

Was Abraham saved by Faith Alone?

By Steve Ray

You say, “Of course Abraham was saved by faith alone! Doesn’t the Bible make that perfectly clear, especially in Paul’s letters? And didn’t Luther’s German translation inform the masses that the words “faith” and “alone” belonged together like bread and butter? Abraham was saved by faith alone!”

Well, maybe he was and maybe he wasn’t, but the Bible certainly throws some question on this well-known Protestant cliché. Let’s find out how and when Abraham was really “saved.”

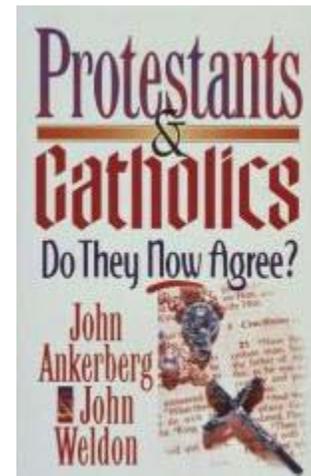
Fundamentalist Protestants like to tell us that we are saved at “one-point-in-time when we “simply believe.” In other words mental assent to the simple gospel gives us a free passage to heaven. Since Abraham is used in the New Testament as the quintessential example of justification by faith, let’s see if we can pin-point the moment when Abraham *believed*? Can locate the exact moment he was “saved”? Since this was such a momentous occasion in the history of mankind, and in the drama of salvation history, it should be clearly shown *when* Abraham actually believed and was reckoned as righteous. From unbelief to belief, from no faith to saving faith.

Protestants (e.g., John Ankerberg in *Protestants and Catholics, Do They Now Agree?* [Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publ., 1995) like to say the word “justify” as used by James really means “vindicate,” and that “vindicate” has nothing to do with salvation, but has to do with the proving of the believer’s *faith*—Abraham’s faith. You really should have addressed the major weakness of this perspective: it is not the *faith* that is being justified by works—it is the *man*. How can we justify this?

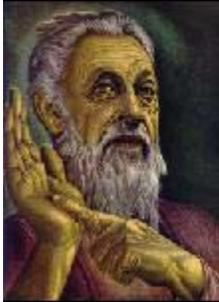
If our theory holds true shouldn’t we read, “*Was not Abraham our father’s faith justified (vindicated) by works?*” making it clear that it is his faith, and not his person. Instead we read, unfortunately, “*Was not Abraham our father justified by works?*” This observation does not set well with our interpretation. In your book you say that it is always the *faith* that is proven by works, whereas the Apostle James seems to say it is the *person*. We should try to figure out how James could have worded this passage more carefully so Catholics don’t get the wrong idea and misunderstand the gospel.

You also say in your book (p. 37) that “*Paul is writing about a person being justified before God, while James is writing about a man being justified before men. Men cannot see another person’s heart as God can.*” Somehow we have to more careful in this theory, or else we end up scratching a few verses out of the story of Abraham in Genesis. Was it *men* who were testing Abraham’s faith?

The book of Genesis says, no. It was God who was testing Abraham in Genesis 22, not



men. You write that James is referring to justification before men (p. 37), because God can already see the heart. I noticed in reading *James & Peter*, by Harry Ironside, that he agrees with you on this point. But the problem seems to be that it was *God* who was testing Abraham in Genesis, because Moses wrote, “*Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham . . .*” (Gen. 22:1) Notice it was not men who were finding out what was in Abraham’s heart—whether he had true faith—it was God.



Then we learn that Abraham passed God’s test of faith. “*For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.*” (Gen. 22:12) And again, “*By Myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you.*” (Gen. 22:16, 17) Do you think the Catholic won’t notice that even though God could see Abraham’s heart, He had to test Abraham to see if he had real faith. God says to Abraham, “*Now I know . . .*,” seeming to imply He didn’t know earlier. Couldn’t God tell if Abraham had saving faith by looking at his heart?

Didn’t God know if Abraham had saving faith, once and for all, before the test? It was God who, according to your “legal imputation” theory, saw Abraham’s saving faith in Gen. 15:6, so why did he have to see *if* it was genuine faith in Genesis 22 by staging this dramatic and heart wrenching test—as you say, “*thirty years later?*” Do you think James really understood the book of Genesis? Maybe he read it wrong—those things happen you know.

The next problem that presents itself with our Fundamentalist interpretation is that there were no men around to be vindicated in front of—this was strictly between God and Abraham. Our position, that this justification was “*justification before men,*” seems to be at odds with the whole of Scripture, and if so, it holds no water, leaving us vulnerable. This great test of faith took place far from civilization—a three day’s journey to Mount Moriah—where Christ would someday become the Lamb of sacrifice.¹ Genesis 22:3-6 tells us,

“So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance. And Abraham said to his young men, ‘Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go yonder; and we will worship and return to you. And Abraham took the wood

¹ Gen. 22:2 “*And He said, ‘Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.’*”

2 Chron. 3:1 “*Then Solomon began to build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah.*”

Luke 9:30, 31 “*And behold, two men were talking with Him; and they were Moses and Elijah, who, appearing in glory, were speaking of His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.*” We know that Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem. Isn’t it wonderful that on the very mountain, Mount Moriah (Gn. 22:2), that Abraham “sacrificed” his only son, and where God provided a ram for the sacrifice, on that very mountain about two thousand years later stood the city of Jerusalem (2 Chron. 3:1), and on that very mountain the real lamb of God, Jesus, the only son of the Father, was sacrificed as a substitute for our sins. How remarkable God is and how remarkable His word!

of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son, and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together.”

We don't see crowds of people gathered around Abraham on Mount Moriah, as we do with Elijah on Mount Carmel. This test was strictly between God and Abraham—and God tested Abraham's faith. If He already knew Abraham had saving faith, why did He put him through such a cruel experiment? Allah, of the Moslem's is capricious, not the God of the Jews. Your chapter *The Apostle James* doesn't give a biblically-literate Catholic any challenge at all. Even I was very disappointed, and to be honest, I wish you'd of done a better job.

When Was Abraham Saved?

On page 37 you write that “*Paul appeals to Abraham in Genesis 15, stating that Abraham was justified the moment he believed in God.*” The Catholic may wonder where Abraham was really saved, and if it was from believing in God, or in Christ. Maybe in you next printing you should revise your book a bit to address this issue. It seems the Genesis record is not real clear as to when Abraham was really saved, and the writer of Hebrews appears unclear as well. They should have both spoken with Paul who could have cleared it up for them.

In order to have a good explanation when talking with Catholics, you should help your readers pin point the moment when Abraham *believed*? Since this was such a momentous occasion in the history of mankind, and in the drama of salvation history, it should be clearly shown *when* Abraham actually believed and was reckoned as righteous—from unbelief to belief, from no faith to real faith.

We know that Paul quotes from Genesis 15, but is that where Abraham first *believed* God? The first time he had *faith*? What about in Genesis 12? Doesn't Hebrews 11:8 tell us, “**By faith** Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. (KJV). Was this some other kind of faith? We see here an obedience based on faith.



He built altars to God on the plain of Moreh (Gn. 12:6, 7), in Bethel (Gn. 12:8), and Hebron (Gn. 13:18). During this time **by faith** “*he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God*” (Heb. 11:10). What makes this confusing is that it takes place *before* his justification in Genesis 15. There were many years, probably more than ten years, between his first mentioned demonstration of saving faith and the subsequent declaration of righteous in Genesis 15. At what point did his faith save him? or was it a process of faith and obedience? Protestants need to make sure they are clear on this for discussions with Catholics, since the Catholics seem to have a point sometimes.

Further, in the Christian context, justification is seen as the entrance into the New Covenant, the kingdom of God's dear Son. When did God give Abraham the sign of the

covenant? In Genesis 12 when he first believed at 75 years old? In Genesis 15 when it says he acquired imputed righteousness? or in Genesis 17 when he was ninety-nine years old?

God established His covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17. The sign of the covenant was circumcision. Abraham was justified by faith, but what would have happened if he had refused to obey and cut off his foreskin? What would his status have been before God then? Would his obedience (good works) or disobedience have entered into the equation? What if Abraham had refused to sacrifice his son?

Then again James comes into the picture with another reference to Abraham (which we have already discussed) and seemingly another perspective on Abraham's righteousness. James thinks Abraham was not justified in Genesis 15 *or* 17, but much later in Genesis 22, when he offered up Isaac.



He states, “*Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?*” (James 2:21 KJV). And then James is bold enough to say, “*So you see, a man is justified by his works, and not by faith alone.*” (James 2:24) I can really understand why Martin Luther disliked James, called it the “epistle of straw,” and relegated it to the back his translation, since it did not belong with the inspired books.

Our dilemma is rather serious. This story of Abraham does not seem as neatly packaged as Luther and Evangelicals would like to have it. We need to get this ironed out if we are going to really be effective.

Somehow the argument Paul is making in Romans has been squeezed into the framework of the Protestant and Catholic debate. The Jews were not content to let Gentiles *just become* Christians by faith. After all, Jesus was sent to the Jews. He was the Jewish Messiah. The Jews of that time considered it a logical necessity therefore, for the Gentiles to first convert and obey Jewish laws and customs, and bear the mark of the covenant, before being allowed to follow the Jewish Messiah. They had to obey and comply with the Old Testament laws and customs first.

In other words, the Judaizers were trying to make Gentiles become “Jews” first, before they became Christians.² They were saying one became a Christian by observing all the laws of the Jewish religion. Paul was not arguing salvation by *faith vs. faith plus obedience!* He was saying, “Did Abraham become righteous by circumcision and obedience to the Ten

² Galatians 2:14 “*But when I saw that they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter before them all, If thou, being a Jew, livest after the manner of Gentiles, and not as do the Jews, why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews?*” (KJV) The Jewish Christians were trying to make the Gentiles live like Jews and follow all the Jewish customs and ceremonial laws. Paul is saying, “No, it is not by following Jewish circumcision and ceremonial law that we are right with God, it is through faith in Christ!” This seems to be something very different from saying one has to live a life of obedience and holiness subsequent to justification by faith.

Commandments? No, he was reckoned as righteous way before these things existed. How was he made righteous? By believing God while virtually in the state of being a Gentile, why? Because there were no Jews yet, no law yet, no circumcision yet. If Abraham was right before God before the Law, why is it impossible for the Gentile to be right for God apart from works of the Law?

Abraham was justified as a Gentile (non-Jew) and did not have to become a Jew first, before he could be justified in God's eyes. Now, these Gentile converts, how could they become justified? Did they have to get circumcised and follow all the Jewish legal and ceremonial laws before God would justify them? Did they have to become Jews to become Christians? No, they could be justified just like Abraham was—by faith.

James then elaborates what faith is, and the crucial element of obedience (works), as does John in his first epistle. We need to make this clear if we are going to argue well with the Catholic! The Catholic vs. Protestant argument, the *faith vs. faith and obedience* debate, had absolutely nothing to do with the discussion Paul was having with the Jewish Christians in Rome and Galatia. You need to show your readers how very important the historical context is.