause" of justification is not God's righteousness imparted, but Christ's righteousness imputed. The same point was pressed against the seventeenth-century Arminians, who held that faith is "counted for righteousness" because it is in itself actual personal righteousness, being obedience to the gospel viewed as God's new law, and being also an act of self-determination that is in no sense determined by God.***

The argument against both Romans and Arminians was that by finding the ground of justification in the believer himself they contradicted the Scriptures; nourished pride, and a spirit of self-sufficiency and self-reliance in religion, so encouraging self-ignorance; destroyed assurance by making final salvation depend upon ourselves rather than on God; obscured the nature of faith as self-renouncing trust; and robbed both God's grace and God's Son of the full glory that was their due. It is not enough, declared the Reformed writers, to say that without Christ our justification could not be; one must go on to say that it is on the ground of his obedience as our substitutionary sin-bearer, and that alone, that righteousness is reckoned to us, and sin

cancelled. The Westminster Confession (XI.i) has both Romanism and Arminianism in its eye when it declares, with classic precision and balance:

Those whom God effectually calleth he also freely justifieth; not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; not by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience, to them as their righteousness; but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness by faith; which faith they have not of themselves; it is the gift of God.

Second, the displacing of the cross as the ground of justification. This happens when the correlation between Christ's sin-bearing and our pardon is lost sight of...in every case where the correlation breaks, the effect is to shut us up to supposing that God, after all, pardons and accepts us for something in ourselves—our repentance, or the righteousness of which it is the promise. So we return by a new route to the idea that the ground of justification is, after all, our own works, actual or potential.

Justification by faith only, as Reformed Christians know, is "a "gospel mystery," a revealed secret of God which is a wonder of grace, transcending human wisdom and indeed contradicting it. No wonder, then, if again and again, it is misunderstood, or objected to, or twisted out of shape! But, as we have seen, to those who know anything of God's holiness and their own sinfulness the doctrine is in truth a lifeline and a doxology, a paean of praise and a song of triumph--as it was to the judicious Richard Hooker, with whose majestic and poignant declaration of it we close.

Christ hath merited righteousness for as many as are found in him. In him God findeth us, if we be faithful; for by faith we are incorporated into him. Then, although in ourselves we be altogether sinful and unrighteous, yet even the man who in himself is impious, full of iniquity, full of sin; him being found in Christ by faith, and having his sin in hatred through repentance; him God beholdeth with a gracious eye, putteth away his sin by not imputing it, taketh quite away the punishment due thereto, by pardoning it; and accepteth him in Jesus Christ, as perfectly righteous, as if he had fulfilled all that is commanded him in the law: shall I say, more perfectly righteous than if himself had fulfilled the whole law? I must take heed what I say; but the Apostle saith, "God made him which knew no sin, to be sin for us; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." Such we are in the sight of God the Father, as is the very Son of God himself. Let it be counted folly, or phrensy, or fury, or whatsoever. It is our wisdom, and our comfort; we care for no knowledge in the world but this, that man hath sinned, and God hath suffered; that God hath made himself the sin of men, and that men are made the righteousness of God.

Appendix...Do Paul and James Disagree on Justification by Faith Alone?

Thomas Schreiner

Critics of the slogan “faith alone” often point out that Scripture only speaks once about whether we are justified by faith alone—and that text denies it: “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (James 2:24, CSB).

What does James mean in saying we are justified by works?

I won’t defend the truth of justification by faith alone in detail, but it’s clearly taught, for example, in Romans 3:28: “A person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.” Or, as Paul teaches in Romans 4:5, “God justifies the ungodly.” Both Abraham and David were justified by faith and not by works (Rom. 4:1–8; Gal. 3:6–9).

Salvation, as Paul elsewhere demonstrates, is “by grace” and “through faith” (Eph. 2:8–9). Works are excluded as the basis of salvation—otherwise people could boast about what they have done. Salvation by grace through faith highlights the amazing and comforting truth that salvation is the Lord’s work, not ours.

But does Paul contradict James?

Justification by Works in James

James 2:14–26 repeatedly argues that faith without works doesn’t save on the last day. Those who claim to have faith but lack good works aren’t saved by such a claiming faith (Jas. 2:14). James compares such faith to “words of love and comfort” given to someone who is cold and hungry. Such words are meaningless if not accompanied by actions to feed and clothe the person in need (2:15–16). So also, faith without works is “dead” and “useless” (2:17, 20, 26).

Faith that is merely intellectual, or faith that claims to believe but is bereft of any action, is no better than “the faith” of demons. After all, they subscribe to the orthodox belief that “God is one,” and they “shudder” in terror (2:19). James highlights that Abraham was “justified by works” in offering up Isaac (2:21), and Rahab the prostitute was “justified by works” in receiving the spies and protecting them from danger (2:25).

Intellectual Belief Doesn’t Save

At first glance, it might seem James rejects justification by faith alone, but first glances aren’t enough when reading the Scriptures. We are called to read deeply and canonically. James doesn’t deny that faith saves; he rejects the notion that a particular kind of faith saves—a faith that doesn’t produce works. In short, faith that is merely intellectual assent is not saving faith.

Again, demons professed that Jesus is “the Holy One of God” (Mark 1:24), but their belief in that truth didn’t save them. Even though they knew who Jesus was, they hated him. Saving faith, then, is the act of the entire person. It includes the will and the emotions, such that those who believe in Jesus give themselves to him.

Not the Foundation

Let’s think of it another way. Faith alone justifies, but only the kind of faith that inevitably produces good works. Now, such good works aren’t the basis of justification; indeed, they can’t be, for one sin makes you a lawbreaker (Jas. 2:10–11). Good works can’t function as the foundation of our justification because God demands perfection, and even after we are converted we continue to sin.

James, in fact, says this very thing in the next passage after discussing justification by works: “We all stumble in many ways” (3:2). The word “stumble” means “sin,” as the parallel text in James 2:10 shows. Every one of us without exception—including James (“we all”)—continue to sin.

Is he saying we sin only occasionally? Absolutely not. He says we all sin “in many ways.” We don’t just sin in a few ways, but in many. Since sin continues to characterize the lives of believers in remarkable ways, and since God demands perfection, works that justify can’t form the basis of our justification.

Fruit, Not Root

How should we understand the works James requires? Certainly good works are necessary, for without them we will not be justified, but we have seen that they aren’t the necessary basis or foundation.

The best solution is to say they are the result and fruit of faith. True faith expresses it in works. Paul actually says the same thing, teaching what ultimately matters is “faith expressing itself through love” (Gal. 5:6, NIV).

The concept isn’t hard to understand. If I said the room you were in was about to blow up in one minute, and you believed me, desired to live, and were physically able to leave, you would hurry to exit. True faith would lead to works! Leaving the room would be the result of your faith. So it’s right to say, as the Reformers did, that we are justified by faith alone, but that true faith is never alone. I would suggest James is teaching this very idea.

It isn’t as if our works save or justify in the sense that they qualify us to enter God’s presence—as if our virtue wins us God’s favor on the last day. James teaches that there is an organic relationship between genuine faith and works. If we truly trust Christ, that trust shows up in how we live. Works evidence our faith.

Complementary Truths

Why do Paul and James sound so different? Why does it appear at first glance they contradict? We need to remember that letters were written to specific situations facing specific churches. Paul wrote to churches where people were tempted to trust in their works for salvation, while James wrote to those who were disposed to think intellectual assent could save them.

Paul counteracts legalism, while James corrects antinomianism.

Of course, Paul rejected antinomianism as well: “I am warning you about these things—as I warned you before—that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal. 5:21). He also believed good works were necessary for eternal life, but both Paul and James believed such works were the fruit of saving faith, not the root.

In the beauty and completeness of God’s Word, Paul and James teach complementary, not contradictory, truths.

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/do-paul-james-disagree-on-justification-by-faith-alone/>