

Paul And James

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Introduction

In two earlier papers I discuss the historic debate between Augustine and Pelagius.¹ The first of these deals with issues raised in the debate itself. The second traces its significance for Celtic Christians, especially those living in Ireland. Below, instead of following the debate farther forward in time down to our own day,² I trace it back to its earliest roots--i.e., to the apparent tension between Paul and James within the New Testament.

Both Paul and James appeal to the story of Abraham as final proof of their respective positions. "What does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness'" (Rom 4:3). That was Paul's point. James, on the other hand, says:

(20) You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? (21) Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? (22) You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. (23) And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. (24) You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. (Jas 2:21-23)

For Paul the story of Abraham offering up Isaac is an illustration of faith; for James it is an illustration of "deeds" (vs. 20)--i.e., works. Could any two positions be any more diametrically opposite than these? And if it really is true that they are irreconcilably different, which one should we accept?

The Story of Abraham

Admittedly the contrasts between Paul's outlook and that of James could be emphasized, but I do not think it is necessary to do so. What both men wrote was inspired by the same Holy Spirit, who is not divided against Himself. The two disagree only in the sense that they present opposing aspects of the same truth. They do not disagree in the sense that what they say cannot be reconciled. If we believe our Bibles, we must accept both.

Let us start with James. James did not oppose faith. Let us be clear on that at the outset. He merely wanted the real thing rather than substitutes. His argument is for genuineness as regards the quality of faith. There is nothing in his rejection of hollow talk as a substitute for genuine substance that is hostile to what Paul says. But James' question is, How can we tell when faith is real and when it is not? The answer he proposes is by what we do. And this is a fair test. Christ Himself said, "Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them" (Matt 7:20). For James, a person's faith is either practical or it is an exercise in self-deception. Would anyone wish to deny this?

On the other hand Paul does not oppose works. At least no student of 1 Cor 4 and 9 or

2 Cor 1, 6, 7, 11, and 12 would claim that he does. Who can claim to have worked any longer, or harder, or under more forbidding circumstances than Paul did to ensure that the gospel of God's free grace would be understood and believed within the first century (or any other century)?³ There is nothing in so active and forceful a ministry as Paul's that is hostile to what James says. Indeed, how could we possibly find a better illustration of the point James was trying to make than Paul offers by his own very practical example?

Someone will object that because Paul did none of his work for the purpose of earning salvation, what he did cannot be compared to what James has in mind. What kind of works does James have in mind? Does he expect people to throw away their confidence in God and earn salvation, rejecting grace? Where does he say that? If this were his goal, then why does he go to such lengths to establish a method by which we can know when our faith is and is not genuine? Why is maintaining a high quality of faith so important to James if he thought there were any possible substitute for it? There is no reason to suppose that James has in mind any other kind of works than those practiced so extensively by Paul.

The church's efforts to capture the legitimate differences between Paul and James might lead us to think that such differences are the only factors to consider. Martin Luther summarizes them as follows:

"Concerning the verse in Galatians [5:6], 'faith working through love,' we also say that faith doesn't exist without works. However, Paul's view is this: Faith is active in love, that is, that faith justifies which expresses itself in acts. Now, it is assumed by some that the fruits of faith make the faith to be faith, although Paul intends something different, namely, that faith makes the fruit to be fruit. Faith comes first and then love follows. This also happens in the case of God's works. Circumcision, in so far as it is a work by itself, is of no account. But this, he says, is what counts: 'Believe in me and be godly.'"⁴

On one level the church has always insisted on pitting Paul and James against each other. And yet the object these two men come to from such widely different perspectives is the same, i.e., that faith and works belong together. John Calvin makes exactly this same point.⁵ There can be no argument over whether this factor or that has the prior influence without first assuming that some sort of mutual influence is exerted. Only its direction is at issue. In fact each quality validates the other and so both men have a point to make and the church needs to appreciate both emphases. Faith and works will always be found in each other's company--if and to the extent that both are genuine. How can we know when they are or are not? By the measure of association that each has with its opposite counterpart.

The Story of Jesus

The ultimate illustration of the whole truth that both Paul and James each thought the other was missing part of is Jesus. He relied on His Father at all times and in every way. Christ was not under grace as His followers are (see Gal 4:4), but He certainly exercised faith. And what can we say about Christ's works? The dying thief was more right than he knew. What he said was, "We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong" (Luke 23:41). If Abraham's act of offering up Isaac illustrates both faith and works--as it truly does--and if that act typifies or points forward to what Christ would later do for us on the cross, would it not follow that the crucifixion also illustrates a combining of faith and

works? And of the two, which provides a better illustration? In which case is the principle of actions deriving from intelligent faith clearer--in the case where the sacrifice is stopped in mid course or the one where it goes to full completion?⁶

On what principle did Jesus act when He went to the cross? On the principle of sight and material evidence? He could see that His life's work had been a success and was content with the evidence of His senses. Was that it? As He looked down from the cross--to the extent that His own bloody sweat prevented Him from seeing clearly--what evidence did His senses supply?

Jesus had claimed to be the Son of God but to all appearances God had abandoned Him. That is why He cried out from the depths of His soul: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46). He claimed to be a King but virtually all His subjects had run away. John was there, and His mother. A handful of others stood off at a distance. The only evidence Christ had on the cross that His work had succeeded was "the evidence of things not seen" (Heb 11:1, KJV).⁷ "The Saviour could not see through the portals of the tomb."⁸ The death He suffered was that of the lost, i.e., it appeared in every way to involve eternal separation from His Father. The death Christ died was the second death. But He was willing to do that for us if only we could be saved as a result. This is not sight; it is faith. So if Christ so fully unites the two principles in question, how are they inimical to each other?

Conclusion

When we stand at the foot of the cross the cavils brought against James have a rather hollow ring. And the truth of what Paul says about faith is also fully vindicated. In Christ we can see the truth of what both men said--even if they might have thought they disagreed.

We can be glad that the writings of both Paul and James have come down to us in Scripture. It is also good that we have more of Paul because his point is the more difficult of the two to get across. But the book of James is also needed. Without it the New Testament would be incomplete. Paul helps us not to misunderstand James and James in turn helps us not to misunderstand Paul--something that would not impossible to do (see 2 Pet 3:14-16). Just as the main danger to the church of Paul's day lay in hollow works, the main danger to the church now lies in making hollow professions of faith. What empties either quality of its significance is the other's absence. So let us not make a virtue of having an experience that is one-sided in either direction. There is synergy as well as tension between the two writers and our understanding would be diminished if we were to miss the point either was trying to make. Both men contribute a necessary part of what the New Testament has to say.

Did James intend for men's works to save them? Returning to our illustration, is that why Christ did what He did--so that His works could save Him? No, but so that His works could save us. Our works are evidence that His have been successful. When our actions are motivated by a principle higher than self-interest we show that "Christ's love compels us" (2 Cor 5:14), just as it did Paul. There is nothing complicated about this. What Christ's love compels us to do is to follow Christ's example. We who are under grace must work all the more dilligently--just as our great Example worked--not to save ourselves but to save others. This is entirely consistent with everything James says, and with Paul.

Epilogue

From the dialogue between Paul and James in the New Testament it is clear that inspired writers can disagree in matters of emphasis. There is a reason for this. The words of Scripture are not limited by the intent of its various authors.⁹ Behind them lies the infinite mind of the Holy Spirit. It is His intent that we must discern and it stands to reason that we cannot know all of what He means on any given topic until we read all of what He says. We must compare scripture with scripture and one inspired writer with another. For this reason, among others, inspiration cannot be primarily verbal. What is inspired is the person who uses human language to speak for God. It is not that a verbal concept offers too high a view of inspiration. Instead it falls short of the reality. If the inspiration of Paul and of James were verbal in nature, we would have to choose between them which one's words to accept. This is the task of higher criticism. But it has no place in the life of a Christian. All of God's Word is inspired "and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16).

Do Paul and James disagree at a more substantive level? Both men might have thought so. They each saw and captured the Spirit's intent, but they saw it and captured it each in his own way as shaped by his own unique experience. This is the only way to account for their differing emphases. The mind of the Spirit, on the other hand, being infinite, transcends the understanding of any one individual (see 1 Cor 13:12). It is in the confluence of all He has said that the Spirit's meaning is most fully and adequately revealed. We cannot safely choose parts of God's revelation to mankind, accepting this and leaving that aside. Until we study all the avenues by which God has expressed Himself we do not have the full range of what He is saying.

Note: All Scripture quotations in this paper, except when noted otherwise, are from the Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright (c) 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society.

¹See Hardy, "What Augustine Did Not Tell Us about the Nature of Man," *Historicism* No. 25/Jan 91, pp. 32-452; "Pelagius and Patrick," *Historicism* No. 26/Apr 91, pp. 65-86.

²"[Pelagius and Augustine] represented principles and tendencies, which, in various modifications, extend through the whole history of the church, and reappear in its successive epochs. The Gottschalk controversy in the ninth century, the Reformation, the synergistic controversy in the Lutheran church, the Arminian in the Reformed, and the Jansenistic in the Roman Catholic, only reproduce the same great contest in new and specific aspects" (Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols. [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910; reprint ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984], vol. 3: *Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity from Constantine the Great to Gregory the Great, A.D. 311-600*, pp. 786-87).

³See Hardy, "Paul's Intention to Go to Spain," *Historicism* No. 17/Jan 89, pp. 37-56. Paul did not get to raise up any churches in Spain, but it was his clear intention to do so.

⁴Helmut T. Lehmann, gen. ed., *Luther's Works*, 55 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), vol. 54: *Table Talk*, Theodore G. Tappert, trans., p. 74.

⁵In book 3 of his *Institutes* John Calvin has a section entitled, "James against Paul?" (3.17.11). The following are some excerpts from that section: "But they say that we still have trouble with James, as one who forthrightly contends against us. For he teaches that even 'Abraham was justified by works' [James 2:21], and that all of us also are 'justified . . . by works, not by faith alone' [James 2:24]. What then? Will they drag Paul into conflict with James? If they consider James a minister of Christ, his statement must be so understood as not to disagree with Christ speaking through Paul's lips. The Spirit declares through Paul's mouth that Abraham

attained righteousness through faith, not through works [Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:6]. We also teach that by faith all are justified apart from the works of the law. The same Spirit teaches through James that the faith both of Abraham and of ourselves consists in works, not only in faith. It is sure that the Spirit is not in conflict with himself. What, then, will be the agreement of these passages? . . . Understanding this condition [the licentiousness of Calvin's opponents], it will be easy to note where our opponents are at fault. For they fall into a double fallacy: one in the word 'faith,' the other in the word 'justify.' When the apostle labels 'faith' an empty opinion far removed from true faith, he is making a concession that in no way detracts from the argument. This he sets forth at the outset in these words: 'What does it profit, my brethren, if a man say he has faith but have not works?' [James 2:14]. He does not say 'if anyone have faith without works' but 'if he boast.' . . ." (John T. McNeill, ed., Ford Lewis Battles, trans., *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian religion*, 2 vols., The Library of Christian Classics, vol. 20 [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960], pp. 814-15, passim). "To sum up, he is not discussing in what manner we are justified but demanding of believers a righteousness fruitful in good works. And as Paul contends that we are justified apart from the help of works, so James does not allow those who lack good works to be reckoned righteous" (ibid., 3.17.12, p. 816).

⁶In John 6 we see the same relationship from the perspective of faith rather than works: "Then they asked him, 'What must we do to do the works God requires?' Jesus answered, 'The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent'" (John 6:28-29).

⁷For us Christ's person--His human body, the fact that He exists and did what is recorded about Him--is "the evidence of things not seen" (Heb 11:1, KJV). He Himself is the tangible evidence of things not seen (see 1 John 1:1). But on the cross what comfort could there be in such passages as, "(5) 'Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; (6) with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. (7) Then I said, "Here I am--it is written about me in the scroll--I have come to do your will, O God"' (Heb 10:5-7). Christ Himself had only the knowledge of His Father's will and He followed it with a faith stronger than death (see isa 50:7-9). Here, incidentally, is the context for Heb 5:8 ("Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered"). It was by following His Father to the cross that He learned the full implications of obedience. It is not as though doing His Father's will were something foreign to Him, but rather that obedience was something He had to experience and did experience in every way. "And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death--even death on a cross" (Phil 2:8)!

⁸"Satan with his fierce temptations wrung the heart of Jesus. The Saviour could not see through the portals of the tomb. Hope did not present to Him His coming forth from the grave a conqueror, or tell Him of the Father's acceptance of the sacrifice. He feared that sin was so offensive to God that Their separation was to be eternal. Christ felt the anguish which the sinner will feel when mercy shall no longer plead for the guilty race. It was the sense of sin, bringing the Father's wrath upon Him as man's substitute, that made the cup He drank so bitter, and broke the heart of the Son of God" (Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* [Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1940], p. 753).

⁹See Hardy, "On the Nature of Inspiration," *Historicism* No. 26/Apr 91, pp. 95-104.