# Does faith really mean faith, or did James redefine it?

## Introduction

Many evangelical Christians tend to think they disagree with each other only on what they consider minor issues such as whether to baptize infants and whether the gift of tongues is for today, but that they agree on how the forgiveness of sins is received: by grace, through faith alone. This illusion is dispelled upon the realization that different evangelical churches mean very different things by the word *faith*. Here are some of the most common examples:

• Faith really means deciding to accept Jesus as Savior by sincerely saying a sinner's prayer.
• Faith really means making the decision to accept Jesus not only as Savior, but also as Lord.
• Faith really is not just belief in God's promise that his Son died for our sins and rose from the dead, but includes a benevolent love for God, a pious hatred of sin, covenant faithfulness, an obedient heart, or some other commendable quality.

With all the differences of opinion, can anyone know with certainty what faith means? Does it matter?

## A simple definition

Theologians have made complex distinctions between what they called *formed faith*, which includes love, and faith in the sense of mere historical knowledge. To those who first unambiguously opposed this kind of confusion by teaching justification through faith alone, faith meant... faith! They believed the word of God was clear enough to simply believe. When pressed, **they defined faith not as mere knowledge of history, but as belief in God's promise of the good news**, including in such trust a desire for the promised forgiveness of sins.[1] Good works were carefully excluded from this definition, as their inclusion would have abandoned the apostolic gospel of justification by faith alone. At the same time, they affirmed that anyone who really has this faith will do good works, living lives of repentance.

To be clear, the gospel to be believed is the good news that Christ, the Son of God, died for our sins and rose from the dead (John 20:31; 1 Corinthians 15:1-4). This gives a more complete definition of faith:

> *Faith is not mere historical knowledge, but trust in the good news that Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead; such belief includes a desire for the forgiveness of sins that God offers and promises in that good news.*

Scripture is full of passages teaching that this faith always *results in* good works (e.g., Matthew 7 and 25). No passage, however, defines faith in such a way as to *include* good works, for such a redefinition would nullify, among other passages, Romans 4: Paul could not have meant to say, "faith, which by definition includes good works, justifies apart from works." What could that possibly mean? It would, however, make sense to say, "faith, which always leads to good works, justifies apart from works."

## Did James redefine faith?

Many readers believe James 2 seems to contradict Paul's clear teaching of justification by faith alone. Since Scripture is its own interpreter, no human interpreter is needed to resolve the apparent conflict by modifying Paul's teaching. In other words, the clear passages of Scripture interpret those that are less clear; in this case, passages that clearly teach justification by faith alone, including

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[1] This desire is not a human decision, but rather is God's gift (John 1:12-13; Ephesians 2:8-9).

Romans 4 and Galatians 3, interpret James 2 and other unclear passages. There are at least two reasons Paul in his epistles would not have mentioned the James passage even though it is unclear to us today:

- Like many Scriptures unclear to us, it was clear to its original audience. It might have corrected a known distortion of Paul's preaching.
- Few, if any, of the churches Paul addressed would have heard the epistle, which was not universally used in the churches until centuries later. In fact, there is little or no evidence that the epistle was widely read in the predominantly Gentile churches even as late as the second century; by contrast, we have writings from that period indicating that the Gospels and many of Paul's epistles were used in the liturgy everywhere. After all, James was one of the last books to become universally included in the canon. Of course, this does not imply that the epistle was not inspired.[2] It does indicate that it did not influence most Gentile Christians' understanding of the gospel, at least not until much later in church history. So again, any use of James that modifies the apostolic gospel must be rejected.

    To elaborate, one's approach to James 2 will in large part be governed by the degree to which each of two conflicting principles of interpretation is followed:

- *Man interprets Scripture* (harmonization). Taking all of Scripture into account, the human interpreter, presumably led by the Spirit, synthesizes the information and constructs what he or she sees as a consistent system, much as a scientist might construct a theory to account for experimental results. This leads to uncertainty about what any particular passage means, arguably even after the whole system is in place. It also leads to doctrinal division and to denominations, as one human interpreter differs from another.
- *Scripture interprets Scripture*. All clear passages of Scripture are to be believed as they are, not reinterpreted. Many of the passages that are unclear in themselves are interpreted by the clear passages. This is the historic doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture as seen, for example, in Luther's *Bondage of the Will*. This leads to doctrinal certainty and unity of faith.

Which was Paul's approach to the good news of justification by faith alone (Galatians 1)?

- If an apostle or angel from heaven teaches a gospel that seems different, then harmonize the two teachings until you have what you or a respected scholar sees as a consistent system of doctrine.
- If an apostle or angel from heaven teaches a different "gospel," let him be anathema.

To make understanding James a prerequisite for understanding Paul is to make one of two errors:

- Paul's statements of the gospel are unclear, and thus require interpretation by the clear statement of the gospel by James. That would be an attempt to apply the principle of Scripture interpreting Scripture, but with rather arbitrary designations of what is clear and what is unclear.
- No book of Scripture is clear in itself, so one must take into account all of Scripture before being sure of what any passage of Scripture teaches. This replaces the clear passages of Scripture as the interpreters of Scripture with fallible systematic theologians as the interpreters of Scripture. As noted above, this method of interpretation can only lead to doctrinal uncertainty and division.

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[2] David Scaer, author of **a Christ-centered book on James**, like many other confessional Lutheran scholars, believes Luther overstated his case when he questioned the relevance of James. Luther, finding that his reading James in light of Paul failed to convince his opponents, reasoned that *if* an epistle whose canonical status had been controversial and whose apostolic authorship was doubtful denied the clear doctrine of epistles of historically unquestionable canonical and apostolic authority, then the former would have to be rejected rather than modifying the teaching of the latter. The Papacy later ruled on which books had to be accepted, on pain of anathema. Although Chemnitz and other confessional Lutherans have refuted that condemnation as historically untenable, all of the deuterocanonical New Testament books (the antilegomena) are read in their congregations.

## Conclusion
Paul so clearly stated the doctrine of justification by faith alone as to make it the standard by which all human interpretations of less clear parts of Scripture are to be judged; cf. Galatians 1. Failure in this has led some to abandon the apostolic gospel by, for example, redefining faith to mean or include a moral decision, covenant faithfulness, an obedient heart, greatest-commandment love, or other good works. Although saving faith is not defined in terms of these virtues, it always produces them.

## More information
**The danger of changing the definition of faith**
**The ubiquity of the problem**