

Faith and Works

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Introduction

We live in an age in which there is much religious confusion and where varying interpretations can be found on nearly every doctrine of the Faith. One of the most misunderstood and controversial doctrines today is the proper understanding between faith and works. With the advent of the Protestant reformation and the idea of sola fide (faith alone), many now think that no works are necessary in order to attain salvation. What I intend to explore in this paper is first of all what faith is, and then what it is that faith requires of us. To have faith in God does not mean simply a mental assent that does not effect the rest of one's life, but necessarily includes obedience to the Word of God.

Faith as a Gift

The fact that we are able to have faith in the first place is itself a grace, hence it is called the "gift of faith." The Catechism explains that "Faith is a gift of God, a supernatural virtue infused by him." (Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC 153) God is the one who takes the initiative of calling all men to himself. In the light of God's revealed truth about himself and also about our ultimate purpose and meaning, the only adequate response we can make is the response of faith.(cf. CCC 142) However, "before this faith can be exercised, man must have the grace of God to move and assist him."(CCC 153) This is the gift of faith, that not only does God reveal himself and all his glorious truth to us, but he also enables us by his grace to respond to him.

Faith as a Free Response

Although faith is a gift from God, it does not in any way undermine or override personal freedom. As persons, God has created us with a rational nature and free will. This is so that man "might of his own accord seek his creator and freely attain his full and blessed perfection by cleaving to him."(CCC 1730) Although God grants us faith as a gift, as free persons we have the ability to either accept or deny the gift. A gift is not something that is forced upon a person, but it is lovingly offered with the need to be accepted. Faith, as a gift from God, is offered to us out of his great love for us, along with all the grace we need enabling us to accept it. With the revelation coming down in a sense from above, and God's grace moving us from within, all that remains to complete and fulfill the gift is our free response and acceptance of faith. The Catechism explains that "The act of faith is

of its very nature a free act.”(CCC 160) In this way, faith is that in which the human will freely cooperates with the grace given by God.(cf. CCC 155) Each person is obliged to make the response of faith and personally accept the truths revealed by God.

Sin and Justification by Faith

The condition man finds himself in is a sinful condition, devoid of any hope apart from God, and desperately in need of salvation. When human freedom was put to the test at the very beginning, we find that man fell through the first sin of Adam.(cf. Gen 3:1–7) This “original sin” is hence passed on to all mankind.(cf. CCC 402) As St. Paul explains in the book of Romans, “As sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned.”(Rom 5:12) As we see here, all men have fallen into sin, and the consequence sin is death.(cf. CCC 1008) Left to our own devices, all of humanity is lost. However, God did not abandon us, but from the moment sin entered into the world he began to enact a plan to bring us back to himself. This plan entailed sending his only Son, Jesus Christ, to intervene and die for our sins, thus reconciling us to God.

The sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, makes it possible for all men to be reconciled to God and to be justified. Justification means that we as sinners are made right before God. The Catechism explains that justification is to “cleanse us from our sins and to communicate to us ‘the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ’ and through Baptism.”(CCC 1987) It is by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit that we are able to participate in the death of Christ to sin, and hence be justified before God.(cf. CCC 1988) Since the consequence of sin is death, Jesus pays this price for us by his death on the cross, that whoever believes in him will find salvation.

By God’s revelation he tells us all that we need to know in order to attain salvation and no longer be separated from him by sin. It is only through our response of faith and acceptance of his revelation that we can be reconciled to God and become adopted children. It is through our freedom cooperating with God’s grace that we are justified before God.(cf. CCC 1993) For this reason the Catechism explains that “without faith no one has ever attained justification.”(CCC 161)

The Question of Faith and Works

Since it is only through faith that we can be justified, and since faith is itself a gift from God, the question then becomes what this faith actually consists of in the life of the Christian. Is faith simply a mental assent to the truths which God has revealed, or does faith require that we live those truths which God has revealed? And is living out the truths that we believe by faith necessary for salvation?

Looking in Scripture there are several verses that seem to be saying different things. In the book of John it explains that whoever believes in Jesus will have everlasting life. (cf. John 3:16) Then in the book of Romans it explains that one is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. (cf. Romans 3:28) Taking these two verses alone it appears that all we have to do is believe in Jesus in order to be saved, and this belief is apart from any works or action on our part. However, one cannot just look at two verses out of context if

one desires to understand the message that God wishes to reveal to us. There is a unity in all of Scripture that must be taken into account in any interpretation. (cf. CCC 112) Looking further in the Scriptures we find in the book of John that every man will be repaid according to his deeds. (cf. John 5:29) Then in the book of James it goes even further to say that man is “saved by works, and not by faith alone.” (James 2:24) Obviously there must be some connection between faith and works.

Works of the Law

In order to clarify a frequent misunderstanding in the area of faith and works, I think it is necessary to distinguish between works before and after initial justification. Another way to distinguish them is between the works done on our own apart from faith, and those works done in response to and in union with faith. It is not the case that we can do all sorts of “good works” and then come to God and demand salvation based on all the wonderful things we have done. However, once we have been justified by God it is necessary to live out our faith, and hence do good works. The first kind of works mentioned above can be demonstrated in what is referred to in the Scripture as the “works of the law.” In the book of Romans St. Paul states that “A man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.” (Romans 3:28) The Catechism explains that God gave the law to his people as a “pedagogue” in order to direct the people towards Christ. However, the law did not have the power to save man, but only to show him his sinfulness before God. (cf. CCC 708) The Catechism goes on to explain that “now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it.” (CCC 2543) So it is not the case that man can do all these works of the law and be saved on account of his worthiness. The works of the law do not bring salvation in and of themselves, but are meant to lead God’s people to Christ and give them a desire for the Holy Spirit. However, notice that St. Paul never says that man can be saved apart from obedience or apart from love. There is a difference between works of the law and living out one’s faith.

Faith and Obedience

In order to understand the connection of works to faith, it is necessary to take a closer look at the nature of faith. The Catechism explains that “By faith, man completely submits his intellect and his will to God. With his whole being man gives his assent to God the revealer.” (CCC 143) So the response of faith to the revelation of God is not simply a mental affirmation, but is a submission of intellect and will. Faith is the personal adherence of the person to God and the truths which he has revealed. This involves a total commitment of one’s whole life, including all human activity. This submission is what the Scriptures call the “obedience of faith.” (cf. Romans 1:5, 16:26) Submission and assent to the truth of God requires obedience on our part. If we are truly assenting to the truth of God then it only follows that we will also obey it.

It is interesting to look at the connection between the words “faith” and “obey.” In the book of John it explains that “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God shall rest upon him.” (John 3:36) In this verse it shows that there is a link between believing and obeying, with the opposite being to disobey. Also, it says in the book of Romans that “you are slaves of the one

whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness.”(Romans 6:16) Here it shows that we can either follow the way of sin or of obedience.

Living Faith

As was shown, faith is intimately connected with obedience. This obedience of faith and adherence to the truths revealed by God must be acted out in our lives—hence it is often called “living faith.” In order to have living faith it must be such that good works overflow as a natural consequence. For it is in our good works that our faith bears fruit. (cf. Col 1:10) Without doing good works as a result of our faith, how is one to claim that he has living faith? For as it says in the book of James, “Faith apart from works is dead.”(James 2:26) The Catechism explains that when faith is “deprived of hope and love, faith does not fully unite the believer to Christ and does not make him a living member of his body.” (CCC 1815) There is an inseparable connection between faith and works. Faith apart from works is dead and works apart from faith does not bring salvation. It is not works apart from faith, or faith apart from works, but both are necessary in order to have living faith - and ultimately salvation.

One thing that is of interest to note in this discussion of faith and works is that faith itself is a work. In the book of John the question is asked, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” to which Jesus answered, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”(John 6:28–29) Even faith requires effort on the part of the individual. Faith is something that one must do. The Catechism explains that “believing is an act of the intellect assenting to the divine truth by command of the will moved by God through grace.”(CCC 155) Although the will is moved and enabled by the grace of God, it is still an act of the intellect commanded freely by the will. Living faith means that we are actively willing our response of faith.

Faith Working in Charity

Regarding the content of “living faith,” the Catechism explains that “Living faith works through charity.”(CCC 1814) Charity, like faith, is a theological virtue. It is the virtue which orders and inspires all other virtues.(cf. CCC 1827) It is also the greatest of the virtues for faith and hope will pass away at the end of time having come to their fulfillment, but charity remains in eternity. It is the virtue by which we love God above all other things, and by which we love our neighbor as ourselves.(cf. CCC 1822) And it is through charity that living faith works and finds its motivation. We are to do good works out of love for God and neighbor. These are not works separate from faith as though we are trying to earn our way to heaven, but these are works flowing out of our faith through charity. In faith we open our hearts and wills to God, who reveals his great love for us, and teaches us how to live in likeness of him. This is a love that is active. As it says in the book of 1 John, “let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth.” (1 John 3:18) For what kind of love are we claiming to have if we see people in need and only speak about helping them without actually doing anything.

Necessity of Bearing Witness

As followers of Christ, it is not enough to have faith, but we also must proudly profess it

and constantly bear witness to it.(cf. CCC 1816) The Catechism explains that in response to the amazing revelation that God has given to us, “Our duty toward God is to believe in him and to bear witness to him.”(CCC 2087) Bearing witness means that by our speech and our actions we must attest to the truth of the Gospel. We are called to be a light shining in the darkness. Bearing witness to our faith is a necessary part of having faith. In fact the Catechism goes so far as to say that “Service of and witness to the faith are necessary for salvation.”(CCC 1816) This is because if we do not bear witness to our faith then by our very silence we are denying it. A very frightening statement that Jesus makes is that “Everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.” (Mat 10:32–33) This shows the importance of bearing witness to Christ and why it is necessary for salvation.

We are also called to bear witness to the faith in all our works. It says in the book of Matthew, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”(Mat 5:16) It is through our works that others will come to see the faith that we have in God, and give glory to him. How are people supposed to see our faith in God if we don’t live it out by doing good works? In the book of James he explains, “Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.”(James 2:18) It is impossible to show that you have faith, and therefore bear witness to your faith, unless it is lived out in your life. It is not enough simply to say that you have faith, for who will believe you if you act contrary to your faith. Bearing witness to our faith is a necessary part of having faith, and it is through the witness of our lives that others will come to believe and find salvation as well.

Faith, Works, and the Final Judgement

One of the clearest ways to see the connection between faith and works is to look at all the places in the Scriptures and the Catechism that deal with the final judgement. There are multiple references in Scripture that speak of how men will be repaid according to what they have done - those who have done evil are cast off into the fiery pit of hell, and those who have done good may enter into heaven to share the glory of God.(cf. Jn 5:29, Rom 2:6–8, Rev 20:13) Here we see that it is not based solely on faith as a mental assent, but on a persons deeds. The Catechism asks the questions, “Who will rise? All the dead will rise, ‘those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgement.”(CCC 998) At the end of time we will all stand before Christ and have to give an account of what we have done. God has given us a great responsibility to live out our faith in charity and care for those who are in need. If our faith is not such that it overflows with good works out of love, then we will not be found worthy of the kingdom of God.(cf. CCC 1038–1039) Here also we see the connection between faith, works and justification. It is through faith that we are able to be saved, yet in the final judgement we see that we will be judged according to our works. Faith must be lived out in all a person’s actions in order to be justified before God.

Conclusion

It is clear to see by the teachings in the Scriptures and the Catechism that there is an intrinsic connection between faith and works. Faith itself is a theological virtue and a gift

from God, however it is something that we must accept in our freedom with our whole being. The very revelation of God demands nothing less than total acceptance and adherence in our whole lives. Furthermore, faith must be living faith with works of charity flowing out as a natural consequence of our faith. Also in all our speech and action we must bear witness to our faith, for if we truly believe then it will be evident for all to see. Finally, faith is necessary for justification and therefore salvation. Yet at the end of time all will be judged according to their works, thus showing the intrinsic connection between what we believe and what we do in our lives. Our faith is something that should permeate our whole being, thus changing us from our sinful state to what God has meant us to be from the moment of creation. Through faith we conform our lives to the truth of God, and live a life of holiness pleasing to God.