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Justified by Faith and Judged by Works: A Biblical Paradox and Its Significance

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The Challenge of Listening to the Whole of Scripture

Within the space of two short chapters in Romans, Paul declares, "It is not the hearers of the Law who are righteous before God, rather those who do the Law shall be justified" (Rom 2:13); and, "According to our evaluation, a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the Law" (Rom 3:28).

One can find no indication in the text that Paul was embarrassed by the seeming incongruity of these affirmations. Nor is it likely that he fell unawares into inconsistency, when we consider that the letter to Rome is carefully constructed and composed by the apostle in his maturity. We must assume that in some way these two widely different perspectives on the momentous matter of our standing before God cohere with one another. It is this point of cohesion that I would like to consider.

It is worth reminding ourselves at the outset that in seeking a biblical synthesis, we must take care to listen to all the biblical evidence and guard ourselves against diluting either one of the Pauline statements we have just cited. We should remember that it was the rediscovery of Paul's latter affirmation, that justification is a gift given to faith, which prompted the Protestant Reformation in a Church that had grown dull of hearing. The Reformers, whether Lutheran or Calvinist, came to understand that believers shall

stand at the final judgment by a righteousness given to faith alone as a gift. In other words, the righteousness that saves us is found outside us in Jesus Christ, incarnate, crucified and risen. In taking this position, the Reformers were making a conscious break with traditional understandings of justification, according to which the initial gift of justification had to increase and grow internally in order for the believer to attain salvation. Their disagreement with their contemporaries was not over whether salvation was a divine gift. Everyone at that time was a follower of Augustine, or at least thought themselves to be. The distinctive of the Reformers was that they went beyond Augustine and back to the Scriptures. They preserved Augustine's insight that justification is the work of God alone in their rediscovery of the biblical and Pauline understanding of grace: "If [salvation] is by grace, it is no longer by works, otherwise grace is no longer grace" (Rom 11:5). The reformational insistence on "sola fide" was inseparable from its equally firm affirmation of "sola Scriptura." It is well beyond our scope here to explore the ways in which the Reformers appealed to Scripture to support their position. We may simply observe that although Paul was a primary Scriptural witness to this truth, he was by no means the only witness. Whether or not the Reformers' reading of Scripture is right on the matter of justification is

another issue of course. For various exegetical reasons that I cannot elaborate now, I think that they did get it right. My present purpose is to remind us that when we wrestle with the relationship between “justification by faith” and “judgment according to works,” we do not, in the first instance, seek to legitimate a Protestant tradition. Instead, we seek to understand the message of Scripture in its fulness.

Therefore, the following reflections represent an exercise in biblical theology. It is an attempt to find that central point from which these seemingly disparate affirmations of the text find their resolution. Although I shall restrict myself primarily to Paul’s letters, it will be readily apparent that the observations I shall offer have implications that encompass the whole of Scripture. Here and there, where appropriate, I shall attempt to draw some connections with other elements of the biblical witness.

Inadequate Solutions to the Problem

First, it is necessary for us to consider some of the ways in which theologians, particularly Protestant theologians, have handled the question at hand. One of the most common attempts at resolving the difficulty has been to say that in the final judgment “works” shall serve as evidence of the justifying faith of believers. This claim finds obvious support in the words of the Jakobean interlocutor, “I shall show you my faith by my works” (Jas 2:18). This thesis, if properly qualified, is essentially correct. Nevertheless, it has obvious deficiencies. In context, James goes on to speak not of a justification by faith shown by works, but of a justification by works, as do various passages in the New Testament from the preaching of Jesus to the

Apocalypse of John (Jas 2:20-26).¹ Furthermore, as Protestants generally have recognized, to speak simply in terms of “justification by faith” would be to overlook the various ways in which Scripture, and Paul in particular, locates justification in Christ and his saving work (e.g., “we have been justified by [Christ’s] blood,” Rom 5:9). For Paul justifying faith is inseparable from the saving work of Christ, and vice versa. It is in Christ crucified and risen that the biblical tension between faith and works finds its resolution.

Other solutions to the problem are less than satisfactory.² The argument that we must understand Paul’s expectation of judgment primarily in relation to the church as a corporate entity, fails to convince, since the texts that speak of judgment generally speak of the individual.³ It also has been suggested that Paul’s references to judgment according to works represent a mere rhetorical device, drawn from Jewish tradition. Indeed, interpreters frequently read Romans 2:12-16 and its surrounding context as a hypothetical description of judgment, even if they do not apply this claim to Paul’s thought as a whole. Yet precisely in this passage the argument fails, for here, having declared that it is not the “hearers,” but the “doers of the Law” who shall be justified in the day of judgment, Paul solemnly affirms that “God shall judge the secrets of human beings according to my gospel, through Christ Jesus” (Rom 2:16). Paul explicitly includes a final justification according to works within his gospel of justification apart from works. We, therefore, cannot escape the inherent tension within his thought.

Yet another attempt to resolve this difficulty, one that is popular among evangelical Christians, is to draw a distinction

between final salvation and reward. The former has been secured by Christ for the believer once-for-all. The latter is dependent upon our obedience. The texts that speak of justification or salvation by faith (alone) thereby retain their full force. Those that speak of judgment according to works do so likewise, because they speak about another, secondary matter. Again in this case, logical coherence is obtained at the cost of the meaning of the biblical texts. We may freely grant that the judgment according to works that Paul expects entails eternal reward and, in a certain sense, degrees of it. Moreover, Paul's reference to the one saved "yet as through fire" in 1 Corinthians 3:10-17 shows us that he obviously knows of deficient service within the church, which will be exposed and consumed at the final judgment, ending in the bare salvation of the one who offered it. Even in this context, however, Paul goes on to warn that anyone who destroys the church will meet with destruction from God. A danger exists not only of empty labor, but also of final condemnation. Significantly, Paul leaves the line of demarcation between shoddy workmanship and destructive efforts undefined. Furthermore, other Pauline texts that speak of final judgment leave no room for a distinction between salvation and reward, since they presuppose an absolute "either-or," standing or falling, life or death, salvation or wrath.⁴ Nor can we legitimately read 2 Corinthians 5:10 as dealing with the mere dispensation of rewards to believers: "For it is necessary for all of us to be manifest before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one might be recompensed for the things done through the body, whether good or evil." As the following verse makes clear, the topic at hand is the legiti-

macy of the apostle, which ultimately God alone will confirm. Although Paul formulates his description of final judgment in general terms, in the first instance, he has in view those who claim to have apostolic authority within the congregation. The passage deals with approbation and condemnation, life and death, not with the supposedly secondary matter of rewards. Occasionally, this "rewards" thesis is combined with the idea that the biblical language of "inheritance" refers to rewards and not salvation itself.⁵ Nevertheless, in the New Testament and contemporaneous Jewish writings, the terminology of "inheritance" clearly signifies the age to come and life in it.⁶ Moreover, to conceive of "reward" in this manner is to miss its intrinsic and paradoxical connection to salvation, a topic we cannot explore here.⁷

Yet another way of trying to reconcile Paul's expectation of a judgment according to works with his understanding of salvation has been to claim that he embraced a doctrine of Christian perfection. Although we can recognize how certain passages such as Romans 6 might give rise to this theory, it is entirely implausible and does violence to the very texts it uses as its starting point. Paul would hardly have needed to urge believers to continue to forgive one another, if he supposed they had or could attain perfection.⁸ And it is quite obvious that when he calls the Corinthians "holy ones" it is on account of what God had accomplished for them in Christ, not on account of what they were in themselves. Throughout his letters, Paul deals realistically with the errors, weakness, and transgressions of his congregations, and leaves no room for perfectionism.

In the current literature, one more

frequently finds the contrary theory that God does not look for perfect obedience at the final judgment.⁹ This idea is not new: it was implicit in the medieval conceptions of salvation against which the Reformers reacted and appeared again among some late seventeenth-century Anglican divines, who viewed Christ as having purchased a lowered condition for salvation. The argument is advanced that God has never demanded perfect obedience from his people. All that he has ever required is sincere allegiance, the devotion of the heart, “embrace of the Law,” “responsible covenant-behavior,” or the like. This unhappy attempt at synthesis reduces the biblical demand to a form of idealism. Obedience now becomes a distant goal, rather than an immediate and unconditioned requirement, from which the human being may not be excused. The message of Deuteronomy, the quintessential book of the Law, is that Israel’s love for God must express itself in unqualified obedience to *all* the commandments, or indeed, to the “entire commandment” of the Law, since the Law is to be understood as an indivisible whole: “Then the Lord commanded us to observe *all* these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good, so as to keep us alive, as is now the case. If we diligently observe this *entire* commandment before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us, we will be in the right” (Deut 6:24-25).¹⁰ Therefore, when the apostle James indicates that to transgress one commandment is to become a transgressor of the whole of the Law, he merely echoes the antecedent biblical understanding (Jas 2:10-11). The same may be said for the author of Hebrews, who reminds his readers that “the word spoken through angels was confirmed, and every transgression and

disobedience received just recompense” (Heb 2:2; cf. Heb 10:28). Jesus, too, regarded obedience to all the commandments of the Law as necessary to entrance into the kingdom of heaven, as is evident in his response to the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17-22 and parallels).¹¹ In the Lukan account of a lawyer’s question, the Law is summarized in the two greatest commandments of wholehearted love toward God and love for one’s neighbor as for oneself: “Do this” Jesus says, “and you shall live” (Luke 10:25-28).¹² Consequently, when Paul indicates on the basis of Deut 27:26 that a curse rests on everyone who does not do *all* that is written in the book of the Law, he merely reflects the theology of Deuteronomy in unison with the broader New Testament witness (Gal 3:10).

In this connection we cannot overlook the provision of forgiveness within the Levitical system of sacrifices, even if we cannot discuss it at length. It is worth observing that a tension appears within Leviticus itself concerning the efficacy of the sacrifices. On the one hand, they clearly serve as a means of atonement, in some sense putting aside Israel’s sin and maintaining her relationship with Yahweh. On the other hand, if Israel does not observe *all* the commandments of Yahweh and thus breaks covenant with him, he shall send them away into exile (Lev 26:1-39, esp. 26:14). The sacrifices operate only within the sphere of obedience. In other words, Leviticus and Deuteronomy speak with one voice concerning Yahweh’s demand for complete obedience, subordinating the sacrificial system and the forgiveness it offered to that demand.¹³ We have here a paradox, indeed the anticipatory form of the very paradox with which we are dealing. Its

presence in the biblical text attests that as the recipient of divine revelation Israel accepted that tension without diluting it. The prophets' later rejection of the cult in the face of Israel's abuse of it may likewise be understood as a reassertion of the primacy which the Torah had already assigned to unqualified obedience.¹⁴ From this perspective, even the bold and sweeping statements of the letter to the Hebrews do not appear to be at odds with Leviticus. The high priestly offering on the Day of Atonement removes only sins performed in ignorance (Heb 9:7). The Levitical sacrifices provide only an outward cleansing (Heb 9:13). They could never provide forgiveness, but serve only as reminders of sin (Heb 10:1-4). Like the prophets before it, the letter to the Hebrews decisively rejects the cult in favor of the demand for obedience, as articulated in Psalm 40, which the author cites. Now, however, something remarkable takes place: the original, paradoxical juxtaposition of forgiveness secured by sacrifice and the requirement for absolute obedience reappears. Biblical demand and biblical promise have been fulfilled in the incarnate Son, who by the will of God offered up his body as a sacrifice, once for all (Heb 10:5-10, esp. v. 10; cf. Ps 40:7-9).¹⁵ In him, and in him alone, this tension within Scripture finds its unity.

Justification and Final Judgment

By this circuitous route, then, we have returned to Jesus Christ and his saving work as the resolution of the biblical tension between justification by faith and judgment according to works. I would like now to elaborate and confirm this "center" of the biblical message that I have advocated by considering several aspects of justification, judgment, faith, and works

in Paul's letters.

Interpreters frequently have lost sight of the full dimensions of the biblical conception of the final judgment and of Paul's forensic language. The image of a modern courtroom, in which the judge functions merely as an administrator of justice fails to capture the whole of the biblical understanding. Particularly in Paul's letters and the Johannine writings another dimension of judgment drawn from the biblical prophets and psalms appears prominently. In judgment God does not act merely as a distributor of justice, he is a party to the dispute. This theme is particularly prominent in Romans and comes to expression in Paul's citation of Ps 51 (LXX 50) in Romans 3:4: "Let God be true, and every human being a liar, just as it is written, 'In order that you might be justified in your words and triumph when you judge.'"¹⁶ God has a contention with us fallen human beings, who in word and deed have denied him as Creator and have turned aside to idolatry. According to Paul's expectation, the day of judgment is nothing other than the day of God's wrath against such unrighteousness.¹⁷ Above all else, the final judgment shall bring the justification of God over against the fallen world, the revelation of his righteousness before the nations, and the effecting of his saving purposes. Paul understands that the gospel has its power to save precisely because this righteousness of God already has been revealed in it.¹⁸ The day of judgment has been brought into the present in Jesus Christ crucified and risen. For us and our transgressions he was crucified. For us and our justification he was raised (Rom 4:25). For those who believe in Jesus, God has come to be the righteous one, vindicated in his charge against us. At the

same time he is the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom 3:26). *God's* righteousness is ours through Christ by faith (Rom 1:17; Rom 3:22). Consequently, there is no justification of the sinner that is not simultaneously the justification of God in his wrath against the sinner. Our justification contains our condemnation within it. Paul often speaks of Christ's cross in this way, as for example in Galatians 2:19b-20: "For I through the Law died to the Law. I have been crucified with Christ. I live, but it is no longer I, rather Christ lives in me. What I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me."¹⁹ For Paul, mercy is not given apart from judgment. Life is granted only where God has put to death. On those who believe judgment already has been passed, even though it is yet to come.²⁰

Of course, we who believe share not only in Christ's death but also in his life. Because Christ was raised "for us," we live in the certain hope of the resurrection from the dead. But that is not all. Christ's resurrection is projected into the present time in the "new obedience" of believers. Or, to put it the other way around, our obedience is nothing other than Christ's resurrection life projected into the present: "We have been buried with him through 'baptism into death' in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:4). Bodily obedience here and now is the necessary anticipation of bodily resurrection.²¹ Paul obviously does not suppose that the *eschaton* has wholly come, but he does understand that in Christ crucified and risen it has come as a whole. In this connection, we may limit ourselves to a single observation, even though there is much

more to be said: behind Christ's resurrection stands Christ's cross. Our obedience to God as believers presupposes that our old life has been judged and condemned.²² According to the text it is because we have been "baptized into Christ's death" that we "walk in the newness" of life (Rom 6:4). Here as elsewhere, when Paul speaks of "newness" he has in view the entrance of the age to come into the world. And his very reference a *new* creation presupposes that the old has been done away with: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. The old things have passed away, behold new things have come!" (2 Cor 5:17; Isa 43:18-19). The newness of life in which believers walk is a reality that comes from beyond the final judgment, from the life of the age to come. The works of believers cannot be reduced to a mere condition of obtaining entrance into the age to come. They are themselves the reality of the age to come as it has broken into the present in Jesus Christ. To put it as Luther did in his Heidelberg Disputation (Thesis 25): our works do not work our righteousness, our righteousness works our works.²³

This observation helps us to understand another dimension of Paul's expectation of final judgment that is easily overlooked. Not only shall the saints be judged by God, they shall judge the world with God and share in his triumph over it. This expectation appears prominently in Romans 8, where Paul speaks of the present suffering of the children of God, which anticipates their glory. Those who believe have been thrust into the contention between God and the world. Echoing the language of Isaiah's Servant, Paul asks: "If God is for us, who is against us? . . . Who shall bring a charge against the elect of God? . . . Who is the one who con-

demns? . . . Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? (Rom 8:31-35). As in the book of Isaiah to which Paul alludes, God predestines, calls, justifies, and glorifies his servants, and in so doing establishes his claim to be the true God (Rom 8:28-30). In this context Paul does not speak of our justification before God, but of our justification by God before the world. The resurrection of the body, the instatement as sons that we await, constitutes God's triumph over the world in judgment. Correspondingly, in admonishing the Corinthian church, Paul speaks of the future participation of believers in judgment as a matter fundamental to the gospel: "Do you not know that the saints shall judge the world? . . . Do you not know that we shall judge the angels?" (1 Cor 6:2-3). Paul presupposes the same at the conclusion of Romans 2, when he rhetorically suggests that the uncircumcised one who fulfills the Law shall judge the circumcised transgressor of it (Rom 2:28). Through God's justifying verdict, those who belong to Jesus Christ shall rule and reign with him. God shall not only be our judge, but our vindicator, who shall establish and defend his own saving work before the world and angels (Rom 8:31-39).

In the present time, the contention between God and the world runs through the very hearts of those who believe. The Spirit and the flesh constitute two "wholes" in Paul's thought, the old person and the new, who do battle until the resurrection from the dead.²⁴ Although it often does not seem so to us, the battle is entirely one-sided and has, in fact, been decided: "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh, with its passions and desires" (Gal 5:24). Paul's similar statement of the matter in

Romans 8 is significant. The sons of God who are led by the Spirit of God, "put to death the deeds of the body" (Rom 8:13). The Spirit again and again reenacts the cross and resurrection in us. We stand under the judgment of God, and therefore can be granted life and freedom only through the sentence of death that has been effected in Christ. The self-judgment of believers at the table of the Lord, i.e., "the judgment of the body" of which Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians 11:29, shows how central it is to Paul's thought. The same may be said of the church's responsibility to exercise discipline when the repentance of transgression is absent in its members (1 Cor 5:1-13). Our self-judgment in Christ is necessary to our sharing in life in him. If we judge ourselves we shall not be judged (1 Cor 11:31).

Faith and Works

We have not yet addressed the question as to why Paul can reject a justification by the "works of the Law" while expecting a final judgment according to works in which the Law itself shall serve as the standard. The answer is two-fold, having to do with Paul's conception of the final judgment and his understanding of the "works of the Law."

For Paul the final judgment is not a "weighing" or "counting" of works, but a manifestation of persons by their works. We may remind ourselves of 2 Corinthians 5:10: "It is necessary that we all become manifest before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one should be recompensed for the things done through the body, whether good or evil."²⁵ As we have seen, Paul describes the day of judgment in similar terms in Romans 2:16. The idea is likewise implicit to 1 Corinthians 3:13, where he announces the searing revela-

tion of our works on the last Day.²⁶ Correspondingly, Paul speaks of the judgment of a person's "work" (note carefully the singular form) as a comprehensive matter. In the final judgment the "work" of each life shall appear as a whole, either as perseverance in seeking "glory, honor, and immortality," or as obedience to unrighteousness (Rom 2:7-8).

This inseparability of "person" and "works" has two sides. On the one hand, taken as a whole our works reveal our persons. At the end of the day we are what we do, not what we suppose ourselves to be. Every act of sin, even the smallest sin, is an expression of our person, that is, an expression that each of us is a sinner. According to the apostle, the commandment of God serves to expose this truth about us, rendering sin "sinful beyond measure" (Rom 7:13). When we encounter the commandment "you shall not covet," we acknowledge that it is good and that it leads to life, but we act otherwise. The irrational cause of our disobedience lies in our desire to do away with God, who gives the commandment. As Luther rightly saw, in its essence sin is nothing other than the "*annihilatio Dei*," the attempt to annihilate God. Because sin is thus rooted in our persons, it is overcome only in the re-creation of our persons in Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, the unity that exists between "person" and "works" means that even those works which presently appear to be good cannot be judged apart from the person who performs them, that is, apart from the "heart," the motive and intent behind the works. Paul therefore refuses to allow the Corinthians to pass judgment on him, and does not do so himself. We cannot rightly see the depths of our own hearts. As Paul later

writes to Timothy, "the sins of some are obvious, going before them to judgment, for others they follow afterward" (1 Tim 5:24).

Although the meaning of the expression "works of the Law" is debated, it seems clear that it signifies those outward, visible deeds that the human being is capable of performing in obedience to the Law. These "works of the Law" served as markers not merely of the national identity of the Jews, but of their piety. Works such as these are inadequate to justify because particular deeds of obedience that we are able perform do not encompass the whole of our lives and persons. Some may achieve outward conformity to the demands of the Law, as Paul himself indicates that he did: "As to the righteousness which is in the Law, (I was) blameless" (Phil 3:6). Yet he could not expunge coveting from his heart. The same was true of the rich young man who departed from Jesus in sadness. Although outwardly he had kept all the commandments, Jesus' call to discipleship exposed the refusal to love God and neighbor that ruled within his heart (Mark 10:17-22). Those in Paul's day who sought their justification in "works of the Law" attempted to substitute partial obedience for the whole which God demands. To seek righteousness in the works we may perform is to hide from the fallenness of our own heart: "by the works of the Law, no flesh shall be justified before (God), for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin" (Rom 3:20). Paul rejects the "works of the Law" not because these deeds are wrong in themselves, but because of the opinion attached to them that they could justify, which made them nothing other than expressions of rebellion against God and his work in Christ.²⁷

We may turn now to the matter of faith itself. The “new obedience” of those who belong to Christ consists in nothing other than, “the faith which comes from the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me” (Gal 2:20). Paul uses these very words in Romans 6 when he rejoices over the faith of the Roman Christians: “Thanks be to God that you were slaves to sin but became obedient from the heart to that teaching unto which you were delivered, and being freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness” (Rom 6:17-18). Here Paul significantly inverts the expected locution and speaks of Christians being delivered to the gospel rather than the gospel being delivered to them. Faith is a manifestation of the new creation itself, as is apparent in Paul’s statement in 2 Corinthians 4:6: “God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ is the one who has shone in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the person of Jesus Christ” (cf. Gen 1:3). Faith is *God’s* work alone, a creation *ex nihilo*, and therefore cannot be reduced to a mere condition of salvation. To be “in the faith” is to be indwelt by Christ: “Test yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Prove yourselves. Or do you do not know concerning yourselves that Jesus Christ is in you—unless you are indeed unapproved?” (2 Cor 13:5).²⁸

Because faith is God’s work, faith works in the world. Indeed, it is inseparable from its works and neither requires nor tolerates any works outside itself. In it the Law of God and its demand for love of God and neighbor comes to fulfillment. According to Paul only “faith working through love” has force in Christ Jesus (Gal 5:6). Faith meets the demand of the Law in “love,” not as an idea or theological conception, but as the reality of the age

to come, which has entered the world in Jesus Christ: “For the (commandments) ‘Do not commit adultery,’ ‘Do not murder,’ ‘Do not steal,’ ‘Do not covet,’ and if there is any other commandment, it is summarized in this word, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does not do evil to the neighbor. Love therefore is the fulfillment of the Law” (Rom 13:9-10).²⁹ Paul does not offer here an ethical criterion by which to judge the course of one’s action. He rather speaks of the presence of Christ, in whom love is effective. As he urges his readers in this context, we are to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh” (Rom 13:14).³⁰ Love has its source in faith, not merely as gratitude for grace received, but in the Christ who is present within it.³¹ In this light, the priority that Paul gives to love over faith in 1 Corinthians 13 becomes understandable. Faith does not have intrinsic value for Paul, but exists as a reflection of Christ and his work. Considered in itself, even a faith that is sufficient to move mountains is nothing (1 Cor 13:2). Love is greater than faith and hope, since it incarnates the eschatological life that faith and hope already apprehend. For this reason Paul does not define love in this chapter, but describes its manifold expressions. The “love” of which he speaks in the most stirring and sublime terms is a gift from God, a gift that the Corinthians are to seek above all others since it abides forever (1 Cor 13:13). If faith is considered as an isolated “gift” operative in the world, love far exceeds faith. Considered in relation to God, however, faith has a priority over love, since it is by faith alone that the divine reality of love is given to us in Christ: “faith works through love” (Gal 5:6).

In this light it is clear that there is no final conflict between Paul and James on the relationship between faith and works in justification.³² James 2:22 speaks of faith “working with” Abraham’s works, not adjunctively but concursively, accomplishing them just as the body with the spirit performs deeds.³³ When, therefore, James speaks of faith “being perfected” by Abraham’s works, he does not mean that works supplied something alongside faith, that faith inherently lacks (Jas 2:22). Faith came to its own perfection by means of works. James understands Genesis 15:6 in prophetic terms: the sacrifice of Isaac was the fulfillment of the Scripture that announced Abraham’s faith in God (Jas 2:23). Faith has a course to run, deeds that it must do in the world. As James makes clear at the very outset of his letter, faith necessarily undergoes testing so that those who believe may come to perfection (Jas 1:2-4). Consequently, James freely draws the conclusion that the justification of Abraham, Rahab, and all others is by works (Jas 2:21; Jas 2:24; Jas 2:25).³⁴ His formulation is important: he does not say that they were justified “by faith and works,” but that they were justified by works alone. James’s concluding illustration of the body and the spirit sheds light on his language at this point (Jas 2:26). When describing the basis or substance of salvation, James speaks of faith, which he calls “the body.” When, however, he views salvation in its completeness and perfection he speaks of the works that justify, “the spirit” that makes the body something more than a corpse. He certainly does not suppose that works in themselves justify, despite his bold language. The works that justify are never alone, but are an outworking of faith, which is present with them: “You see that

a person is justified by works, and not by faith alone” (Jas 2:24). This point becomes especially clear in James’s example of Rahab, whom he explicitly calls “the harlot” (Jas 2:25). She obviously was not justified on account of her occupation, but on account of the works in which her faith was present. Both James and Paul understand justification as the justification of the ungodly.

For James as well as Paul, the faith that leads to justification arises from the saving word of God.³⁵ The promise made to Abraham lies behind the Genesis narrative (Jas 2:23). The spies whom Rahab received were “messengers,” who implicitly brought the announcement of coming judgment (Jas 2:25). Furthermore, the justification that Abraham and Rahab experienced took place at the point of crisis. In accord with Jewish tradition, James speaks as if Abraham completed the act of sacrifice, “offering up Isaac upon the altar” (Jas 2:21).³⁶ Rahab was delivered from the destruction of Jericho, when she “received the messengers and sent them out by another way” (Jas 2:24). These points of crisis arose from God’s contention with the world. This is most apparent in the conquest of Jericho, in which divine judgment falls on the inhabitants of the land. But it is also present in James’s appeal to Abraham, who in being justified came to be called “a friend of God,” and therefore an enemy of the world (Jas 2:23).³⁷ The experiences of justification by Abraham and Rahab were prolepses of the day of judgment, which now stands immediately before the Church (Jas 5:9).

In this light, James and Paul vary in their understanding of justification only in their emphases. Both understand that salvation is by faith, of which the risen Christ is the source and basis. Both

understand that at the last judgment justification take place according to works. Both understand that these works belong to faith, and that they are God's works, not our own.³⁸ Both understand that this justification at the last judgment will be a justification of the ungodly. Both understand justification as the triumph of God over the world. Both understand that the final judgment is present here and now in justification of those who believe. They differ only in that James is concerned to describe the character of saving faith itself, and not its source and basis. Paul elaborates the theme that James presupposes, namely, the crucified and risen Christ who dwells in faith and is its object. Paul speaks of Christ's cross and resurrection as the prolepsis of the final judgment. James speaks of God's past vindications of justifying faith as prolepses of the final judgment, finding examples of these in Abraham and Rahab, just as he elsewhere appeals to the "prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord" as models of patience and final blessing (Jas 5:10-11). The two cohere in that they both understand that Christ is the word of God which at once saves us and in saving us calls us to obedience.

Not only is the second commandment fulfilled in faith, but the first and primary commandment that we should have no other gods before the Lord is fulfilled here in faith as well. Faith is not abstract or general, but is fixed upon the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ: "If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus, and believe with your heart God raised him from the dead you shall be saved" (Rom 10:9). As we noted earlier, in laying hold of the crucified Christ, faith gives God justice, acknowledging his righteous contention that we are liars and idolators.

We believe in Jesus who was delivered up for *our* transgressions (Rom 4:25). With Paul we confess that "he loved me and gave himself up for *me*" (Gal 2:20). Like Abraham and David after him we believe in the one who justifies the ungodly (Rom 4:5). In so believing we acknowledge that we are the ungodly ones who require such a justifier. We are the sick, who require a physician. We are the wretched tax-collectors who must cry out, "God be merciful to me the sinner!" Like Peter who was silenced, and finally allowed Jesus to wash his feet, faith is passive toward God and merely receives what he has given and done in Jesus Christ. Yet this passivity is precisely the first and primary obedience that God requires of us, to acknowledge the truth of his word, which charges that there is no one of us who understands, no one of us who seeks for God (Rom 3:9-20; Psalms 14, 53). Faith fulfills the first commandment in that it lets God be God, and allows his claim against us to stand. As Paul makes clear, Abraham's faith was an act of obedience toward God the Creator, who "makes alive the dead and calls into existence the things which are not" (Rom 4:17).

Conclusion

We have not "solved" the biblical paradox that we are justified by faith in Christ alone, and yet shall be judged according to our works. We rather have come face-to-face with the saving work of God in Jesus Christ, at which we shall wonder into all eternity. The biblical tension has no solution, only resolution in Christ crucified and risen *for us*. The works that God shall judge in us are not our own in the proper sense, but those of the risen Christ who has been given to us in faith. These

works spring from the judgment that has been passed on us already in Jesus Christ. They are the fruit of a justification already given. These works, moreover, are nothing more than faith at work, the apprehending of Christ's work in situation after situation of daily life. They are, as Paul says, the "reckoning" that we have died to sin, but are alive to God in Christ Jesus. This faith does not seek the grace of God in our pious moments, when we feel ourselves to be especially good. This faith, if it is faith at all, knows to pray in the midst of sin, difficulty and failure, that is, in those rare occasions when we vaguely sense what we are before God. Faith also knows that the cry of wretchedness, if it is an expression of faith and not mere self-torment, must be followed immediately by the shout of joy, "Thanks be to God, through Christ Jesus our Lord!" This is the obedience which before all else God demands from us, that we see the crucified Christ as the "earnest mirror" in which we and our sins are reflected, and that we grasp the justifying verdict of God our Creator manifest in Christ's resurrection for us. The Reformational understanding of justification to which we are heirs hangs simply on this, that we find all our righteousness outside ourselves in Jesus Christ who has been given to us in faith. We have this righteousness in him, but we do not yet possess it, and shall not possess it until we are raised from the dead. Faith, therefore, cannot be separated from hope. It is a constant turning of the heart and life toward that which is yet to come, a forgetting what lies behind and looking forward to what lies ahead (Phil 3:13): "We, through the Spirit, by faith are waiting for the hope of righteousness" (Gal 5:5). The one good work that God requires of us according to Paul, is

that we seek after the glory, honor, and immortality that we do not have. They are found in God the Creator alone, who has been revealed to us nowhere but in the crucified and risen Christ (Rom 2:7; Rom 4:17, 23-25). It is this seeking that God shall reward on the last day. In the end, we have been speaking all along about the matter of Christian assurance. The New Testament knows nothing of assurance as a mere psychological state. It knows only of the "boasting," "boldness," and "full confidence" that calls us away from this world of sin and death and into the life of the age to come. This confidence, I will suggest in closing, is the significance of the biblical paradox that we have considered. This is the purpose for which Jesus Christ died and rose again.

ENDNOTES

¹E.g., Matt 7:21-27; John 3:19-21; Heb 6:10; 1 Pet 1:17; Rev 2:23; 20:13; 22:12.

²See the survey in Kent L. Yinger, *Paul, Judaism, and Judgment According to Deeds* (Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 105; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 1-16.

³So Calvin J. Roetzel, *Judgement in the Community: A Study of the Relationship between Eschatology and Ecclesiology in Paul* (Leiden: Brill, 1972) 176. See Rom 2:6-11; 2:12-16; 2:17-29; 14:10-12; 1 Cor 4:3-5; 2 Cor 5:6-10; Gal 6:4-5; 6:7-10; Eph 6:8; Col 3:24-25.

⁴Rom 2:6-11; 14:10-12; Gal 6:7-10; 1 Thess 5:9.

⁵E.g., Michael Eaton, *No Condemnation: A New Theology of Assurance* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995) 175-185.

⁶E.g., Matt 5:5; Mark 10:17; Rom 4:13; 8:17; 1 Cor 15:50; Heb 6:12; Jas 2:5; 1 Pet 1:4; Rev 21:7.

⁷We may think in particular of the par-

able of the laborers in the vineyard, Matt 20:1-16.

⁸Eph 4:32; Col 3:13.

⁹So, e.g., Yinger, 283-291.

¹⁰See also Deut 4:1-2; 5:29; 6:1-5; 8:1; 10:12-13; 13:4, 18; 17:19-20; 26:16-17; 28:1-2, 15; 30:4-10; 31:12-13.

¹¹In this encounter Jesus exposes the failure of the young man to obey the first commandment, that is, to have no other gods before the Lord, despite his remarkable external conformity to the Law. At that moment, love toward God was to be expressed in discipleship to Jesus, into which the young man was unwilling to enter (Mark 10:21-22). Jesus takes the same stance in the Sermon on the Mount, when he warns his disciples that “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:20). Indeed, he calls them to “be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48).

¹²See also the question on the greatest commandment of the Law, Mark 12:28-34; Matt 22:34-40.

¹³See also Num 15:22-31.

¹⁴See, e.g., Isa 1:10-17; Amos 5:21-24; Hos 6:6; Mic 6:6-8. Much like the prophets before him, Jesus regards the rectification of a wrong done to a brother as having priority over any offering given to God. Unless the disciple is reconciled with his brother, his offering is to no avail (Matt 5:21-26). Love for the neighbor does not here become an ideal but remains an unmitigated demand, even in the face of a temporary lapse.

¹⁵In Matthew’s Gospel, where Jesus

twice makes appeal to the words of the prophet Hosea, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice” (Hos 6:6), he accepts the equation his contemporaries made between deeds of obedience and the sacrificial system (Matt 9:13; 12:7). This extension of the Temple cult has its precedents in earlier Jewish literature (e.g., Sir 3:3; 3:30-31; 35:1-13; 45:23), and was undoubtedly furthered by the Pharisaic movement. In the larger context of Matthew’s Gospel Jesus’ appeal to the prophet Hosea carries unmistakably overtones of fulfillment and supersession of the sacrificial system, placing him on the same ground as the author of Hebrews.

¹⁶In the earlier part of the verse, Paul alludes to Ps 116:11, “every human being is a liar.”

¹⁷Rom 2:5; 3:5; 1 Thess 1:10.

¹⁸We meet it in a similar form in John’s Gospel, according to which the time of judgment, the confrontation between the fallen world and its Creator has arrived in Jesus, the incarnate Word. See especially John 3:18-21; 9:39-41; 12:27-33.

¹⁹Cf. Rom 6:6; 1 Cor 1:26-31; Gal 5:24; 6:14. As we can see from this brief citation, it is the Law of God that gives Christ’s cross its punitive significance. Indeed, this is the primary purpose of the Law as it appears in Paul’s letters. The Law brings wrath, condemnation and death, in order that we might have life (Rom 4:15; 2 Cor 3:4-11). It has imprisoned all things under sin, in order that the Son of God might come to redeem us: “When the fulness of time came, God sent forth

his Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that he might redeem those under the Law, that we might receive the instatement as sons” (Gal 4:4-5). See Gal 3:21. Not only does the Law interpret the cross, the cross interprets the Law. In statements such as these, Paul does not suppose that the Law thereby effects a psychological preparation for the gospel. He rather understands it to provide the context for the cross.

²⁰Here, as is so often the case, Jesus’ words seem to anticipate the message of Paul: “Truly, truly I say to you, the one who hears my word and believes the one who sent me has eternal life and does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (John 5:24).

²¹Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. and ed. G. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 177.

²²In this respect, too, the Law provides the basis for Paul’s thought. As Paul indicates by appeal to the Law’s regulation of marriage, the authority of the Law ends with our death (Rom 7:1-6). According to its own precept, once the sentence of death has been passed upon us, relationship to it has been severed (Gal 2:19; cf. Rom 6:14; 1 Cor 9:20; Gal 3:25; 4:5; 4:21).

²³See Timothy F. Lull, ed., *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 46-47.

²⁴Gal 5:16-26.

²⁵In 1 Corinthians 4:5 Paul speaks in an even more pronounced way of the day of judgment as a day of revelation: “(the Lord) shall bring to

light the hidden things of darkness and shall make manifest the intents of hearts. And then each one's praise shall come to them from God" (1 Cor 4:5).

²⁶See also Rom 2:27-29; 14:10-12.

²⁷We should not forget that Paul pronounced a curse on those who were offering a "gospel so-called" that supposed such works had to supplement the work of Christ (Gal 1:6, 9)

²⁸This final passage, we may suggest, represents a prolepsis of the day of judgment itself.

²⁹See also Gal 5:13-15.

³⁰Cf. Gal 2:20; 2 Cor 10:3.

³¹See Mark Seifrid, *Christ, Our Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Justification* (Leicester/Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000/2001) 138-139, from which I am citing a brief section.

³²See Seifrid, 179-183.

³³The verb *synergō* bears the sense of concursive action as in Rom 8:28 and 1 Cor 6:2, as is confirmed by James's subsequent illustration of faith as the body and works as the spirit (Jas 2:26).

³⁴On James's understanding of the Law, see Timo Laato, "Justification According to James: A Comparison with Paul," *Trinity Journal* 18 (1997) 47-61. I would only add that in my view James does not view the (eschatological) "law of freedom" (Jas 1:25; 2:12) and the "kingdom law" (Jas 2:8) as the continuation of the Law that condemns us as transgressors, but as the transcendence of it (Jas 2:11; cf. 2:12-13).

³⁵On the broader implications of this theme in James, see Laato, 47-61.

³⁶Cf. Heb 11:17-19.

³⁷Cf. Jas 4:4; 5:1-6.

³⁸Even for James, these are qualitatively different from human works, by which we might hide our ungodliness in boasting.