

# Faith and Works

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**D**URING studies I have had opportunity to make regarding dualism and its magic power of penetrating our Western culture through thousands of years, I have also had opportunity to consider from a new angle certain topics that undoubtedly give our theologians and preachers a lot of trouble in their daily tasks. Have you ever, for instance, had any difficulty with the subject of faith versus works? As a denomination we have often been accused of a certain "thralldom of external works." Probably such accusations become natural whenever a Christian attaches great importance to God's holy law.

The Reformation, as we all know, was a vehement reaction. A reaction against what? To a large extent just against external things, against the superficial in religious ceremonies and in human lives. That superficiality had reached a notorious climax. It was violently rejected by outstanding personalities within the Catholic clergy, still more violently by the Lutheran Protestants, and most violently of all by the Reformed Church—Calvin's church.

In all violent reactions, however, one thing seems to be almost inevitable. Men are exposed to the temptation of going to extremes. The pioneers of the Reformation would have been well-nigh superhuman if they had proved a perfect exception to that rule. Even Luther was in the danger zone. In the heat of a legitimate battle against formalism and the "thralldom of external works" he became so eager to save the contemporary church from the quagmire of self-salvation and self-righteousness that he was tempted to despise works altogether and to grant them no place whatsoever in the great work of salvation. Sufficient evidence of this is found in a well-known fact. The German Reformer had serious difficulty in accepting one of the books of the

New Testament canon as the really inspired Word of God because its author, James, had much to say in favor of those outward manifestations in human life which we call "works." He had the boldness to state in no ambiguous terms the excellency and prime importance of works. Anyone who reads the second chapter of his Epistle, es-

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*This article deals with what some have called provocative ground in the theology of salvation. The councils of the church have echoed with the opposing slogans Sola obra! Sola fide! And in between some have tried to combine some faith and some works.*

*Here the author, a Norwegian layman of experience and university training discusses the question whether real faith in God is ever unaccompanied by consequent works for God—even when they may not be dominantly apparent.*

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pecially verses 14, 17, and 22, may feel almost sorry for Martin Luther. Certainly those Bible texts do not at first view seem too well adapted to help a gallant warrior in his inexorable battle against the servitude of self-justification through the contribution of human efforts.

We must not forget, however, that Luther was right in the heat of battle. Any praise of personal human actions must have sounded in his ears almost like the flute of the Papacy, or as the treacherous voice of the evil one himself. His constant fear was, of course, that his congregations should be tempted to infer that those pitiable works of their own could provide them with any morsel of merit or righteousness.

Nevertheless, in order that sinful human beings be made really whole again, they need one thing—righteousness presented to them through the matchless sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Just how is that righteousness

to be appropriated? Is it through faith, or is it through works?

Do even we Seventh-day Adventists fully realize how utterly absurd that question is? Such frequent remarks as this, "Faith must be followed by works," may indicate that we all accept without any serious protest expressions and, to a certain extent, ways of thinking that are characteristic not of Biblical theology and anthropology, but precisely of a culture penetrated by dualist conceptions. Perhaps that is almost inevitable and therefore quite excusable. When a person of our Occidental culture says "soul," for instance, he does associate that word with ideas that an old Hebrew would never think of. We often have the idea of a soul as opposed to the body. That connotation was entirely foreign to the minds of the men who wrote the Old Testament. A soul was always a complete man, including his "body," of course. (Here I quite naturally used the word *body* in the abstract sense of something imagined as different from and "opposite to" the soul.) Do you see how much we have inherited from Plato and how imperceptibly we carry that heritage along with us?

But as far as the Platonic dualism of soul versus body is concerned, nobody could really deceive an Adventist into believing that body and soul are two different and separable entities. Our theology has been too intensely aware of the terrible dangers of spiritualist conceptions for that. And childlike Christians through all centuries have been able to realize that a human body and a human soul are simply two aspects or two sides of one and the same reality. Notice that we said *childlike* Christians. In our Platonic culture it does take a childlike mind to understand that simple fact. And what has made the Christian feel so childishly confident that those two aspects are not necessarily two separate and implacably opposite things? Well, simply the circumstance that he has never observed one single instance in his whole life where one of the "two parts" occurred independent of the other. Nor did any historical annals give any reliable report about any such monstrous occurrence. And the Biblical revelation does not make any allusion to it either.

#### *The Dualism of Faith Versus Works*

But now what about the dualism of faith versus works? Is it not strange indeed? Is it

not symptomatic? We all say faith *versus* works without the slightest hesitation, and without thinking for a moment that there is anything really striking in this. But when did we have the sensational experience of coming across one of them all alone? When was faith (or works) ever known to manifest itself as a sort of solitary specter? Not once in the records of human history, as far as I know, has any case occurred where real faith appeared without simultaneously expressing itself in some form of outward action. Conversely, no single real action has ever been performed on this planet of ours without a perfectly corresponding amount of inward faith.

In fact, there is overwhelming evidence that faith and works are absolutely inseparable aspects of one and the same reality. So the "problem" of their alleged controversial nature, their "opposition," is no doubt wholly and fully a pseudo problem. Are we quite logical then, when we keep saying that faith should be followed by works? *Accompanied* is the more correct word. Moreover it is not necessary to say faith *should be* accompanied by works. Faith is always accompanied by works. It simply cannot help it, just as one side of a door cannot help moving if the other side moves.

What has induced us to conceive of faith and works in terms of a certain contrast? At least, we dare say, that "contrast" is not found in the nature of those two "elements" that a whole world has agreed to present as inevitably contrasting to each other. So, once more, the bisection must to some extent be just in the minds of the men posing the problem.

Who has taught us to tear even the life of religious faith into shreds? As far as we can see, it must be that same spirit of treacherous disruption that has permeated our culture ever since the birth of Platonic idealism. And who is caught by that spirit of morbid dualism in this case? It might be as well to ask, Who is *not* caught by it? In a case like this it becomes clear that there must be something wrong with all of us.

Do we, then, actually imagine that there exists in that living reality we call faith, some sort of "pure spirit," some ideal essence of the intellect or of the heart, able to disengage itself from its concrete manifestations—floating around in the ether, as it were, just like those mysterious souls so currently believed to finally leave their re-

spective bodies and make a separate existence for themselves somewhere above the earthly regions?

"Opposed," then, to this spiritual substance called faith, we seem to imagine another phenomenon called works—equally independent and vagabondlike, and, above all, with a particular aversion against faith!

#### *Attempted Synthesis of Faith and Works*

Is it too bold to attempt a certain synthesis here? Is it too much if some people who still have a vivid sense of totality in human life feel a little sorry, as it were, for those two homeless and peaceless specters whom centuries of dualism have insisted upon separating? Anyway, we have decided to ask this daring question: Suppose that faith and works, too, should happen to be just two inseparable sides of one and the same reality? We sincerely hope that we have not thereby committed the crime of yoking together two deadly antagonists. Rather, we feel that there is no need of bringing faith and works together. They have never been apart. They must be concomitant in the highest degree. And what is the evidence that faith has no existence at all except as far as it is able to give itself concrete manifestation through the medium of works? Well, we do not imagine that any subtle or sagacious process of logical thinking is necessary at all to arrive at such a conclusion. A minimum of plain common sense and of simple empirical observation seems to be sufficient. The fact that no observer in the course of human history has ever had the sensational experience of coming across one of the "elements" without meeting the other at the same time, ought to provide a nice case of valid logical induction. But in addition to that we do have the clear testimony of Holy Writ. Against what is the apostle James polemicizing, if not just against the dualism of faith versus works? At what human absurdity is he actually scoffing?

"If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works; shew me thy faith without thy works and I will shew thee my faith by my works" (James 2:15-18).

It is just the simple childlike view of wholeness and harmony we constantly find when we examine the faith-and-works ideology of the primitive Christian church. And James, too, is eminently childlike in this. His mind is not haunted by any specter of pagan dualism in his views on faith and works. To him they are a perfect union. Not that he has any confidence whatsoever in man's ability to save himself, or any admiration whatsoever for man's own moral beauty. He knows perfectly well that in Christ's religion faith is the one decisive and all-important factor for the realization of the great wonder of Christian redemption. Would it not be reasonable to think that this is the very reason why he is so particularly eager to make that unique agent truly living and truly perfect in the heart of man?

How then is faith made living? How is it made perfect? Here we actually come to the great evidence of Christian totality in the apostle's view of the moral struggle in the life of a human being: "By works was faith made perfect" (verse 22). The apostle insists upon this as the only means imaginable of establishing faith as a perfect union, a living reality in the heart of man. In fact, he sees no possibility whatever that faith can have any existence at all in human lives except in union with its phenomenal counterpart, "works."

Must not then the apostle James be counted among the "philosophers" in antiquity who efficiently combated dualism?

But how was he enabled to make such a tremendous contribution in this field? Probably his ability came in the same way as that of the other authors of the Christian gospel—they were one with God. So they did not just "think" Christianity, they "lived" it.

"Faith is made perfect by works"! We should not be astonished if some philosophers find it a little discomforting to be told that this is the way the thing is accomplished. From heathen dualism we have also inherited a strange depreciation of everything that is outward. Bodies are outward; accordingly, they should be despised. Works are also outward; accordingly, they too should a priori be despised.

But what is the attitude of the childlike Christian, that plain and rather unphilosophical creature who simply believes the Christian gospel? Will he feel equally puz-

*(Continued on page 32)*

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## Faith and Works

*(Continued from page 16)*

zled or scandalized? If he learns that divine Providence has found it compatible with its dignity and its wisdom to take simple human instrumentalities into its service, and to establish a method of cooperation, so to speak, between frail humanity and divinity, will he have any serious objection to that peculiar plan for human regeneration? No, the typical reaction of a true alterocentric attitude is just to be cooperative and to be simply grateful for having been regarded worthy of actual cooperation.

It is the complicated mind of the philosophizing adult that considers all things from the problematic angle. It seizes the problems with eagerness, and where it does not have a problem, it makes one, simply manufacturing sham problems, in case there should be a serious shortage of real problems in this world. Anyway, if the solution of the "problem" of faith versus works is as simple as we have here suggested, does not that place the age-old quarrel in this case—and in a great number of similar cases—in a most curious light?