“Faith without works is dead”

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As CHRISTADELPHIANS we believe that we must accept the whole teaching of the Bible. The Apostle Paul in his words of advice and warning to the elders of the Ephesian ecclesia testified to the fact that “I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God” (Acts 20:27), and this should be our attitude to Scripture, both amongst ourselves and in our preaching of the gospel to others.

The apostle went on to warn that after his death false teachers would cause havoc in the ecclesia, both “grievous wolves” who would “enter in among you”, that is, from without, and those who would arise “of your own selves . . . speaking perverse things” (vv. 29,30). As we well know, this happened, and we see the results in Christendom today, with its multiplicity of churches and sects and many different doctrines. Many of these doctrines resulted from the importing of false ideas from paganism into the ecclesia; some came from rabbinical Judaism, others from giving undue weight to particular passages of Scripture out of context and to the exclusion of the rest of Scripture.

All these different elements are to be found in the wrong ideas that exist regarding the topic of our Special Issue this year. Getting the right balance between faith and works is vitally important if we are to have the right grasp of the gospel of salvation, for the churches and sects of Christendom have tended to place the emphasis on one side or the other. This Special Issue is devoted to getting that balance right by means of various articles which present the different aspects of the subject, both in terms of the basic teaching of Scripture and in its practical application in the things that we do.

The issue

Behind this Special Issue is a question that has been much discussed down the ages: Are we justified by faith or by works? But what do we mean by ‘justified’? The words ‘justify’ or ‘justification’ have become theological terms, and therefore not readily understood by many people. We need therefore to understand what is meant by these terms, and this is not helped by the fact that we do not always have equivalent English words to represent the Greek of the New Testament.

In the AV we have words such as ‘just’, ‘justification’ and ‘justified’. In the Greek they are based on the word for ‘righteousness’, so a just person is a righteous person, justification is making righteous, and being justified is being made righteous. (The problem is that there is no such word as ‘righteousify’ in English.) Righteousness is simply doing what is right and not what is wrong, and God is the source of what is right.

Being righteous is doing what God says is right, and, of all mankind, only Jesus has ever done this completely. All others fail to a greater or lesser extent and are therefore sinners and deserving of death. Only through the death of Jesus can people be saved from this, which means that, though not actually righteous, they are forgiven their sins and counted as righteous, that is, justified.

The question then arises as to whether God requires any response from people to obtain this salvation, and if so, what? Scripture is clear, the response required is faith. This produces the question, Is there any place for works? This is a question that has troubled Christendom, and it will be useful to consider briefly the different views in Christendom before considering where Scriptural truth lies.

A brief survey of Christendom’s views on faith and works

A major conflict within Christendom on the matter of faith and works came to the fore in the Reformation of the sixteenth century. At the beginning of that century Roman Catholicism was a religion of works, that is to say, it taught that merit could be accumulated by charitable deeds, fasting, pilgrimages and giving money to the church.

There was little or no place for faith in all this. Then a German monk named Martin Luther, disgusted by the way the Church sought to increase its wealth by enabling people, effectively, to buy their way to eternal bliss in heaven (as it was thought), and troubled by his own inability to overcome sin, was struck by the words of Romans 1:17 (quoting Habakkuk), “The just shall live by faith”. He preached the doctrine of salvation by “faith alone”, and this became the foundation stone of Protestantism, as exemplified today in the evangelical movement.
There are a number of problems with this approach. Firstly, in practice this ‘faith’ amounts simply to a declaration of acceptance of Jesus Christ as your personal saviour. Secondly, since faith alone saves, then it follows, say some, that once this declaration of ‘faith’ is made, the one who makes it is assured of salvation and eternal blessing. Thirdly, it became linked with the idea that only certain individuals would be saved in this way, being selected by the Holy Spirit, which directly acted on their minds to cause them to have this faith. In this scheme of things any ‘works’ are produced by the continuing influence of the Spirit and are evidence that the person is already ‘saved’ rather than having anything to do with securing salvation. The evangelical idea of ‘salvation by faith alone’ in fact comes from taking one particular aspect of New Testament teaching without considering others and without considering the context of the passages where it is referred to.

Roman Catholicism has abandoned the excesses which Luther reacted against, but much of its ‘salvation by works’ teaching and practice still exists; for example, in the partaking of the ‘mass’, at which sins are believed to be forgiven. One can see it in the Jehovah’s Witnesses, where attendances are chalked up and hours spent canvassing recorded. The origin of this way of thinking can be seen in the rabbinical Judaism of New Testament times, condemned by Jesus and combated by Paul when it affected the early ecclesias.

Another form of ‘salvation by works’ that has emerged in more recent times is the idea that, by showing a general benevolence to others and doing ‘good works’, that is, charitable deeds, a future reward is ensured, regardless of belief or religious observance. This has become the position of many who give nominal adherence to the Church of England and mainstream non-conformist churches such as the Methodists and the United Reformed Church.

The teaching of Scripture
The truth of the matter is that faith and works are both needed for salvation, but faith must come first. But what is faith? In English we have the words ‘faith’ and ‘belief’, and the former is a stronger word that the latter. There is a another difference; there is a noun ‘belief’ and a verb ‘to believe’, but though there is a noun ‘faith’ there is no verb ‘to faith’ (though we can speak of ‘having faith’). In Greek there is no such difference; the Greek for ‘faith’ has a related verb. The AV has chosen to render the noun as ‘faith’ but the verb as ‘believe’. This can lead to the idea that faith is something different from believing something to be true, and this can develop into the idea of faith as a feeling, something rather mystical. This in turn can lead to faith being regarded as something which has little or nothing to do with what we believe.

The best Biblical definitions of faith are to be found in the following passages:
• “But without faith it is impossible to please [God]; for he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him” (Heb. 11:6). Here the verb translated “believe” comes from the noun translated “faith” and would be better translated as “have faith”.
• “[Abraham] staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded that, what He had promised, He was able also to perform” (Rom. 4:20,21). This passage is particularly important, for it is in the context of Abraham being the great example of saving faith for all time, and it shows what in practice this faith meant.

The words of Hebrew 11:1, “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen”, are sometimes said to be a definition of faith. This is not really so, however. The verse is not telling us what faith is but what it can do for us. (The word “is” can lead to a definition in the words that follow but often it does not, as in, to take a trivial example, “ice cream is my favourite food”.)

Both Hebrews 11:6 and Romans 4:20,21 have important implications for our theme, especially when their contexts are considered. Believing in God as a “rewarder” implies knowing what He has promised as a reward to those of faith; and Abraham’s faith was likewise shown in believing what God had promised. More than just a belief in Christ as your personal saviour is involved in this. Moreover, God is a rewarder of those who “diligently seek Him”, and the context of the statement in Romans 4 about Abraham involves what he did. Here then are works as well as faith, though the works would be of no effect in obtaining salvation without the faith.

The faith that saves is thus believing what God has said in His Word and acting on it. Although we are helped by others in understanding God’s Word, we do not put our faith in what men say but rather in what the Word itself says. The Epistle
The idea of salvation by faith alone has led to the false idea that an acceptance of Jesus as Saviour is enough to guarantee salvation, and “Holding fast to the faith” demonstrates the need to remain faithful to the Truth after it is embraced. To balance this, “The full assurance of faith” demonstrates that for those who remain faithful there is no need to fear judgement, for there is abundant mercy for sins confessed and forsaken. “The real meaning of baptism and the Breaking of Bread” shows that, though vital for salvation, these ordinances are meaningless rituals if not carried out with the right attitude.

“Let all things be done decently and in order” shows that rules in ecclesial life only have value if they contribute to the spiritual welfare of brethren and sisters. “Do good unto all men” shows that, though believers must seek to reflect God’s goodness in their dealings with others, mere benevolence to others does not bring salvation. Believers have to live out their lives in an evil world, and “In the world but not of it” discusses how to do this without being adversely affected by it.

The Special Issue concludes by considering in practical terms “Faith and works in daily life”, with contributions on “The family”, “Employment”, “Ecclesial life” and “Leisure”.

Though this Special Issue is not a comprehensive treatment of the subject, it is hoped that the articles it contains will be helpful to readers in covering the most important aspects of the matter. May we all remain strong in our faith in the “things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ”, and may that faith be a living faith, shown in how we conduct our daily lives, to the end that we may see and experience the fulfilment of those things which we have most surely believed.

The person who possesses [faith] knows what is testified concerning Jesus by the apostles, and is fully persuaded of its truth; he also knows the exceeding great and precious promises which God has made concerning things to come, and he confidently anticipates the literal fulfilment of them. Laying hold of these things with a sure faith, he acquires a mode of thinking and a disposition which are estimable in the sight of God; and being like Abraham in these particulars, he is prepared, by induction into Christ, to become a son of the father of the faithful, and of the friend of God.

This faith comes by studying the scriptures; as it is written, “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17). This word contains the “testimony of God”. When this testimony is understood, and allowed to make its own impression in “a good and honest heart”, faith establishes itself there . . . The ability to believe lies in a sound understanding, a candid disposition, and knowledge of the testimony of God. Where there is ignorance of this there can be no faith.

John Thomas, Elpis Israel, p. 162-3