

Justification According to Paul and James

One need not be a highly-educated Bible scholar to recognize and resolve what appears to be a major conflict between Paul and James on the matter of justification. Paul stated, “*For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.*” (Romans 3:28), while James argued, “*You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone*” (James 2:24). Furthermore, anyone with a Greek Bible or concordance will notice that these two short verses use four of the same Greek words: *dikaioo* (justify), *pistis* (faith), *ergon* (works), and *anthropos* (man).¹ Thus, a significant proportion of the words in both verses overlap.² The parallel in wording is indeed noteworthy. However, it appears as if each author used the same terms to say the exact opposite of the other. This real or apparent discrepancy, if not properly understood, has the potential to be the source of serious theological confusion and error. So, how should the Christian view this problem? Is it a real or apparent contradiction? Does it provide a reason to deny the inspiration, infallibility, and inerrancy of Scripture?

The Conflict Over *Sola Fide*

Perhaps the most well-known aspect of the Reformation is the conflict over how a person becomes justified. During that time, the Catholic monk Martin Luther came to the firm conviction of Scripture’s teaching that a man is justified by faith alone. This belief came to be known as *sola fide*. As expected, there was no small dispute over this matter, since *sola fide* was in direct opposition to the sacramental system of works-righteousness that was well established in the Catholic Church. Unfortunately, what began approximately five hundred years ago is still alive today. R.C. Sproul wrote, “no doctrinal dispute has ever been contested more fiercely or with such long-term consequences as the one over justification.”³ It is a matter of the utmost importance, because the doctrine of justification is an essential doctrine.⁴ In fact, Luther believed that justification was “the article upon which the church stands or falls,”⁵ because he correctly identified justification by faith alone (i.e. *sola fide*) with the gospel itself. Along with the declaration of the person and work of Christ, the gospel necessarily includes “a declaration of how the benefits of Christ’s work are appropriated by, in, and for the believer.”⁶

In response to the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Council of Trent clearly solidified their works-based understanding of justification by espousing that good works “merit an increase of grace, eternal life, and in case he dies in grace, the attainment of eternal life itself.”⁷ Similarly, the Catholic Catechism states, “faith does not fully unite the believer to Christ and

¹ The Greek sentences are as follows (common words to both are shown in bold font): James 2:24: ὁρᾶτε ὅτι ἐξ **ἔργων** δικαιούται ἄνθρωπος καὶ οὐκ ἐκ **πίστεως** μόνου. Romans 3:28: λογίζομεθα γὰρ δικαιούσθαι **πίστει** ἄνθρωπον χωρὶς **ἔργων** νόμου.

² Four of eight Greek words (50%) in Romans 3:28, and four of the eleven (36.4%) in James 2:24 overlap. If conjunctions, prepositions, and the adverb οὐκ are not counted, the overlap is four out of six words (66.7%) in both.

³ R.C. Sproul, *Faith Alone* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 1995), 18.

⁴ The essential doctrines are comprised of the minimum biblical content (i.e. body of doctrines) one must believe in order to be saved. Rejection of one of these doctrines results in damnation (e.g. In John 8:24, Jesus clearly stated that anyone who does not “believe that I am He” will die in their sins).

⁵ Sproul, *Faith Alone*, 18.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Council of Trent, Session 6, Canons Concerning Justification, Canon 32, <http://www.americancatholictruthsociety.com/docs/TRENT/trent6.htm> (accessed Feb. 15, 2011).

does not make him a living member of his Body,”⁸ and “we can then merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed...for the attainment of eternal life.”⁹ These works are a result of infused grace: “[Virtues] are infused by God into the souls of the faithful to make them capable of acting as his children and of meriting eternal life.”¹⁰

Evangelical theology, on the other hand, understands justification as a forensic (i.e. judicial, legal) declaration of God whereby He pronounces a person just in His sight on the basis of the imputation of the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ to that person. Sproul wrote:

The question of *inherent* versus *imputed* righteousness goes to the heart of the Reformation debate. When the Reformers spoke of forensic justification, they meant a legal declaration made by God that was based on the *imputation* of Christ’s righteousness to the believer, not on Christ’s righteousness inherent in the believer.¹¹

Thus, Roman Catholic and Evangelical beliefs regarding justification are worlds apart.¹² Sproul was correct in stating that, “In the Roman formula works are a necessary precondition *for* justification. In the Evangelical view works are a necessary fruit *of* justification.”¹³ How can these two groups arrive at such divergent beliefs concerning justification? It is important to understand that the underlying issue behind the dispute over *sola fide* is nothing less than the doctrine of Scripture. Sproul wrote:

Historians often describe justification as the *material* cause of the Reformation...The formal cause of the Reformation was declared in the formula *sola Scriptura*, meaning that the only source of special written revelation that has the authority to bind the conscience absolutely is the Bible.”¹⁴

The Impact of *Sola Scriptura*

Catholics and Evangelicals both agree that the Bible is the inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word of God. As a result, they both espouse, as does J.I. Packer, “the ultimate author of Scripture is God Himself.”¹⁵ Nonetheless, their interpretation of Scripture, especially in regard to *sola fide*, is vastly different. While the Roman Catholic Church upheld their belief in Scripture and tradition as dual sources of authority, Martin Luther rediscovered “*sola Scriptura*,

⁸ Catholic Catechism, Article 1815, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c1a7.htm#1815 (accessed Feb. 15, 2011).

⁹ Ibid., Article 2010, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c3a2.htm#2010 (accessed Feb. 15, 2011).

¹⁰ Ibid., Article 1813, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c1a7.htm#1813 (accessed Feb. 15, 2011).

¹¹ Sproul, *Faith Alone*, 99-100. Emphasis Sproul’s.

¹² Although some other views of justification exist, attention will only be given to the Catholic and evangelical positions in this paper. Other notable positions include the Campellite view of baptismal regeneration and the view espoused by the so-called “New Perspective on Paul,” in which Protestant theologians took a major leap in the direction of Roman Catholic theology. For example, N.T. Wright speaks of final justification “on the basis of works” in N.T. Wright, “New Perspectives on Paul,” in *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Academic, 2006), 260. Quoted in John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N.T. Wright* (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway Books, 2007), 117.

¹³ Sproul, *Faith Alone*, 156. Emphasis Sproul’s.

¹⁴ Ibid., 18, 21.

¹⁵ J.I. Packer, *God has Spoken: Revelation and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 1994), 35.

or the principle of relying on the Bible alone in determining Biblical doctrines.”¹⁶ He made “repeated assertions of the divine authority of Scripture and its freedom from error...Luther was unambiguous in his conviction that all of Scripture is inspired and infallible.”¹⁷ Given his confidence in the inspiration of Scripture along with *sola Scriptura*, Luther set out, not to interpret Scripture in light of tradition, but “to deal with and interpret [the epistle of James] according to the sense of the rest of Scriptures.”¹⁸ Thus, Luther rightly concluded that the only way to resolve apparent contradictions is through good systematic theology coupled with sound hermeneutics and exegesis. When this is done, we have “a firm foundation in the Scriptures against treacherous errors.”¹⁹ J.I. Packer argues that the analogy of faith

...meant the principle of understanding Scripture harmonistically, not setting text against text or supposing apparent contradictions to be real ones, but seeking rather to let one passage throw light on another, in the certainty that there is in Scripture a perfect agreement between part and part, which careful study will be able to bring out...For me to confess that Scripture is infallible and inerrant is to bind myself in advance to follow the method of harmonizing and integrating all that Scripture declares.²⁰

Many theories and attempts have been made at resolving the conflict between Paul and James on the issue of justification. However, when one holds to the conviction that Scripture is inspired and inerrant, some of these theories must immediately be abandoned. One such position is the view that one apostle wrote to correct the other. This, of course, cannot be true, since it assumes disunity and disharmony in Scripture. Calvin wrote, “It is sure that the Spirit is not in conflict with himself.”²¹

A second theory is that one of the two letters is not canonical. This was the view Luther considered. One must remember that Luther was trained and “thoroughly saturated with [Catholic] dogma.”²² Thus, “his Catholic training had penetrated to the very marrow of his bones.”²³ As the Lord began to open his eyes to the truth of Scripture, “he wrestled with the problem of developing a whole new perspective of religion in which justification, Christ, and Him Crucified, would occupy the central place.”²⁴ This wrestling resulted in his emphasis on *sola fide* to the extent that he made it *the criterion* for canonization. John Wehnam explains, “He approached the Canon with a subjective criterion, and seemed to wish to deny full canonical status to those books which did not clearly set forth the doctrine of justification by faith.”²⁵ It is for this reason that Luther questioned the canonicity of James. Packer rightly argues that Luther should have been concerned with the fact that he was virtually alone in his interpretation of

¹⁶ E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times: The Reformation from a New Perspective* (Saint Louis, MO.: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 135.

¹⁷ R.C. Sproul, “The Establishment of Scripture,” in *Sola Scriptura: The Protestant Position on the Bible* ed. by Don Kistler (Lake Mary, FL.: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2009), 40-1.

¹⁸ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, ed. by Lewis W. Spitz (Philadelphia, PA.: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 34:317.

¹⁹ Augustine, *In Epistolam Johannis tractus*, 2 in *NPNF*, Series I, VII:469. Quoted by James White, “Sola Scriptura and the Early Church,” in *Sola Scriptura: The Protestant Position on the Bible* ed. by Don Kistler (Lake Mary, FL.: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2009), 26.

²⁰ Packer, *God has Spoken: Revelation and the Bible*, 99, 105.

²¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 1:814 (3.17.11).

²² Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times*, 578.

²³ *Ibid.*, 280.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ John Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, (Eugene, OR.: WIPF & Stock, 2009), 153.

James: “Who was Luther to challenge a book which down the centuries had imposed itself on, and been accepted by, the whole Church as part of the New Testament canon?”²⁶ It is important to emphasize, however, that “[Luther’s] question about James was not a question of inspiration.”²⁷ Packer states, “Were Paul and James really at odds, Luther’s attitude would be defensible, for the inspiring Spirit of God does not contradict Himself; but in fact they differ only in their use of words, while agreeing in substance.”²⁸

The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978) affirms that Scripture has been given by divine inspiration, and is therefore infallible, true and reliable.²⁹ Additionally, it affirms “the unity and internal consistency of Scripture.”³⁰ Thus, the only way to approach the conflict in James and Paul is to do so in light of the inspiration, infallibility, inerrancy, and unity of Scripture. When one concludes that the canon is fixed and no real contradictions exist, he will invariably see the passages in James and Paul, not as a *real* contradiction, but as an *apparent* contradiction. As a result, he will seek to properly understand their harmony.

Resolution of the Apparent Contradiction between Paul and James

Even with the shared belief that the Bible is inspired, infallible, and inerrant, Roman Catholics and Evangelicals approach harmonization of James and Paul differently. Many Catholic commentators argue that James was

...correcting an error that seeped into the Church regarding Paul’s teaching. Since Paul was adamant that works of the law could not justify the individual, it is possible that some in the church overreacted to Paul’s teaching by propounding a doctrine of antinomianism, which held that one was not required to do any works in order to be justified.³¹

Here, the Catholic argument is that James was essentially writing to correct the *sola fide* view, which the commentator quoted above incorrectly refers to as “antinomianism” (i.e. lawlessness). This view is easily disproved on several fronts. First, many scholars believe that James was one of the earliest epistles written and predates most or all of Paul’s writings. Second, it is significant to note that James never mentioned Paul or his writings. It would be strange to think that he would make no mention of Paul if he were writing to correct errors pertaining to his teaching. Third, James, in Acts 15, clearly asserts justification by faith alone.

A sound, biblical, and Evangelical approach to harmonization recognizes that the two apostles addressed different, non-contradictory problems: Paul focused on the nature of justification, and James focused on the nature of faith.

So, does James 2 repudiate the Reformed doctrine of justification by faith alone as Rome suggests? Certainly not! As mentioned in the introduction above, James and Paul used four of the same Greek words: *anthropos* (man), *ergon* (works), *pistis* (faith), and *dikaioo* (justify). Indeed, if they used *all* of these words in exactly the same manner, we would be faced with a

²⁶ Packer, *God has Spoken*, 113.

²⁷ Sproul, *Sola Scriptura*, 41.

²⁸ Packer, *God has Spoken*, 113.

²⁹ Article XI of the “Articles of Affirmation and Denial.” Quoted in Packer, *God has Spoken*, 140.

³⁰ Article XIV. Quoted in *Ibid.*, 141.

³¹ Robert Sungenis, *Not by Faith Alone: The Biblical Evidence for the Catholic Doctrine of Justification* (Santa Barbara, CA.: Queenship Publishing, 1997), 118.

real contradiction in Holy Scripture. However, it is evident that this is not the case. We will examine their use of each of the terms.

Anthropos (Man) and Ergon (Works) – Of the four terms, there is no disagreement over the use of the word *man*. There is some debate regarding the use of the term *works* in the two passages. As we have seen above in the quote of Robert Sungenis, some Catholic commentators make a distinction between Paul’s “*works of the law*” (Romans 3:28) and James’ “*works*” (James 2:24). They argue that the former are an attempt to indebt God to payment and cannot save, while the latter are the valid works of gratitude that merit salvation. This explanation fails considerably when one considers that Paul also often used the term “*works*” in a generic sense to argue for *sola fide* (Romans 4:2-6, 9:10-33, 11:6; Ephesians 2:8-10; 2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 3:5).

Pistis (Faith) – Even upon a cursory reading of James 2:14-26, it becomes immediately evident that James is arguing against a “faith” that is nothing more than mere lip service. In verse 14, he writes, “*Can that faith save him?*” What faith? The kind that never produces good works and thereby proves itself to be dead (v. 17). The kind that approximates the belief of demons (v. 19). This is hardly the genuine faith/belief that Paul spoke of with regards to *sola fide*.³² Sproul wrote, “James makes it clear that a mere *profession* of faith does not result in salvation...He is answering the question, ‘What kind of faith saves?’”³³ Far from arguing against *sola fide*, James “corrected an erroneous concept of faith.”³⁴ Similarly, Calvin wrote, “It is not therefore [James’] intention to weaken in any respect the force of true faith”³⁵ Thus, following the model expressly set down by James, “orthodox theologians have always acknowledged that while faith alone justifies, a faith which is alone...will not justify.”³⁶

The Reformers carefully constructed a threefold definition of saving faith. According to R.C. Sproul, “The constituent elements...are (1) *notitia*, (2) *assensus*, and (3) *fiducia*. Each element was regarded as necessary for saving faith.”³⁷ *Notitia*, or knowledge, pertains to the content of faith, thus clearly identifying the object of faith. It is an objective knowledge and understanding of propositional truth in the Bible, namely the gospel of Jesus Christ and other essential doctrines pertaining to God and man. *Assensus* refers to mental assent and conviction regarding truth, and *Fiducia*, or trust, moves beyond cognition to volition. Given this helpful definition, it is easy to see that James 2:19 (as well as the entire passage, i.e. vv. 14-26) describes a faith that consists of knowledge and assent with no trust. Sproul writes, “Here sarcasm drips from the apostolic pen. James was making the point that meeting the first two necessary conditions of saving faith does not guarantee salvation. It merely qualifies one to be a demon.”³⁸

Dikaioo (Justify) – Even though it is clear that James used the term “*faith*” differently than Paul, the prospect of James teaching a doctrine of justification by works would still seem to contradict Paul’s unambiguous doctrine of *sola fide*, unless, of course, they used this term differently as well. As with the vast majority of words, the Greek term *dikaioo* has a range of

³² Note Paul’s use of “*faith*” in conjunction with “*believe*” regarding righteousness and salvation in Romans 3:22, 4:5, and Galatians 2:16, 3:22.

³³ Sproul, *Faith Alone*, 164.

³⁴ Daniel Doriani, *James* (Phillipsburg, NJ.: P&R Publishing, 2007), 94.

³⁵ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1:815 (3.17.11).

³⁶ A.A. Hodge, *The Westminster Confession: A Commentary* (Carlisle, PA.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2002), 185.

³⁷ Sproul, *Faith Alone*, 75.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

lexical definitions. Although twelve of fifteen times throughout Romans³⁹ Paul used the term in its technical sense (i.e. a forensic/legal declaration of God based on the imputation of Christ's righteousness), he also used the term in a non-technical sense in 2:13, 3:4, and 6:7.⁴⁰ The most controversial of these is 2:13, where Paul argues that "*the doers of the Law will be justified.*" Catholics argue that "Romans 2:5-10 shows that in Paul's view, God saves or condemns based on the works performed by the individual."⁴¹ However, Evangelicals take a different position. Some believe that Paul used the term "*justified*" here in the technical sense and argue for a distinction between "*doers of the Law*" here and "*works of the Law*" in 3:20. In their estimation, a doer of the Law is simply Paul's description of a person who comes to Christ in faith and repentance. However, this view is unconvincing due to verse 6.⁴² A second view that understands the term in the technical sense is the hypothetical view espoused by John Calvin. Calvin argued that Paul's meaning in this passage is that "the righteousness of the law lies in perfection of works; no one can boast that he has fulfilled the law through works; consequently, there is no righteousness arising from the law."⁴³ Doriani agrees. He argues that Paul is presenting a "hypothetical person."⁴⁴ This view, although possible, seems to be a bit of a stretch. The most reasonable understanding of the passage is that Paul used the term "*justified*" in a non-technical sense to speak of vindication of one's faith before God on the basis of works. There are two reasons why this view is preferred. First and foremost, the immediate context of Paul's statements is the Day of Judgment.⁴⁵ Second, Paul used the term in this same sense in 3:4 (c.f. Matthew 12:36-37).⁴⁶ In his commentary on Romans, John MacArthur states, "Again Paul is pointing to the same truth as James in regard to the relationship between faith and works...The person who genuinely obeys God's Word proves by his divinely-empowered obedience that he is saved and thereby will be recognized as justified on the day of judgment (cf. James 2:20-26)."⁴⁷ In his commentary on James, he writes, "Both men make it clear that we are going to be judged on the basis of what we have done, for that is a sure indicator of genuine salvation."⁴⁸

Now we turn to the *usus loquendi*⁴⁹ of the term *dikaioo* by James in chapter 2. The key contextual indicator is James' historical references to Abraham's justification. James demonstrates his agreement with Paul and belief in *sola fide* by quoting Genesis 15:6 as a reference to Abraham's justification in the technical sense of imputation (2:23).⁵⁰ In this light, it becomes obvious that James intends Abraham's "justification by works" in the two preceding verses to be understood as vindication, not imputation (cf. 3:13). Robert Reymond explains,

Whereas Paul is concerned with the question of how a man may achieve right standing before God, and turns to Genesis 15:6 to find his answer, James is concerned with the question of how a man is to *demonstrate* that he is *actually* justified before God and has

³⁹ Romans 3:20, 3:24, 3:26, 3:28, 3:30, 4:2, 4:5, 5:1, 5:9, 8:33, and twice in 8:30.

⁴⁰ In Romans 6:7, Paul uses the term *dikaioo* in the sense of being "freed" or "set free" from sin.

⁴¹ Sungenis, *Not by Faith Alone*, 36.

⁴² "[God] WILL RENDER TO EACH PERSON ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS [i.e. *ergon*]" (Romans 2:6)

⁴³ Calvin, *institutes*, 1:818 (3.17.13).

⁴⁴ Doriani, *James*, 97.

⁴⁵ Verses 5 and 16 are "book ends" which mark off everything in between as being in the context of final judgment.

⁴⁶ See also Matthew 11:19 and Luke 7:35 for uses of *dikaioo* as vindication.

⁴⁷ John MacArthur, *Romans* (Chicago, IL.: Moody Press, 1996), 139.

⁴⁸ John MacArthur, *James* (Chicago, IL.: Moody Press, 1998), 125.

⁴⁹ That is, the use in speech by the author.

⁵⁰ Paul quotes the same exact verse in defense of *sola fide* in Romans 4:3.

true faith, and turns to Genesis 22:9-10, and the *probative* ‘fulfillment’ of Genesis 15:6 (see Genesis 22:12), to find his answer.⁵¹

Thus, inspired, infallible, and inerrant Scripture presents a beautiful, complementary whole. Daniel Doriani provides a fitting conclusion to the matter:

...here to justify is to *vindicate*, whereas in Romans, to justify typically means to declare righteous...In the court of public opinion, Abraham is justified – declared righteous – by his works. His works confirm God’s declaration that he is a man of God. His works complete his faith, showing it is genuine. So Paul and James agree.⁵²

⁵¹ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville, TN.: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 749. Emphasis Reymond’s.

⁵² Doriani, *James*, 94-95.

Bibliography

- Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., trans. Ford Lewis Battles. Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.
- Catholic Catechism, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/.
- Council of Trent, Session 6,
<http://www.americancatholictruthsociety.com/docs/TRENT/trent6.htm>.
- Doriani, Daniel. *James*. Phillipsburg, NJ.: P&R Publishing, 2007.
- Hodge, A.A. *The Westminster confession: A Commentary*. Carlisle, PA.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2002.
- Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works, Volume 34*, ed. by Lewis W. Spitz. Philadelphia, PA.: Muhlenberg Press, 1960.
- MacArthur, John. *Romans*. Chicago, IL.: Moody Press, 1996.
- _____. *James*. Chicago, IL.: Moody Press, 1998.
- Packer, J.I. *God has Spoken: Revelation and the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 1994.
- Piper, John. *The Future of Justification: A Response to N.T. Wright*. Wheaton, IL.: Crossway Books, 2007.
- Reymond, Robert L. *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*. Nashville, TN.: Thomas Nelson, 1998.
- Schwiebert, E. G. *Luther and His Times: The Reformation from a New Perspective*. Saint Louis, MO.: Concordia Publishing House, 1950.
- Sola Scriptura: The Protestant Position on the Bible* ed. by Don Kistler. Lake Mary, FL.: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2009.
- Sproul, R.C. *Faith Alone*. Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 1995.
- Sungenis, Robert. *Not by Faith Alone: The Biblical Evidence for the Catholic Doctrine of Justification*. Santa Barbara, CA.: Queenship Publishing, 1997.
- Wenham, John. *Christ and the Bible*, (Eugene, OR.: WIPF & Stock, 2009).