

# Saved by Works or Not by Works?

by Wilbur Cartwright

As a boy raised in the apresuppositional, infralapsarian, anti-Ricoeurian Independent Baptist Church of Worthington, Texas, I knew well the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith apart from works. Nevertheless, I remember how, at the age of fourteen, my belief in this doctrine was tested when someone brought a Mormon girl to our Junior High Sunday School class. Pastor Harnose, our youth pastor, was leading us in what I still believe to be a Spirit-led study of James 2:14-26, where it states, among other things, that “thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble” (vs. 19) and that “faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone” (vs. 17). I remember how nervous I was the first time I read that passage in my personal devotions until Pastor Bledsoe put the Epistle of James in perspective and relieved my fears with a series of sermons on Paul’s Epistle to the Romans.

So now, in Sunday School, as we read again through James, chapter 2, others, including this benighted Mormon girl, were surely feeling a sense of terror upon reading the harsh words of James due to an ignorance or neglect of Paul’s teachings in Romans. The air was charged with suspense as if the whole class hung, suspended from a bungee cord stretched so tightly that it was ready to snap at any moment, plunging us into a gaping, bottomless chasm. Then Pastor Harnose through us a line and pulled us away from the passage in James to the haven of Romans 3:28 where it says that “a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.”

The yawning abyss began to shut its mouth as Pastor Harnose explained that there are two kinds of faith—real faith and false faith, and that the real faith produces works while the false faith does not. He clarified for us the Bible truth that God still saves us through faith, not through works, and that if we have real faith, the works of a genuine faith will automatically follow, ipso facto, just like an apple tree inevitably producing apples. The class seemed to be breathing easier now and our chairs sat firmly planted once again on the crimson-carpeted, concrete floor of the Independent Baptist Church, no cavern in sight.

Pastor Harnose continued. The simple gift of believing, imparted by God's grace, was all that was needed to justify us before God through the sacrifice of Calvary. All the thief on the cross needed was faith to be saved. If we simply believed, we were assured of salvation, with no care regarding works just as an apple tree need not have any concern for bearing apples. Thank God, the works would just follow automatically. Pastor Harnose quoted Paul's dictum once more, saying, "a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law," and we all sat content, having solved an insoluble conundrum, when, all of a sudden, the visiting Mormon girl raised her hand and took our attention back to James, chapter 2, verse 24: "...by works a man is justified, and not by faith only." Her voice was shaking a bit as she spoke. "James tells us we are justified by good works, and not by faith only," she said.

The white flesh of Pastor Harnose's face turned the shade of a stoplight. Was it embarrassment? Impatience? Rage? Even worse, could the Mormon girl actually be right? As we hung there once again above the cold, dank mouth of a murky abyss, I am absolutely certain that some of those Sunday School children actually wondered about the import of her statement. But, those of us who had been faithfully reared in the church, knew that, despite the apparent rationality of her statement, this heretical Mormon girl could not be right. After all, the Mormons failed to derive the correct doctrine of the Trinity and a proper understanding of the "church" from the various Biblical proof texts where these entities are incidentally inferred in a way which transcends the original intent of the human writers.

Those of us in the know, those of us who had been initiated out of childish error, knew that in Biblical Bridge, Paul always trumps everything else, despite any seeming contradiction, because the Bible, possessing inerrant verbal plenary inspiration, can, therefore, contain no contradictions. So, when Paul says that we are "justified by faith without deeds" and James says we are "justified by works, and not by faith only," they must be talking about two different issues—one crucial to our salvation, and the other, only secondary, or, perhaps, even irrelevant. With an air of impatience, Pastor Harnose looked straight at the Mormon girl and reiterated the difference between true faith and false faith and pointed out that Paul was talking about true faith, while James was talking about false faith. The warning of James is to false believers, not to true believers. Poor little Mormon girl. She couldn't help herself: she had been deceived

by her church into thinking that James was talking to true believers. Unwittingly, she only demonstrated how that James was actually talking to people like herself—people with false faith who think that they are somehow saved through works.

The pitch black gloom of her darkened soul cast its shadow on the room as she attempted to give a rebuttal to Pastor Harnose's Bible-based explication. "Look at verse 13," she said, the tremor still subtly there. "He shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy. If you don't do works of mercy, God will not show mercy to you. If you don't forgive others, neither will Heavenly Father forgive you. His mercy and forgiveness depend on what you do." The shakiness in her voice betrayed that she lacked the boldness of someone with full salvation. As Proverbs 28:1 says, "The righteous are bold as a lion." She could not be bold as a lion because she had not received the righteousness which is by faith alone, apart from works. As long as she clutched onto her Mormon illusions, she could never "have confidence, and not be ashamed before Him" (I John 2:28).

Pastor Harnose took a deep breath and let it hiss out slowly as he peered over the rim of his bifocals. "Look," he said, "you're confusing salvation by faith with the issue of rewards to be handed out at the judgment seat of Christ."

The Mormon sat silent now, and we all wondered if, maybe, just maybe, she would be one of those walking the aisle to the altar at the end of the worship service which was to follow.

Pastor Harnose continued. "You see, the judgment seat of Christ occurs a thousand and seven years prior to the Great White Throne judgment which occurs at the end of the Millennial Reign. Only the saved will appear at the judgment seat of Christ and what is judged there is not whether your faith is genuine, because only those with genuine faith will be raptured to appear in heaven before the judgment seat. Whether or not true faith is present doesn't get evaluated by works. The only way true faith can be authenticated is by the omniscience of God. Only God knows the heart. Only unbelievers will stand before the Great White Throne Judgment a thousand and seven years later after the rapture. God will already have evaluated their faith and found that they are faithless. What is evaluated at the Great White Throne Judgment is not their faith, but their works. Their works will determine the degree of torment they will suffer for eternity. All

those standing before the Great White Throne Judgment will be cast into the Lake of Fire, but some will suffer in the shallows while others will suffer in its depths.”

“So,” the Mormon girl said, “are you saying that I have to believe there’s a difference between Christ’s Seat and His Throne in order to be saved?”

Brother Harnose’s lips pursed as he let out a chuckle. He wiped his sweat-beaded brow and said, “No, that’s not necessary for salvation, but if you don’t believe it, it’s an indication that you’re probably not saved.”

The Mormon girl wouldn’t give up. They had brainwashed her well in primary school at her ward. “Are you saying that people’s faith never stands on trial before God? Are you saying that God holds a trial to evaluate works, but He doesn’t bother holding a trial to evaluate people’s faith?”

Brother Harnose replied without batting an eye. “God doesn’t need to hold a trial. He evaluates the genuineness of faith the same way He determined that the thief on the cross had genuine faith. ‘God looketh on the heart.’”

“But,” said the Mormon, “the thief on the cross had works.”

“No, he didn’t,” said Pastor Harnose.

“Yes, he did,” said the Mormon. “He acted differently than the other thief.”

“True,” said Pastor Harnose, “but he wasn’t saved by acting differently. He acted differently because he was already saved.”

“When was he saved?”

Pastor Harnose grinned in triumph. “At the very moment he called Jesus ‘Lord,’ saying ‘Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’”

“But he was already acting differently before he called Jesus ‘Lord.’”

“Well then,” said Brother Harnose, “he was already saved because he had believed in his heart before he confessed with his mouth.”

“But even his confession was a work,” said the Mormon girl. It was something he did.”

“No, it wasn’t,” said Pastor Harnose. “It wasn’t something HE did. Otherwise, he could claim credit for it. No, it was something the Holy Spirit did for him.”

“But not everyone who calls him ‘Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven...”

“That’s right,” said Pastor Harnose, unruffled. “Only those whom God chooses to endow with true saving faith are truly saved. It can never be that they did anything. God has to do it for them.”

“Well, if it’s all so automatic,” asked the Mormon, “what’s the point of reading the book of James or even talking about these things?”

“Exactly!” said Brother Harnose, nodding his head. “What’s important is not the doing, but the knowing. Reading the book of James and talking about these things helps the saved to become more convinced of their salvation, and provides the unsaved with another opportunity to prove themselves worthy of condemnation for following the natural tendency of their sin nature to trust in their own works.”

Just then, the bell rang. Sunday School was over and the Sunday morning worship service would soon begin. Pastor Harnose had dealt admirably with the challenges put forth by a misled Mormon girl. As far as I know, she has never truly believed.

As I look back on that experience from my childhood, I realize that my ideas about justification by faith have not changed over the years, but what has changed is the level of knowledge I possess to help substantiate and support the doctrine of justification by faith alone apart from works. As my knowledge has grown over the years, my faith in the doctrine of justification by faith alone apart from works has grown commensurately. My seminary training at the Sanctified Pentecostal Theological Seminary and my own private research in church history, Greek, and Biblical theology have convinced me more than ever of the Scriptural truth of this great doctrine.

The carnal church—the succeeding generations of “Christians” who followed some of the teachings of Scripture, but who lacked their own personal encounter with Calvary, lost the true understanding of justification by faith alone. Instead, they substituted the doctrine of baptismal regeneration for a true born again experience by faith. They began referring to faith as “the faith”—as the body of Christian doctrine, that is, a creedal faith rather than a living, personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The carnal church further minimized the importance of a living, personal faith through an insistent supplementation of creedal faith with sacramental and virtuous works resulting in the idea that faith was not enough for

salvation. In so doing, the carnal church made itself the object of faith rather than Christ, thus robbing its adherents of the possibility of salvation. The reformers recognized that to place faith in the Church was to place faith in a fallible, pretender to the Body of Christ while placing faith in the Bible alone, especially the original autographs, apart from any human intermediary of transmission or interpretation, was to place one's faith in the very Word of Christ which, in turn, was to place one's faith in Christ Himself.

Truth be told, there is nothing on earth worthy of our faith except for the infallible, inerrant Word of God penned by men from whom the fallibility of our fallen depravity was momentarily lifted as the Holy Ghost filtered out their human imperfection. True faith cannot be placed in the Body of Christ nor can it be placed in His tangible "Blood" made present in some mystical rite like the Eucharist. Rather genuine, saving faith involves sufficient Bible knowledge together with the working of the Holy Spirit to bring about a real encounter with the intangible Christ of literate, Bible-based knowledge without any intermediary between the believer and the Scriptures. Thus no believer, whether pope, or church council, pastor, or fellow layman has any God-given authority over any other believer.

The only true authority is the believer, Bible-in-hand, led by the Holy Ghost. Thus, the reformation restored not only the priesthood of the believer, but also the popehood of the believer, so that each believer receives authority through the Holy Spirit to interpret the Word authoritatively only for himself. Thus believers escaped from the extreme of Popism to the extreme of true, Bible-based Christianity. All believers are autonomous in faith through the direct apperception of Christ in the Bible through the prophetic illumination of the Holy Spirit as each believer is himself taught by God. Due to free will and fallen human depravity, God chose to exercise His sovereignty in the preservation of His Book, but chose to allow the darkness of human error to have sway over the interpretation of His Book, resulting in the Bible remaining a sealed a book for centuries until the times of reformation. But the Dark Ages came to a close as Brother Martin Luther, sitting in Wittenburg Tower, relieved himself of the burden of works righteousness when he rediscovered the true means of salvation which had been lost for centuries. John Calvin helped clarify the teaching on justification by faith by saying that "it is faith alone which justifies, but the faith which justifies is not alone." His point was

that real, genuine, justifying faith automatically results in works. Real faith automatically results in the same miraculous works which Jesus did and even greater, for He promised, in His infallible Word which cannot lie that “he that believeth on Me the works that I do shall he do also, and greater than these shall he do” (Jn 14:12).

Although the Greek word for faith, *pistis*, can also mean faithfulness, when it refers to the faith which justifies, it should be taken in the sense of “faith” rather than faithfulness, since unregenerate human beings are incapable of being faithful due to the total depravity of their fallen, sin nature. Only the regenerate human being can choose to be faithful since his will has been freed from the tyranny of his sin nature. It is my personal belief that if one is truly regenerate, he will automatically choose to be faithful forever, while Dr. Dinkins holds that the regenerate may possibly choose to be unfaithful and thus forfeit their saved status. Dr. Dinkins and I have chosen to agree to disagree on this minor point of doctrine. What matters is that we both agree on the important truth that we are saved by grace through faith alone and that works play no part in salvation. I must confess, though, that when it comes to true freedom of choice, Dr. Dinkins’s belief that the regenerate may at some point choose to turn their back on God is, in fact, more in accord with the idea of “free will.” My view does seem to cast greater doubt on the true freedom of the human will, whether regenerate or unregenerate.

Another thing Dr. Dinkins and I agree on is that the will of the unregenerate is enslaved to sin and incapable of choosing God or grasping the things of God. What that little Mormon girl failed to grasp was the fact that Martin Luther rediscovered the key doctrine by which we are saved after it had been lost for centuries in the mist and mire of monasticism, mysticism, sacramentalism, conciliar decrees, patristic commentary, and works righteousness. Rather than placing her faith in the simple fact of Brother Luther’s understanding of Scripture, she placed it in the teachings of her church—a tragic result of fallen, human reasoning. I pray that somewhere back in the mists of primordial time that God chose to save her and that her irresistible invitation from the Holy Spirit is forthcoming that she might know the bliss of an automatic, all-of-grace salvation. I pray the same for you. 🙏