

## Bad Theology Has Gone Global

By Pastor John Correia

There's nothing quite like traveling across the globe and getting embroiled in a theological controversy among the people you are visiting and hoping to serve. You show up full of vigor to serve the Lord, and the next thing you know someone wants you to solve a long-standing theological impasse in 15 minutes...through an interpreter. As a theology geek issues like these can be a ton of fun; as a short-term missionary who doesn't want to ruin unity in the community they are more than a little stressful. If handled improperly controversy can cause dissension and strife, but if approached with humility, biblical precision and a willingness to dialog and interact it can bring togetherness and camaraderie. I thank God that on my recent trip to Rwanda He allowed me to navigate this minefield by upholding the grace of God and helping about 30 churches embrace His radical message of the truly free grace of salvation by faith *alone* in Christ alone.

I didn't go to Rwanda to start a theological debate, but a big one came and found me while I was there doing pastoral training. My central mission on a recent trip was to train local pastors in biblical interpretation as well as discipleship and basic theology. (you can find the handout I used for the biblical interpretation training [here](#); the discipleship handout I made is [here](#)) This was just a short introduction; for anyone who has had a college or seminary class in Bible interpretation, imagine trying to take 16 weeks of instruction and material and compress it down into about 2 hours—during which you have to stop every other sentence for translation—and you will get the gist of what I was working with.

I knew as well that I wanted to reinforce the grace of God in my training time. I chose to use Romans 4:1-8 as the text we would practice our interpretive skills on specifically to reinforce the truth that salvation is by grace through faith *alone*. I had been taught by several people who had gone to Africa before me that the church in Africa can tend towards legalism and sometimes struggles with the message of the grace of a truly free salvation, so I wanted to reinforce the radical truth that Paul teaches in Romans.

*Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due.  
But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly,  
his faith is credited as righteousness, (Romans 4:4-5, NAS)*

Salvation as a truly free gift of God, by faith alone in the work of His Son Jesus on our behalf, is the cornerstone of historic Christianity. I wanted to bring that message to the pastors in Gacundezi; at the same time, I wanted them to discover it for themselves in the text as we worked on our observation and interpretation skills rather than take my word for it. The bedrock of evangelical Christianity is that there is nothing that anyone can do to earn eternal life because our sin separates us from God. The scandal of the cross, Paul tells us, is that all who trust Christ with no works have His righteousness credited to their account. (Rom 4:3)

I should have expected that there would be some spirited discussion on the requirements of eternal life when I chose that particular passage. The million-dollar question came from one of the pastors in the audience. “Pastor,” she asked, “How does this passage compare with what James says in James 2:18?” I wasn’t looking to get embroiled in the Lordship Salvation controversy, but it came and found me in Africa! With how often I get asked to compare James 2:14-26 and what Paul says in his writings (and Jesus says too) I should have expected it. I was very grateful that I was prepared to discuss the free grace of God and ready to interact with the issue with these pastors.

I started with a bit of masochism, telling the pastor who asked the question (her name is Josephine) if I could make the problem more difficult. My translator did a double take when I said that, thinking for sure that he had misheard me! However, for the grace of God to come into sharp focus we must first bring the controversy into sharp focus. I don’t want to [tilt at windmills](#) or defeat a [straw man](#); I want to face the issue head-on! I asked everyone to turn their Bibles not to James 2:18, but to James 2:24. That’s where the REAL issue is!

*“You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.”*

This is the actual heart of the problem, I told them. Paul says clearly that we are justified by faith alone in Christ alone (see especially Romans 3:21-30; Romans 4:1-8; Galatians 2:16; 3:24; Ephesians 2:8-9), while James says that we are justified by works! Paul says we are justified by faith alone, whereas James says we are justified by works and NOT by faith alone. So who is right and who is wrong? More importantly, does James disagree with Paul and are there therefore contradictions in the Bible?

Once the problem is established, we were able to use our new-found interpretive skills to navigate this theological edition of “[Scylla and Charybdis](#).” A thorough and biblical understanding of the theology of both James and Paul helped me navigate the tricky issues of the Lordship Salvation controversy and encourage and uplift the 30 or so churches that were there to be trained that day. Rather than muddy the waters for the pastors assembled, grace theology allowed me to bring clarity and focus.<sup>1</sup>

First and foremost I love grace theology because it allows me to address the words of each author head-on. Evangelical theology is clear that our salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone, and that is easy to see from many statements in the New Testament like those quoted above. However, what are we to make of James 2:24 then? Without grace theology we are left to try to understand James while having to basically ignore the plain sense of what he says, and as I was taught in hermeneutics class, “When the plain sense makes good sense, accept no other sense lest you believe nonsense.” The bald statement of 2:24 is where the controversy really comes into its own. Are we saved by faith or must our faith have works to make it valid?

At first blush it might appear that James and Paul are at loggerheads over this issue, so I felt the need to clear that up first and foremost. I took the pastors in the room to Galatians 2:9 to reassure everyone that Paul and James were friends. Galatians is widely viewed as one of Paul’s earlier letters; James is considered to be early as well, and these two letters were written within a couple of years of each other.<sup>2</sup> Paul says in Galatians 2:9 that James was among those who offered him and Barnabas “the right hand of fellowship;” it seems very unlikely that James and Paul could have been close friends if James taught eternal salvation by works, especially in light of Paul’s strong statements about the source of his gospel and how to treat those who taught something else.

In Galatians 1:6-10 Paul told the church in Galatia to throw anyone out who brought a different gospel, and if James taught salvation by works then he and Paul could certainly not have had the fellowship that Paul claims they had in Galatians 2:9. Notice as well that in Acts 15:12 Paul and Barnabas defended their mission to the Gentiles, but it was the words of James in Acts 15:19-20 that settled the matter that salvation does not require obedience to the Law of Moses. So clearly,

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<sup>1</sup> For a thorough treatment of James 2:14-26 I would encourage you to get a copy of the book I co-wrote with Dr. Fred Chay entitled *The Faith That Saves*; this is just a synopsis.

<sup>2</sup> See Guthrie, Donald. *New Testament Introduction*. 4th rev. ed. The master reference collection. Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996, 472-480 for dating issues in Galatians that date the letter likely in 49-50 A.D.; see 749-753 for his discussion in James that dates James in A.D. 50.

if Paul felt so incredibly strongly about his message, and Paul and James were close friends, then James must have agreed with Paul on this foundational issue.

Then we turned to the text of James 2 itself to put the controversy to rest. The pastors I trained could well relate to James 2:14-17 and the message it contains about the need to help people who were destitute. They had plenty of people in their church that saw needs and instead of meeting those needs wished God's blessing on the one who was needy! (it seems that some problems within the church are universal) In James 2:1 we can clearly see that James is addressing people who have faith in Jesus Christ, and in 2:14-17 we see that his concern is much more concerned with the here-and-now than with the hereafter. James asks what good it brings to the church and to people for someone to have a faith that they do not follow. He has needy people in the church, and their brothers and sisters in Christ are not willing to lift a finger to help them. What use is that?

Then the tricky parts of James came into focus. In James 2:21 James says that Abraham was justified by works when he offered up Isaac on the altar. But justified before whom? In Romans 4:5 Paul quotes Genesis 15:6 to remind his readers of when Abraham was justified by God, while James looks to Genesis 22 (decades later in the narrative of Genesis) to speak of Abraham's justification. Abraham had been in a right relationship with God for decades when he offered Isaac to God! It was not before God that Abraham was justified in Genesis 22, but before the people of Canaan. Likewise in James 2:25, James says that Rahab was justified when she hid the spies and sent them out another way in Joshua 2. Clearly there, Rahab was right in the eyes of the people of Israel rather than in the eyes of God. Her faith in Yahweh would not have saved her from death in Jericho when it was destroyed without the works of serving the people of God. She was justified before men, not God, by her works.

The message of James, then, is how to make our faith useful for the here-and-now. It's not about how to go to heaven when we die, but about how to live and love as someone who is going to heaven when they die. James and Paul are not in disagreement; they just use terms differently. Paul the thinker and great theologian uses the word "justification" to speak of our standing before God (particularly in Romans), while James uses it more generally to speak of our vindication before people. These two great men were good friends because they agreed on the central tenets of the gospel of Christ, even while writing with different foci to different groups of people. In James 2:24, James reminds us that there are two kinds of justification; that while God can see our heart and hence our faith, people can only see our works. We are justified before God by faith, but before people by works.

It was grace theology that got me through this tense question in the midst of my pastoral training. Without it, we would have been lost in a sea of different kinds or qualities of faith, about categories that may have been impossible to translate from English to Kinyarwanda. Because of a firm understanding of grace theology, though, we were able in a relatively short time to bring understanding and clarity to the situation and continue our time in training together. The pastors assembled heard the message and accepted it with joy, and great unity was built in the room because of it.

If James and Paul could get along, they said, we can too. Amen! Paul insists that our eternal life comes as a truly free gift by faith *alone* in Christ alone. James reminds us that in order to make our faith useful and vital, to live out the commands of God to love Him and love people, we must obey God by having a life of good works. Their messages complement each other rather than compete with one another.

What does that mean in America? Really, culture changes little in this issue. Grace theology allows the issues to stay sharp and for the message of the cross to retain the scandal it has had for millennia. Salvation is and always has been by faith alone in Christ alone. Maintaining the freeness of eternal life is just as important in America as it is in Rwanda. It is also important to keep our theology sharp to help people have proper motivation for serving Christ with their lives in light of the free gift they have been given at the moment of faith alone in Christ alone.

Sloppy theology leads to sloppy teaching, which leads to sloppy application and therefore sloppy living. My trip to Rwanda reminded me to keep thinking theologically and biblically rather than allowing myself to wander from the core truth of Christ and His crucifixion. We must keep the “word of truth” (see Hebrews 4:12) sharp to do its work in people’s lives rather than being blunted by our inattention or laziness. Theology matters and we must never forget it.