

SOME COMMENTS ON THE OPC JUSTIFICATION REPORT

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I would like to offer a few comments on the section of the Orthodox Presbyterian Justification Report dealing with “Faith Alone,” and in particular on footnote 89. I do this for two reasons. First, this footnote deals with my own view on the relation between faith and works; and second, as I understand it, my friend and colleague of many years, Professor Dick Gaffin, wrote this note.

Gaffin speaks of a “recurring ambiguity” in my writings concerning the relationship between faith and works. The phrase that he singles out as exemplary of this ambiguity is, “a living, active, obedient faith.” He objects to describing saving and justifying faith as living, active, penitent, and obedient faith.

He offers two examples of this so-called ambiguity. The first example is the following citation from *The Call of Grace*, p. 50: “faith looks away from personal merit to the promises of God. Repentance and obedience flow from faith as the fullness of faith. This is faithfulness, and faithfulness is perseverance in faith. A living, active, and abiding faith is the way in which the believer enters into eternal life.”

The one item in this citation that he singles out for criticism is the word “fullness.” He says, “It easily suggests, which the context does not exclude, that, just as it ‘looks away’ to God’s promises, faith lacks integrity or wholeness, or is incomplete, unless it includes, in addition, repentance and obedience.” What is Gaffin’s concern in making this observation? He writes, “Our concern here is not to isolate faith from repentance and good works. Rather we are concerned not to obscure the extraspective, fiducial nature of the faith, never alone, that alone justifies.”

It is significant that Gaffin does not want to isolate justifying faith from repentance and good works and that he calls the faith that justifies a faith that is “never alone.” These have always been my own concerns. Apparently he does not think that describing justifying faith in this way obscures the extraspective and fiducial nature of this faith, and he is right. It doesn’t. But neither does it obscure the extraspective or fiducial nature of faith to say that “repentance and obedience flow from faith,” or to say, “faithfulness is perseverance in faith.” Nor do I believe that calling the repentance and obedience that flow from faith the “fullness” of faith obscures the extraspective or fiducial nature of faith.

The faith that looks away from personal merit and looks to Jesus Christ and his righteousness alone for justification and eternal life (extraspective, fiducial) is, in Gaffin’s words, a faith that is never alone and a faith that may not be isolated from repentance and obedience. I cannot see any objection to calling such faith a living, active, and abiding faith. Indeed, I cannot see how we can refer to faith that is never alone and a faith that may not be isolated from repentance as anything but a living and active faith. It certainly is not a dead faith or an inert faith.

In my article, “Justification by Faith in Pauline Theology” (*Backbone of the Bible*, pp. 89-94) I attempt to describe at some length what Paul means by faith in Romans 3:28. My very first point is that justifying faith is faith in Jesus. I cite the relevant evidence in Romans 3, 4, and 5 to demonstrate this point; and not only that, but I also refer explicitly to the last half of the Westminster Confession, chapter 14, section 2, as a summary of this Pauline view. “Faith in Jesus means accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for the pardon of sin and the title to everlasting life” (p. 90). This is surely evidence of no desire or attempt on my part to suppress or obscure the extraspective and fiducial nature of the faith. This remains the case when I go on in the same section to describe justifying faith as a penitent faith and an obedient faith. Again, neither Gaffin nor I wish to isolate faith from repentance and good works; but in my judgment we do isolate them if we are unwilling to describe the faith that looks away from all personal merit and looks to Jesus Christ alone for justification and eternal life as a penitent and obedient faith.

The second example of my so-called ambiguity is this statement at the end of the previously mentioned article on “Justification by Faith in Pauline Theology:” “Gospel proclamation calls us to a living faith, that is, to a penitent and obedient faith” (p. 101). The problem here, according to Gaffin, is that “This leaves the impression, in its context, that repentance and obedience are what make faith living.” His point is that works do not “give life to faith or constitute the vitality of faith.”

Well now, is it really the case that my statement “in its context” gives the impression that works constitute the vitality of faith? Let’s look at the context, the whole paragraph of which the quoted statement is a part.

Jesus is the only *one* through whom we can be justified and sanctified, and faith in Jesus is the only *way* by which we can be justified and sanctified. Gospel proclamation calls us to living faith, that is, to a penitent and obedient faith. The response of faith, repentance, and obedience to the gospel call is possible only because of the regenerating and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

Although Gaffin gives no indication of what he thinks constitutes the vitality of faith, this paragraph clearly does. In the last sentence I make quite clear that faith, repentance, and obedience all have their source and therefore their vitality from the regenerating and sanctifying work of the life-giving Holy Spirit. The faith that the Holy Spirit gives to us in regeneration is a living faith and this living faith is a faith that has as its fruit and evidence repentance and obedience to Christ.

Although in the course of developing this objection Gaffin quotes James 2:26 as he concedes the point that “Undeniably, ‘faith without works is dead,’” he does not deal with the main point of this verse, the analogy between body and spirit on the one hand and faith and deeds on the other. James says that the body without the spirit is dead. In the same way faith without deeds is dead. James compares faith to the body, and just as the body without the spirit is dead so also faith without deeds is dead. Is it the spirit, then, that gives vitality to the body? That is certainly the impression that James leaves us with. If so, then works give vitality to faith.

Now I am not concerned to press this point, and it may well be that there is some nuanced exegesis of which I am not aware that would enable us to avoid this conclusion; but in that case

Gaffin would have to lay the same charge at the door of James that he lays at my door. The language of James is ambiguous because it suggests that works constitute the vitality of faith.

What is troubling to me in footnote 89 and in the broader discussion of the nature of saving faith in this Report, however, is the apparent reluctance and even unwillingness to embrace with enthusiasm the teaching of James 2:14-26 as an authentic, clear, and accurate presentation of the gospel of sovereign grace. Undoubtedly Gaffin believes this passage to be the inspired word of God, but it is with a certain reluctance and only by way of concession that he quotes and alludes to it. He says, “Undeniably, ‘faith without works is dead,’” and “True, ‘faith without its fruits and evidences is neither true nor lively.’” This attitude toward James 2:14-26 belongs to a long tradition stemming from Luther and found among Reformed people beginning with John Calvin himself. Even J. Gresham Machen writes, “If James had had the epistles of Paul before him he would no doubt have expressed himself differently” (*Machen’s Notes on Galatians*, p. 221). I consider this statement of Machen to be an indictment of the Holy Spirit who inspired James.

James does not offer a discourse on the nature of the vitality of faith, but he does say very plainly that faith without works is dead (v. 17). Faith without deeds does no good (v. 14). Faith without deeds is useless (v. 20). Faith without deeds cannot save (v. 14) and it cannot justify (v. 24). Even if we adopt the view that in my mind is exegetically untenable, that James is using “justify” in a demonstrative sense, we still have to answer the question whether faith without works can justify in the forensic/soteric sense. But if faith without deeds is useless and cannot save, if it is really dead, there is no way we can say that it will nevertheless justify the sinner. There is nothing obscure or mysterious about this plain teaching. This is the point of the passage. The example James offers of the exercise of faith alone is that of the demons. The demons are not saved by this faith alone. They shudder because of the judgment to come. Their example is hardly one to be imitated.

Why is it so hard for us to embrace with enthusiasm this plain teaching of the word of God? Because we have been taught for years that it conflicts with Paul’s insistence that we are saved and justified by faith without works of the law as in Rom. 3:28 and Gal. 2:16. Now this is not the place for me to offer an exegesis of “works of the law” in Paul. I have tried to do this in “Justification by Faith in Pauline Theology”(pp. 94-100). I would simply appeal to Machen who has correctly resolved the apparent contradiction between Paul and James. (See *Machen’s Notes on Galatians*, pp. 220, 221.) It is essential to note that Machen does not resolve this apparent contradiction by resorting to an exegetically indefensible distinction between Paul’s use of “justify” in a forensic, soteric sense, and James’ use of it in a demonstrative sense. Instead, he makes two points.

The first point is, “the faith James is condemning is not the faith that Paul is commending.” The faith James condemns “is a mere intellectual assent which has no effect upon conduct.” Over against this, “The faith about which Paul has been speaking is not the idle faith which James condemns, but a faith that works.” Machen is saying that justifying faith is a faith that works and therefore it is not the “faith alone” that James condemns.

Machen's second point is that just as "the faith which James condemns is different from the faith which Paul commends, so also the works which James commends are different from the works which Paul condemns." He goes on, "Paul is speaking about 'works of the law'—that is, works which are intended to earn salvation by fulfilling the law through human effort. James says nothing in chapter 2:14-26 about the works of the law. The works of which he is speaking are works that spring from faith and are the expression of faith. Abraham offered Isaac as a sacrifice only because he believed God. His works were merely evidence that his faith was real. Such works as that are insisted upon by Paul in every epistle. Without them no man can inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:21)."

Now there can be no objection to calling good works the fruit and evidence of saving faith. In Gal. 5:6 Paul speaks of justifying faith as faith expressing itself through love; and James says in 2:18 that the believer shows his faith by what he does. At the same time we must say no less clearly and no less forcefully, and not simply by way of reluctant concession, that "Undeniably, 'faith without works is dead' (James 2:26)," and that, "True, 'faith without its fruits and evidences is neither true nor lively.'" The reason for this is simply that faith without its fruit and evidence will not save and it will not justify. Even if we were to insist (as Lutheranism consistently does) that faith first justifies and then has works added to it after justification, we still have to say that if there are no works (no fruit and evidence) then the faith is not true faith. And if it is not true faith at a later point, it never was true faith to start with, and could never have justified the sinner at any point.

This does not mean that works are the ground of our salvation or of our justification any more than faith itself is the ground of our justification and salvation. Neither faith nor the works that are the invariable accompaniment of true and living faith are the ground of our acceptance with God. The Westminster Confession is quite correct in making this point. Faith is extraspective. It does not gaze at its own navel, and it does not gaze at its own fruits and evidences. Faith looks to Christ alone for justification and eternal life. True faith is not meritorious and the fruits and evidences of this faith are not meritorious. Machen is right in saying that the works which James commends are not the works of the law that Paul condemns.

The reason why these matters are important is signaled by Machen when he quotes Gal. 5:21 to say that without the works "insisted upon by Paul in every epistle . . . no man can inherit the kingdom of God." We cannot take comfort in a formulation of the doctrine of justification by faith alone that in the end leaves us outside of the kingdom of God. If there is ambiguity it is at this point in the OP Report. Does the Report give us an understanding of "the nature of saving faith" that warmly and enthusiastically embraces what both Paul and James have to say, or does it treat James as something that we would have been better off without, or as something that has to be massaged until it is brought into line with a faulty understanding of Paul? Do we bring James into line with our theology? Or do we bring our theology into line with James?

If indeed it is undeniable, as Gaffin rightly observes, that faith without works is dead, then when we proclaim the gospel we do not want to call sinners to a dead faith. We do not want to call them to a faith without works. We want to call them to put their trust in Christ for the forgiveness of their sins and for the new life that can say "no" to ungodliness. We want to call them to repent of their sins. We want to tell them not only to be sorry for their sins but also to

turn away from them. We want to call them to a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins as Peter did on the day of Pentecost. And we want to teach them to obey everything that Jesus has commanded. If our theology does not permit us to preach this way there is something wrong with our theology. There is something wrong with a theology that does not permit us to evangelize in the way that Christ commands us to evangelize in the Great Commission.

I believe this is a significant source of powerlessness in the evangelical world today. I also believe that the majority of Orthodox Presbyterian pastors are carrying out the Great Commission as Christ gave it to us. For example, I have never heard a pastoral prayer in which the pastor prays that the Lord would give his people “faith alone,” but I have heard prayers in which pastors ask the Lord to give their people both repentance and faith. Consider the thief who is listening to the gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ and asks whether he will have to stop being a thief if he believes in Jesus. No OP pastor would respond by telling him, “No, you don’t because you are justified by faith alone and we don’t want to mix faith with works.” The problem is that this Report on justification does not give him the theology that explains what he is doing day by day in his ministry.

Gaffin goes on to reference the Westminster Confession, chapter 14, section 2, to make the point that when the Confession details what saving faith does in distinction from its principle acts of “accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life,” it does not mean to say that “the vitality of these principal acts resides in the manifold obedience done ‘by this faith.’” This point is well taken and I have never argued that it does. The Confession is not offering an explanation of wherein the vitality of faith resides. But at the same time it is not describing saving faith as a faith that is alone. It does not separate faith from works (the fruit and evidence of faith) in the way that the Report would like us to separate them. This explains why the Report does not quote the Confession, 14/2, in its entirety even though this is the paragraph that offers a definition of saving faith, the precise subject with which the Report is dealing. Further, the Report does not explain how the first half of the paragraph is related to the second half.

Let me try to supply the deficiency. This is how the whole paragraph reads:

By this faith, a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God himself speaking therein; and acteth differently upon that which each particular passage thereof containeth; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come. But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.

Here the Confession clearly distinguishes between saving (justifying) faith in the narrow sense (the principal acts) and faith in the broader sense including believing all that is revealed in God’s word and acting differently according to the teaching of the particular passage. These acts of faith include yielding obedience to the commands and trembling at the threatenings. The latter are not the principal acts of saving faith, but they are acts of saving faith nevertheless. The Confession does not “isolate faith from repentance and good works.” Rather, it binds them together in a single definition of faith. There are not two different faiths, one faith that yields obedience to the commands of Scripture and a different faith that rests upon Christ for

justification. There is one saving faith consisting of a multiplicity of acts, some of which are called principal acts. Using Gaffin's language, these principal acts are not true and lively apart from the fruits and evidences of them, namely, yielding obedience to the commands of Scripture. At the same time both Gaffin and I would want to say that the language of the Confession at this point does not "obscure the extraspective, fiducial nature of the faith, never alone, that alone justifies."

Again, if there is ambiguity in this whole matter it is whether the OPC heartily and enthusiastically embraces all that is said in the Westminster Confession, 14/2, about the nature of saving faith and the way that the two halves of this paragraph are related. I raised this matter in a letter to *New Horizons* (the OP monthly periodical) describing my agreement with the Statement on Justification adopted by a previous Assembly. My letter asked only that the statement be expanded to include all of what is said in 14/2 on the nature of saving faith and also what is said in 15/3 about the necessity of repentance for the forgiveness of sins that is included in justification. *New Horizons* declined to publish my letter although it was in no way critical of the Assembly action. It was supportive of the Westminster Confession and simply asked that the Assembly affirm two additional elements in the Confession directly bearing on the subject of justification.

I believe the members of the Committee that prepared the new Report were aware of this letter. Nevertheless the Committee does not clearly and explicitly affirm the whole of 14/2, nor does it deal with the necessity of repentance for the forgiveness of sins included in justification. I believe this is a serious defect in the Report and indicates a backing away from the teaching of the Westminster Confession. When Gaffin writes at the end of footnote 89, "Good works are certainly integral to the life lived by faith, but they are not integral to faith itself," he needs to show how his view is consistent with the Westminster Confession, 14/2, that does precisely this. The Confession makes good works integral to faith in its definition of saving faith.

At the end of footnote 89 Gaffin takes up the caveat I have offered concerning the metaphor of good works as "the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith." Again, there is no objection to speaking of good works as the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith; but I expressed my caveat with an analogy as follows. An apple tree is still an apple tree even if at a given moment it doesn't have any apples hanging from its branches, that is, even if there is no evidence in terms of fruit that it really is an apple tree. But faith that has no works is not true faith.

I think the point is legitimate and I believe Gaffin grants as much when he writes by way of concession, "True, 'faith without its fruits and evidences is neither true nor lively.'" But then he goes on to say that the analogy is apt in this sense, that "the tree has its vitality *distinct* from the apples that grow on it and without that vitality there would be no apples; the apples do not constitute the vitality of the tree." Now of course my point was not to deny that the vitality of an apple tree is distinct from its fruit or to deny that without that vitality there would be no fruit. My point was to say that faith without its fruits and evidences is neither true nor lively, and this much Gaffin concedes. In terms of the analogy, the apple tree that does not have apples has no vitality. It is dead. This is not necessarily true in the realm of biology, however, and that is why I felt compelled to offer the caveat.

We remember how Jesus cursed the fig tree that gave evidence of vitality (lots of leaves) but had no fruit, no figs (Mark 11:12-25). Jesus taught us that our heavenly Father “cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit” (John 15:2). Jesus pronounces his judgment, “unless you repent, you too will all perish” (Luke 13:3, 5). If our theology does not permit us to tremble at this threatening we do not understand either the gospel or the Westminster Confession, 14/2.

In my judgment the Report shows an alarming insensitivity to a host of passages that in some way or other make eternal weal or woe dependent on what we do. Jesus says, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). Paul writes in Gal. 6:7, 8, “Do not be deceived. God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.” Heb. 10:36 urges us, “You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised,” and then quotes Hab. 2:4 as a proof text, “But my righteous one will live by faith.” We have James 2:14-26 saying that dead faith, faith without works, will not save, and the judgment scene so vividly described by our Lord in Matthew 25. This list of texts could be expanded to include references to virtually every book in the New Testament with the possible exception of Philemon.

None of us want to say with Roman Catholicism that these texts prove justification and salvation by the merit of good works. They don’t. But on the other hand we cannot simply dismiss them with a reference to good works as the fruits and evidences of faith. Then they cease to function in the way they are obviously designed to function, as exhortation, encouragement, and warning to keep us moving through the narrow gate and along the Way of Holiness (Isaiah 35:8) that leads to eternal life. “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). My view is that of Calvin in the *Institutes*, III, 11, 20, “Indeed, we confess with Paul that no other faith justifies ‘but faith working through love’ [Galatians 5:6]. But it does not take its power to justify from that working of love. Indeed, it justifies in no other way but in that it leads us into fellowship with the righteousness of Christ.”

In spite of footnote 89 and to a certain extent because of footnote 89 I don’t believe there is really any substantial difference between the views of Dr. Gaffin and myself on the relationship between faith and works in the matter of justification. There is no more ambiguity in my view than there is in his view, or in the Westminster Confession, for that matter. If there are differences they are the kind that can be profitably discussed among brothers and sisters of like precious faith, people who look to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ alone for justification, salvation, and eternal life, who believe the Bible to be the inspired word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice, and who share a common adherence to the Reformed faith. For some this faith is best expressed in the Westminster standards. For others it is best expressed in the Three Forms of Unity, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dordt. We all labor together under the command of our Lord to “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3).