

# Justification by Works and *Sola Fide*

THOMAS R. SCHREINER

---

**Thomas R. Schreiner** is James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation and Associate Dean for Scripture and Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. A widely respected New Testament scholar, Dr. Schreiner is the author of countless articles and many books, including *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Baker, 2008), *Galatians* in the Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament series (Zondervan, 2010), *The King and His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Baker, 2013), and *Faith Alone—The Doctrine of Justification* (Zondervan, 2015).

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

I want to do two things in this article. First, I am going to give a whirlwind tour of my book on justification by faith alone—*Faith Alone—The Doctrine of Justification*. Second, I want to defend exegetically justification by faith alone. After considering the use of slogans in our discussion of justification, two themes will be considered in this latter section. I want to consider how the imputation of Christ's righteousness fits with *sola fide*. And then I want to explain how *sola fide* can be sustained since the NT teaches that works are necessary for justification and salvation.

## A WHIRLWIND TOUR OF FAITH ALONE—THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION

### *The Teaching of the Early Fathers*

Let's begin with the whirlwind tour. I begin the book by saying that those who claim that the early fathers rejected justification by faith alone are

guilty of being too simplistic. In fact, a few of the early fathers explicitly endorsed justification by faith alone. Such an expression doesn't necessarily mean that they would subscribe to the understanding of the Reformers on the matter. On the other hand, neither can we say that those who omit the slogan would necessarily reject it. We have to remember that the matter wasn't debated or disputed by the early fathers. Conflict or controversies clarify the issues at stake. When we examine what the early fathers wrote we see two themes. Justification is ours by the grace of God through faith, and good works are necessary for salvation. These two themes capture quite nicely the NT writings themselves. In that respect the early fathers were faithful interpreters of the NT.

I am not claiming that the fathers always formulated these matters in a way that accords with the scriptures. Surely there are statements made which the Reformers would not endorse and which we would judge to be less than faithful to the biblical witness. The earliest interpreters of the NT were not infallible, and their lack of precision and even their less than helpful articulations can be forgiven given their context and time. Accuracy and precision are forged in the furnace of controversy. We aren't surprised that one of the most helpful books on *sola fide* was written by John Owen titled *Justification by Faith*.<sup>2</sup> Owen wrote this book more than a hundred years after the Reformation began. He could survey the entire question from the standpoint of church history and after the controversies that had erupted between the Reformers and the Roman Catholics and the Reformers and the Socinians.

Hence, neither Protestants nor Catholics can confidently claim that the early fathers were on their side. What we can say is that there are indications that the early fathers were closer to the biblical witness than many have affirmed. In other words, Thomas Torrance's claim that the early fathers contradicted the Pauline teaching on justification fails to persuade.<sup>3</sup>

I am not suggesting all the early fathers would have endorsed justification by faith alone. Perhaps some would have rejected the notion. But I am saying that those who say that there was a consensus against the doctrine go beyond the evidence. Some of the fathers, as already noted, specifically wrote that justification was by faith alone. Most of them, if we bring our questions to the text, are rather vague and ambiguous. On the other hand, Brian Arnold's recent dissertation on the early fathers rightly demonstrates that some of the earliest evidence actually accords with justification by

faith alone.<sup>4</sup> The matter is complex, and I am not a church historian, and it is probably somewhat foolish for me to be talking about this with church historians in the room! Still, the only point I am making here is that those who confidently say that the early fathers denied justification by faith alone are claiming more than the sources say. Sometimes Protestants are accused of reading their theology back into early fathers, and, of course, we must beware of anachronism. But the opposite is also true. Roman Catholics are also prone to read the early fathers as if they denied what the Reformers taught about justification. And I want to say: not so clear and not so fast. In fact, there is significant evidence on the other side.

### ***The Reformers and Their Successors***

My book is actually like a tour where I dock at certain ports of call. Many important persons are skipped since there is no attempt to be comprehensive. I particularly consider the contribution of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and as I already noted, John Owen. The disagreement between John Owen and Richard Baxter on the issue is most interesting, for it reflects in some significant ways a debate that continues up to our very day. I would argue that Owen got the better of the debate, but I won't linger on that point today. It is fascinating to see that Baxter argued that faith is our righteousness, whereas Owen claimed that faith justifies us because it unites us to Jesus Christ who is our righteousness. In other words, Owen presents a powerful biblical and theological defense for the imputation of Christ's righteousness.

I would like to pause and mention a couple of other things that fascinated me. Jonathan Edwards's understanding of justification by faith has been the subject of intense controversy in scholarship. Some maintain that he is faithful to the NT and to the Reformers, while others suggest that he veers into Catholic territory in articulating his doctrine of justification. Protestant scholars line up on both sides in assessing Edwards. I come out with those who say that Edwards is faithful to the Reformers and to the NT witness. Edwards specifically says that justification is by faith alone and dependent upon the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ. Some think he denies this conception when he explains the role of good works in justification. I wouldn't phrase everything the way Edwards does. Sometimes in formulating his theology Edwards becomes quite speculative. But I would maintain that his statements about the necessity of good works for justification should be

interpreted in light of his clear statement that justification is by faith alone and rests on the imputed righteousness of Christ alone. What Edwards is trying to do, however, is to take seriously what James means when he says that justification is by works. Edwards is a good Protestant; he takes seriously *sola scriptura*, and thus he doesn't just parrot the Reformed tradition but tries to explain it. Perhaps he wasn't entirely successful, but I think it goes too far to say that he actually denied it and wanders into Catholic territory. After all, Edwards had no sympathy whatsoever for Catholic theology.

### ***Some Recent Developments***

I also consider some recent developments and controversies related to justification. Hence, the "New Perspective on Paul" and Doug Campbell's apocalyptic reading of Paul are examined.<sup>5</sup> The new perspective isn't so new anymore and sometimes scholars skip it altogether. Joseph Fitzmyer, the great Roman Catholic commentary, doesn't engage it at all in his commentary on Romans.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Leander Keck's 2005 commentary on Romans pays little attention to the new perspective.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the new perspective is losing steam and becoming yesterday's news. Some think Doug Campbell's post new perspective view is the next thing on the horizon, but Campbell's reading of Paul is idiosyncratic, and it is hard to see how it will become influential, unless someone tweaks it in a way that appeals to evangelicals.

I also survey the *Joint Declaration on Justification* which represents the fruit of Roman Catholic and Lutheran dialogue. Frank Beckwith's return to Catholicism which has generated much interest is also considered.<sup>8</sup> Finally, ECT (Evangelicals and Catholics Together) is assessed, especially the contribution and defense of ECT by Richard John Neuhaus and J. I. Packer.<sup>9</sup> Packer rightly says that Augustinianism shouldn't be condemned and that people may be justified by faith alone even if they deny justification by faith alone. Owen said the same thing long before Packer. Still, the Catholic Church has moved in a much more Arminian direction since the days of Augustine, and despite Packer's demurrals, the document suggests more harmony between evangelicals and Catholics on the gospel than truly exists. Neuhaus is a fascinating case since he was raised in Lutheran circles and converted to Catholicism. Neuhaus has a long discussion on justification by faith alone. When it comes right down to it, he ends up saying that justification by faith alone really isn't that important and Reformed Protestants should just get

over it. That is a most interesting argument because that is the very point that is disputed. Those who are Reformed and find justification by faith alone to be precious both doctrinally and pastorally aren't moved by an argument that says it is a matter of indifference.

### ***Pastoral Thoughts***

I close the book with some pastoral reflections. Justification by faith alone is important doctrinally, but it is vital pastorally. We will all stand before God on the day of judgment, and what will we plead before him? Will we plead our own righteousness and goodness? Owen especially emphasizes this matter in his book on justification. He says that believers will almost certainly get things right if they reflect on standing personally before the Holy One of Israel. They will not put any trust in their own righteousness but will look to God alone for justification.<sup>10</sup> It is instructive that J. Gresham Machen as he was dying said, "I'm so thankful for active obedience of Christ; no hope without it."<sup>11</sup> If we die slowly, we will consider our sins, and Satan and our own conscience will accuse us of our sins. We will find no comfort in that hour if we reflect on our own righteousness. For we recognize in that moment that we need the perfect righteousness of another to stand before God, namely, the righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to us. A short story here might prove to be helpful. I was raised as a Roman Catholic and hence friends occasionally bring to me Protestants who are considering Catholicism. I have a bad track record by the way of turning them away from Catholicism. I tried something else the last time I had this kind of discussion. I said to the person. "You have many secret sins and are you going to plead your own righteousness on the day of judgment?" I don't know if he was convinced, but I could see he was visibly shaken since we all know in our heart of hearts that we are unworthy to stand before God based on our own goodness.

## **JUSTIFICATION ACCORDING TO WORKS AND SOLA FIDE**

### ***The Use of Slogans***

As we examine the biblical text, three areas will be addressed briefly: 1) the use of slogans; 2) the matter of imputation; and 3) how justification according to works fits with *sola fide*. The longest discussion will be on the last issue since it is the best argument against justification by faith alone.

Reformed Protestants confess that justification is by faith alone, and yet scripture never says such explicitly. In fact, as Roman Catholics never tire pointing out, the scriptures only address once whether justification is by faith alone, and they deny it. James 2:24 says, “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (ESV). How is that Protestants who uphold *sola scriptura* have a slogan which is contradicted by the very words of scripture? Have we inadvertently become like Roman Catholics in that justification by faith alone represents our tradition but actually contradicts the scriptural witness? To paraphrase the words of Jesus: are we denying scripture to uphold our tradition (Matt 15:6)?

I will argue that we don’t deny the scriptures in confessing justification by faith alone, but first a word should be said about slogans. Slogans are both helpful and distorting. The slogan justification by faith alone is helpful, for it is time-consuming to explain repeatedly what we mean in expressing a theological truth. The slogan summarizes in short form the theology that has been hammered out exegetically, historically, and theologically. If we didn’t use slogans our conversations would be interminably long.

If we look at it from another perspective, slogans are also distorting. The untutored person might think that the slogan justification by faith alone means that good works are important and unnecessary. They may seize on James 2:24 where James explicitly says justification is not by faith alone and triumphantly reject the notion that justification is by faith alone. Unfortunately, such a rejection is also a kind of sloganeering and suffers from superficiality, for before someone rejects justification by faith alone it is vital to discern what the most articulate and sophisticated advocates of the doctrine meant. None of them denied the importance of good works. Virtually all of them said that justification is by faith alone, but then immediately added that such faith is never alone. Hence, when they affirmed that justification was by faith alone, they were ruling out the notion that our works were a basis of justification. So, the slogan justification by faith alone is useful as long as it is rightly understood.

### ***Faith Alone and Imputation***

Righteousness by faith alone fits with the truth that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us. Our righteousness doesn’t depend upon what we do, but upon an alien righteousness—a righteousness *given* to us. Robert

Gundry made a splash a few years ago in his rejection of imputation, and he contended that faith *is our righteousness*.<sup>12</sup> Such a reading isn't new, for Baxter held the same view many centuries earlier. Despite Gundry's demurals, faith justifies because through faith we are united to Jesus Christ as the crucified and risen one. Theologically, this makes perfect sense. It is God in Christ who justifies us rather than our faith. Faith is the instrument by which we are incorporated into all that Jesus Christ is and has done for us. Luther expresses this truth beautifully when he says that righteousness is imputed to us because we are married to Christ.<sup>13</sup> In this marriage, in this union, all that Christ is belongs to us. In our righteousness we look outside of ourselves and to Jesus Christ.

Gundry and others point to Romans 4:3 and Galatians 3:6 where Paul, citing Genesis 15:6, says that Abraham's faith was counted as righteousness. Gundry worries that Reformed theology runs over the lineaments of the text, forcing its theology into Paul's writings. Space is lacking to enter into the dispute step by step. Still, three texts in Paul call into question Gundry's exegesis. First, the truth of imputation is captured simply and yet profoundly in 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" (ESV). Christ was made a sin-offering or counted as a sinner in our stead and for our salvation. He was counted as a sinner, in other words, because of our sin and not his own, which is to say that he gave himself as our penal substitute. We were reconciled to God because God did "not [count our] trespasses against [us]" (2 Cor 5:19, ESV). As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:14, "one has died for all, therefore all have died" (ESV). Christ died for us as believers, and therefore his death was our death. His death to sin was our death to sin as Romans 6:8 affirms. But it doesn't stop there; we also are given "the righteousness of God" "in him." We are counted as righteous before God by virtue of our union with Jesus Christ. The righteousness of God is ours by virtue of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We read in 1 Timothy 3:16 that Jesus was "vindicated by the Spirit" (ESV). This vindication took place at the resurrection, proclaiming to all that the crucified one was the righteous one. Those who are united to Jesus participate in the death he died and enjoy the vindication which is his by virtue of the resurrection. Since his death is our death, his resurrection is also our resurrection and vindication.

The second text is Romans 5:12-19. I am not going to engage in a close

exegesis for the sake of time, but the whole point of the text supports imputation. Everyone enters into the world as a sinner and condemned because of Adam's sin. Adam functions as our covenant head; we are united to him, and what is true of Adam is also true of us. So too, those who are in Christ are righteous and have life because they are united to him. Adam and Christ are covenant heads, covenant representatives. If we belong to Jesus Christ, and if Jesus is our covenant head, then his righteousness is imputed to us, just as Adam's sin is imputed to us.

Third, how should we interpret Paul's assertion that our faith is counted as righteousness (Rom 4:3; Gal 3:6)? Paul doesn't say anything in those paragraphs about the imputation of righteousness, and hence we can understand why some conclude that faith *is our righteousness*. A brief foray into the context of Romans 4 and Galatians 3 demonstrates, on the other hand, that imputation isn't foreign to Paul's purpose. Romans 3:21-26 is the decisive hinge in Paul's argument in Romans. Right-standing with God isn't obtained by works of law since "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23, ESV). Righteousness belongs to those who put their faith in Christ Jesus (Rom 3:22). But how does God count believers as righteous through faith in Jesus? It is because Jesus Christ is our redemption and propitiation. He has liberated his people from slavery to sin through his blood (Rom 3:24), and he has taken upon himself the wrath of God as the place where atonement was secured (Rom 3:25-26). Faith counts as righteousness because our faith is in our redeemer and propitiator. It is vital to see that Romans 3:21-26 precedes Romans 4, revealing that it isn't our faith that saves us. Rather, it is the object of our faith which saves us because the faith that saves is faith in Jesus Christ, and righteousness is ours because we are united to God by faith.

We see something similar in Galatians. Paul affirms that we are justified by faith apart from works of law three times in Galatians 2:16. What saves, however, is not ultimately our faith but Jesus Christ himself. Sinners find life only because they have died with him. Paul says in Galatians 2:19 that he died to the law and in 2:20 that he has been crucified with Christ. The life he enjoys is resurrection life, the life of the new age through faith in Christ. But the death Paul died and the life he lives are traced to his death and resurrection in Christ. In other words, Paul has new life because he is united to Jesus Christ. So, faith itself isn't his righteousness. His righteousness is



in Jesus Christ as the crucified and risen one. Such a reading is supported by Galatians 3:10-14, and especially verses 13-14. The curse that rests upon all people because of their failure to keep the law has been taken by Christ Jesus, who has “redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Gal 3:13, HCSB). Our righteousness is located in Jesus Christ as the crucified one, and hence faith itself isn’t our righteousness. Verse 14 bears this out, for Paul says that “the blessing of Abraham” belongs to the Gentiles “in Christ Jesus” (ESV). By virtue of union with Christ Gentiles participate in the blessing promised to Abraham. Faith links us to Jesus Christ and to all that he is for us.

To sum up, when we speak of justification by faith alone, we aren’t saying that our faith justifies us. We see here how the five *solas* are closely linked together, for righteousness is by faith alone because our righteousness is in Christ alone as the crucified and risen one. And if our righteousness is by faith alone and in Christ alone, then it is by grace alone since our works don’t constitute our righteousness. And our righteousness is also to the glory of God alone since he is the one who has accomplished our salvation. Justification by faith alone doesn’t call attention to our faith but to Christ as the redeemer, reconciler, and Savior.

### ***Faith Alone and Justification by Works***

At this juncture, the most important biblical objection to justification by faith alone will be addressed. It is the objection that Frank Beckwith and many others raise against the notion that justification by faith alone. And it brings us back to the famous text in James where James says that justification is by works and not by faith alone (James 2:24). How can we say that justification and salvation are by faith alone when the biblical text says otherwise, when a number of verses speak of justification or salvation by works? Sometimes Reformed Protestants, in my experience, have a rather fuzzy acquaintance with these texts. In some instances we are more familiar with our theology than the biblical evidence. Because of the limitations of time, the discussion here will be limited to Paul and James.

Paul is famous, and rightly so, as the theologian of grace. He emphasizes repeatedly that justification and salvation are by grace through faith, and thus works are excluded. Paul says in Romans 3:28, “For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law” (NIV). Luther

concluded from this verse that we are justified by faith alone, and the famous Roman Catholic NT scholar Joseph Fitzmyer agrees that Luther's reading catches Paul's meaning here.<sup>14</sup> In Galatians 2:16 Paul tells the readers three times that justification is by faith instead of by works of law. The significance of the statement can hardly be overestimated since it appears in the section of the letter where Paul begins to unfold his theology over against the Judaizers. We could even say that the rest of Galatians unpacks the meaning of what Paul says in Galatians 2:15-21. The new perspective has argued that the focus in this statement is on the boundary markers, the identity badges separating Jews from Gentiles. I think this reading goes astray for a number of reasons. Many don't know that there was a similar argument in some respects during the Reformation. Roman Catholics maintained that works of law referred to the ceremonial law, and Luther and Calvin argued that the reference is to the moral law. I think Luther and Calvin got the better of the argument, but I won't rehearse that here. According to Roman Catholics justification comes in part from our adherence to the moral law, but the Reformers rightly insisted that Paul teaches that our righteousness isn't contributed to by our obedience.

Even if we were to grant the new perspective reading of works of law, we still have the statements where Paul teaches that we aren't justified by works. The word "works" (ἔργα) isn't limited or defined by the phrase "of law" (νόμου). Hence, the word "works" refers in the broadest sense to anything and everything a person does to obtain righteousness. Paul emphasizes that Abraham wasn't justified by "works" (Rom 4:1-8). This isn't just a boundary marker issue, for Abraham is characterized as "ungodly" (Rom 4:5), since he belonged to a family of idolaters as Joshua 24:2 says. People who attempt to be justified by their own works are trying "to establish their own righteousness" (Rom 10:3, HCSB). The righteousness that saves, however, is not our own but "the righteousness from God that depends on faith" (Phil 3:9, ESV). As Titus 3:5 says we are not saved "because of works done by us in righteousness" (ESV). The last phrase (τῶν ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ) is most interesting since works are defined in terms of the righteous things we have done, showing that works can't be limited to boundary markers of the new perspective. Works are defined in terms of our righteous behavior. All of this fits with Ephesians 2:8-9, which are signature verses in Pauline theology. "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not

your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (ESV).

In this brief survey we have seen a constellation of texts that demonstrate that justification in Paul’s thought is by faith alone. It is by faith alone because works don’t contribute to our justification. We could look at other texts to make this same point (cf. Rom 3:21-31; 4:13-25; 9:30-10:8; Gal 3:1-4:31; Phil 3:2-9). The notion that justification is by faith alone doesn’t come from just one or two texts. It is rooted deeply in Paul’s letters, and Paul’s theology and his thirteen letters are the fullest exposition of the gospel of grace given to us in Jesus Christ.

At the same time Paul emphasizes the importance of good works. The emphasis on good works is pronounced, so much so that Heikki Raisanen says that Paul’s theology is actually contradictory.<sup>15</sup> Saying that Paul’s theology is contradictory is a counsel of despair and quite unlikely even at a human level, for the texts that say justification is not by works and the texts that say justification is according to works are quite close to one another in the same letters. It is unlikely that Paul didn’t see the tension between these two kinds of statements. He would have been rather obtuse if he didn’t see the problem, but before suggesting a solution, I want to present the evidence that justification or salvation is according to works. Such evidence needs to be adduced because in some cases evangelicals don’t attend to these texts often and hence are surprised when presented with the evidence.

When I speak of justification or salvation by works in Paul, I am not restricting myself to texts that specifically talk about good works relative to justification or salvation. I also include texts which emphasize that the obedience of believers is necessary for entrance into the kingdom of God or eternal life. For instance in Galatians 5:19-21 the “works of the flesh” are itemized, and Paul follows up with these sobering words. “I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (ESV). How remarkable it is to find in a letter that emphasizes the grace of God in salvation and justification by faith that also Paul threatens the Galatians with exclusion from the kingdom if they practice the works of the flesh. We see something quite similar in Galatians 6:8: “the one who sows to his flesh will reap corruption from the flesh, but the one who sows to the Spirit will reap eternal life from the Spirit” (HCSB). The contrast between “corruption” and “eternal life” clarifies that those who sow to the flesh will experience final judgment and eternal destruction.

We find in 1 Corinthians a warning that reminds us of we saw in Galatians. The Corinthians are disputing and arguing with one another, and even going to court before unbelievers (1 Cor 6:1-8). The connection between verse 8 and verses 9-10 is captured very well by the NRSV. Paul says in verse 8, “you yourselves wrong and defraud—and believers at that.” And then in verses 9-10 he threatens them. “Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.” The Corinthians are wronging each other and wrongdoers won’t enter the kingdom. Paul catalogs some of the sins that bar people from the kingdom, showing again that those who practice evil won’t enjoy eternal life.

The notion that there will be a judgment according to work is pervasive in Paul. We read in 2 Corinthians 5:10. “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (NIV). Paul isn’t thinking merely of rewards since the issue in 5:1-10 is one’s permanent home with the Lord which will be the destiny of those who belong to the Lord. In fact, Paul anticipates here what he says later about the false teachers who claimed to be Christians. These teacher are actually “false apostles” and Satanic messengers (2 Cor 11:13-14). Their final “destiny will be according to their works” (2 Cor 11:15 HCSB). Paul makes a similar statement about Alexander the coppersmith who opposed his gospel so virulently. He warns Timothy about him and says, “The Lord will repay him according to his works” (2 Tim 4:14, HCSB). Paul teaches that those who do good works will be saved on the last day, while those who practice evil will be judged. In one sense, what Paul writes is scarcely surprising since the OT taught that judgment was according to works (cf. Exod 34:7; Job 34:11; Ps 62:12; Prov 24:12)

Such a reading fits with what Paul says about works in the most famous passage on this matter. We read in Romans 2:6-11. “He will repay each one according to his works: eternal life to those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor, and immortality; but wrath and indignation to those who are self-seeking and disobey the truth but are obeying unrighteousness; affliction and distress for every human being who does evil, first to the Jew, and also to the Greek; but glory, honor, and peace for everyone who does what is good, first to the Jew, and also to the Greek. There is no favoritism with God”

(HCSB). There isn't any need to engage in extensive exegesis here since Paul clearly says that eternal life is according to works, and those who practice evil will experience God's wrath and indignation. Some commentators, however, claim that Paul speaks hypothetically. Yes, they say, judgment is according to works, but all fail to do good works. The set of those who do good works is an empty set. The hypothetical interpretation fits with the major theme of Romans 1:18-3:20 where all, both Jews and Greeks, are indicted as sinners.

The hypothetical argument is a good one but it fails to convince for three reasons. First, Paul gives no indication in the near context that he speaks hypothetically. He could have easily signaled to the reader that reward for doing good never becomes a reality. Second, we have seen elsewhere that Paul teaches that those who do good works will enter the kingdom. We are not surprised, then, to find Paul saying in Romans 2:13, "For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified" (ESV). Remarkably enough, Paul says that those who obey the law will be justified before God on the last day.

The third argument supporting the notion that Paul isn't speaking hypothetically is the final paragraph in Romans 2:25-29. Context is king and the context indicates that Paul is speaking hypothetically. Here Paul addresses Jews who put their trust in the covenant sign of circumcision. Circumcision, of course, was necessary to be a member of the Jewish people. Gentiles who desired to convert to Judaism showed they were proselytes by their circumcision. Paul, however, says that those who are circumcised but fail to keep the law belong to the uncircumcision. In other words, Jews who don't believe in Jesus Christ are outside the covenant people of God.

Paul doesn't stop there. He says in verse 26 that the uncircumcised person who keeps the law will be counted (λογισθήσεται) as circumcised. Any Jewish person would be mightily puzzled by the notion that one could keep the law and yet fail to be circumcised! But that is a subject for another day. What is remarkable is that the Gentile who keeps the law is reckoned by God (note the passive verb for λογίζομαι) as circumcised. In other words, the Gentile who observes the law is a covenant member. Paul goes on to say in verse 27 that Gentiles who fulfill the law will judge on the last day Jews who enjoy all the advantages of the law and circumcision.

But isn't Paul just speaking hypothetically here? The connection between verses 26-27 and verses 28-29 rules out the hypothetical view. Paul links the

verses with the word “for” (γάρ). So, verses 28-29 function as the ground for verses 26-27. How is that Gentiles can observe the law and be covenant members? We are told in verses 28-29. True Jewishness and true circumcision are not outward matters. Circumcision of the heart fulfills the new covenant promise that God’s people will be circumcised in their hearts so that they are enabled to observe God’s commands (cf. Deut 30:6; Jer 4:4; 31:31-34). Most importantly, Paul contrasts “the Spirit and the letter” here. Wherever we find that contrast Paul refers to the work of the Spirit in the age of fulfillment (cf. Rom 7:6; 2 Cor 3:6). Hence, the reference to the Spirit points to the eschatological work of the Spirit by which Gentiles are truly circumcised and truly Jews. In other words, they are members of the people of God. What Paul says about Gentile obedience and membership in the people of God can’t be hypothetical since he ascribes such to the Holy Spirit! But why would Paul inject the theme of Gentile obedience into a section that emphasizes that all have sinned? Why confuse the readers? Paul anticipates a major theme in Romans: Gentile inclusion in the people of God is intended to provoke the Jews to jealousy. Often in Romans Paul brings up a subject briefly and then circles back to it in his argument.

What we have seen in Romans 2:25-29 helps us interpret Romans 2:6-11 and to reach the conclusion that Paul wasn’t speaking hypothetically when he spoke of judgment according to works. The works that are done, however, aren’t autonomous; they are the work of the Spirit.

Other passages could be adduced in support of the notion that works are necessary for justification. The many texts on the necessity of good works in Paul demonstrate that Paul isn’t so different from James after all. Both Paul and James affirm that good works are necessary for justification.

By now you may have forgotten that this paper was about *sola fide*! I wanted us to see, however, the tension in Paul’s theology between the two affirmations: justification and salvation are *apart from* works, and justification and salvation are *according to* works. Does the emphasis on good works and their necessity for justification contradict *sola fide*? I would say no, and offer the following arguments.

First, good works can’t be the *basis* of salvation in Paul’s theology since Paul clearly teaches, as noted above, that Christ’s atoning work saves us (cf. Rom 3:21-26; 2 Cor 5:14-21; Gal 3:13). What exactly does Paul mean, then, when he speaks of the necessity of good works? He can’t mean that

those works *qualify* us to enter into God's presence in and of themselves, for otherwise, as Paul says in Galatians 2:21 if righteousness comes by the law and our obedience to it, then Christ died for nothing.

Second, and closely related to what was said above about Christ's atoning death: good works can't be the basis of our salvation because God demands perfection. The demand for perfection to enter God's presence is pervasive in scripture. For instance, Adam and Eve were driven from the garden for one sin. God didn't say to them that they could remain in his presence if they obeyed most of the time thereafter. Many scholars say that when Israel entered into covenant at Sinai with Yahweh that perfection wasn't required. The answer is no and yes. No, perfection wasn't demanded, for the Lord in his grace provided sacrifices for the people when they strayed from him. On the other hand, the sacrifices themselves showed that the Lord required perfection. Every disobedience had to be atoned for; otherwise, Israel couldn't remain in the Lord's presence. The presenting of sacrifices shows that perfection was necessary for Israel to remain in God's presence.

In Paul's theology we also see that perfection is demanded. We have already seen that believers need the atoning and redeeming and propitiating work of Christ because God demands perfection. Any sin warrants judgment from God. We are not surprised, then, that Paul (2 Cor 5:21) and other NT writers emphasize that Jesus was without sin (e.g., John 8:46; 1 Pet 2:22; Heb 4:15; 7:26; 1 John 3:5). He could scarcely atone for sins if he wasn't a lamb without spot and blemish (1 Pet 1:19), a perfect sacrifice.

Does Paul teach that perfect obedience is required? I think it is clearly taught in Galatians 3:10. "For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, because it is written: Everyone who does not continue doing everything written in the book of the law is cursed" (HCSB). Note the argument here. We really have a syllogism with the middle step of the argument omitted. The conclusion of the syllogism is in the first part of the verse: those who are of works of law are cursed. The first premise in the argument is in Galatians 3:10b. One must do everything written in the book of the law to avoid being cursed. Paul draws here on Deuteronomy 27:56 and Deuteronomy 28:58. The LXX of Deuteronomy 28:58 can be translated as follows: you must "do all the words of this law written in this book" (ποιεῖν πάντα τὰ ῥήματα τοῦ νόμου τούτου τὰ γεγραμμένα ἐν τῷ βιβλίῳ τούτῳ). Paul emphasizes complete and perfect obedience; one must do *everything* that is written to avoid being



cursed. Interestingly, Andrew Das has shown that the requirement of perfect obedience is reflected in other second temple Jewish writings of the day.<sup>16</sup>

What is the missing step in the argument? It is the notion that no one keeps the law perfectly. Some object that we can't smuggle this notion into the text since Paul doesn't state it. But the reason it is omitted is easy to explain. Everyone agreed in accord with the OT that perfect obedience was impossible for human beings. Listen to these texts:<sup>17</sup>

- "When they sin against You—for there is no one who does not sin (1 Kings 8:46).
- "Who can say, 'I have kept my heart pure; I am cleansed from my sin'? (Prov 20:9).
- "There is certainly no righteous man on the earth who does good and never sins" (Eccl 7:20).
- "There is no one who does good. The LORD looks down from heaven on the human race to see if there is one who is wise, one who seeks God. All have turned away; all alike have become corrupt. There is no one who does good, not even one" (Ps 14:1-3).

The middle premise in the argument is left out because it was perfectly obvious to everyone from the scriptures (and probably also from experience) that all sinned.

Let's sum up Paul's argument from Gal. 3:10.

- God demands perfect obedience of the law (3:10b).
- No one obeys perfectly (implied).
- Therefore, all who rely on works of law are cursed (3:10a).
- Justification, then, can't be based on works since no one performs what is required. When we combine this with what Paul says about atonement, then we see that the basis of salvation is the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, not the works that we do since our works remain imperfect.

Let me add one other argument from Romans 2:26-29. We saw there that Gentiles are considered to be true Jews and covenant members because of their obedience. The obedience rendered, however, is due to the Holy Spirit's work. This fits with Galatians 6:8 where Paul calls upon his readers to sow to the Spirit. Indeed, if we look at Galatians, the emphasis on the Spirit is remarkable. Believers must "walk by the Spirit" (Gal 5:16), "be led by the Spirit" (5:18), manifest "the fruit of the Spirit" (5:22), and "keep in step



with the Spirit” (5:25). This fits with Ephesians 5:18 where a new way of living is ascribed to being “filled with the Spirit.”<sup>18</sup>

The emphasis on the Spirit is important, showing that our works are a consequence and result of the work of the Spirit. I would argue, then, that the works necessary for justification aren’t the *basis* for salvation and in that sense don’t contribute to salvation. They are the *necessary evidence* for and *fruit* of salvation. Such a judgment, I would suggest, isn’t an imposition upon the text but represents a careful putting together of all that Paul wrote on the matter.

Grace is a central motif in Paul’s theology, so that salvation and justification are of the Lord. Our redemption and reconciliation are a miracle of grace, for we deserved judgment and destruction because of our evil and sin. Our works don’t save us since they are woefully lacking. Faith, however, trusts God’s promise to save and justify those who believe in Jesus Christ. And it is right to say faith alone saves since imperfect works don’t pass muster to make us right with God. Faith unites us with Jesus Christ who is our righteousness. Yes, good works are necessary for life eternal, but they can’t be the basis of our right-standing with God since God demands perfection. Good works are a fruit of faith and a result of the Spirit’s work. The best advocates of *sola fide* have always said that we are justified by faith alone, and yet it is by faith that isn’t alone. So, the necessity of good works doesn’t contradict *sola fide*.

### ***Reflecting on James***

Now let’s think about James for a moment. We all know the famous passage where James says that Abraham and Rahab are justified by works (Jas. 2:14-26). Furthermore, James denies that justification is by faith alone. What do we make of this? We remember Luther saying that if anyone could harmonize James and Paul on justification he would put his doctor’s cap on him and call him a fool. On another occasion, Luther, speaking about the epistle of James said that he would like to throw Jimmy in the fire. Still, Luther didn’t exclude James from the canon but said it wasn’t one of the chief books.<sup>19</sup>

Part of what Luther says is actually quite helpful. Too many have read James as if the letter is the whole of his theology. The letter is occasional and responds to a particular situation in the life of the church or churches. Many elements in James’s theology are doubtless absent from the book. For instance, James says nothing about Jesus’s atoning death, but it is hardly warranted to conclude from this that Jesus’s death wasn’t necessary for salvation

according to James. If James dispensed with Jesus's atoning death, he could scarcely be accepted as a Christian writer. Notice, however, that Paul after rehearsing the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15:1-10, which includes Jesus's death for the forgiveness of our sins, emphatically includes both James and Peter in the preaching of this gospel. "Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed" (1 Cor 15:11 NIV). Paul claims that he and James proclaimed the same gospel, which included the truth that Jesus died for our sins. Also, in Galatians 2:1-10 James is among those who gave the right hand of fellowship to Paul, indicating that "the truth of the gospel" (Gal 2:5, 14) proclaimed by Paul was also endorsed by James. The full explanation of the gospel found in Paul is lacking in James, but it is hardly fair to compare thirteen letters of Paul to one by James. That is to demand too much. Ironically enough, some NT scholars read James as if his letter is a systematic theology, whereas many systematians often recognize the situational circumstances that called forth the letter.

What stands out in James is the call to live a new life. Perhaps his readers had used the gospel of grace as an excuse to be lax ethically. Interpreting what James means in speaking about justification by works is illuminated by two other texts. In a verse about controlling our tongues James remarks that "we all stumble in many ways" (Jas 3:2, ESV). The word "stumble" clearly means sin. James uses the same word "stumble" (πταίω) in James 2:12 where he says, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it" (Jas 2:10 NIV). James clearly teaches here that if we violate one command of the law we are lawbreakers instead of law keepers. And then he proceeds to say a bit later in James 3:2 that we all stumble (πταίω again), we all sin, in many ways. How fascinating that James includes himself in those who are sinners, for he uses the first person plural. And what James says is true of all Christians since he says that *all* believers sin in many ways. Notice also that he doesn't say that we sin in a few ways or a couple of ways but in *many* ways.

If we put James 3:2 together with 2:10, there is a sense in which Christians remain lawbreakers their entire lives, up until the time of their death. And yet James also says that believers are justified by works. We have important evidence here that James means something very similar to Paul. Justification by works certainly doesn't mean perfection since we all stumble in many ways. Nor does it seem likely that such works qualify us to enter God's presence

intrinsically since these works are imperfect. This observation fits with the last two verses of the letter where a sinner who wanders and is restored will have his many sins covered (Jas 5:19-20). Justification by works doesn't rule out for James repentance and restoration after a person has given himself or herself to many sins.

Finally, there is evidence in James 2:14-26 that James wouldn't reject *sola fide*. What James rejects in this section is a *saying* faith, a *claiming* faith where works are absent. It is *this* kind of faith that doesn't save, for it is a faith marked by intellectual assent only. Demons, as James tells us, are orthodox monotheists (Jas 2:19), but their faith doesn't lead to a change of life. In the Gospels the demons confess that Jesus is "the Holy One of God" (Mark 1:24, HCSB), but such a confession isn't saving. So, when James says that faith without works doesn't save he is thinking of a particular kind of faith, what he calls a "dead" faith (2:17, 26), a useless or idle faith (Jas 2:20). But genuine faith, a faith that embraces all that God is for us in Jesus Christ, saves, and such a faith inevitably produces works. But this accords what we mean when we speak of *sola fide*. We are justified by faith alone and yet our faith is never alone. I conclude, then, that there is important evidence to support the notion that Paul and James agreed on justification by faith alone, and that they both believed that true faith always produces good works.

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is adapted from a paper presented at The Southern Seminary Theology Conference on September 24-25, 2015 at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY. Much of it is taken from chapters in Thomas R. Schreiner, *Faith Alone—The Doctrine of Justification: What the Reformers Taught and Why It Still Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> John Owen, *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith through the Imputation of the Righteousness of Christ; Explained, Confirmed, and Vindicated in The Works of John Owen*, vol. 5, ed. William H. Goold (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1965).

<sup>3</sup> See Thomas F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948).

<sup>4</sup> See Brian J. Arnold, "Justification One Hundred Years after Paul" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> See Douglas A. Campbell, *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> See Leander E. Keck, *Romans* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> See Francis J. Beckwith, *Return to Rome: Confessions of an Evangelical Catholic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> See Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus, eds., *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission* (Dallas: Word, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Owen, *Justification by Faith*, 9-20.

- <sup>11</sup> See Ned Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (1954; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 508.
- <sup>12</sup> See Robert H. Gundry, "Why I Didn't Endorse 'The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration' ... Even Though I wasn't Asked to," *Books and Culture* 7.1 (January-February, 2001).
- <sup>13</sup> See Schreiner, *Faith Alone*, 182.
- <sup>14</sup> Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 360-362.
- <sup>15</sup> See Heikki Räisänen, *Paul and the Law* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1983).
- <sup>16</sup> See A. Andrew Das, *Paul, the Law, and the Covenant* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000).
- <sup>17</sup> All of these texts are from the HCSB.
- <sup>18</sup> All of these verses are from the ESV, but Gal 5:25 is my translation.
- <sup>19</sup> On this point, see Schreiner, *Faith Alone*, 37-53, 191-206.