

Heroes Of Faith or Of Works?

After thirteen years of handling tons of the books, I finally saw it right there on the cover! The Liberty Bell, that is.

In preparation for publishing *Free In Christ*, a graphic artist gave me several suggestions for the cover art. The Liberty Bell was my choice. It was only a few months ago, however, that I saw a discrepancy in it other than the inscription being on the bell instead of the rim. Dr. Prasad in India made a sort of letterhead to advertise our publishing ministry there. On it, he had slanted the bell to the left. On the thousands of books, it is slanted to the right. In a huge bell like that, the clapper does not move to ring the bell, but the bell moves on a spindle to contact the clapper. So it would never be in the position shown on all five of my books!

I assume that my erroneous depiction of the bell will affect the eternal destiny of no one, but this illustrates how unquestioning and comfortable we can become with things which may give a wrong slant or outright misrepresentation.

Hebrews 11 has always been a favorite portion of the Scriptures for me. It is thrilling to read of those heroes of faith pictured there. Only a few years ago, however, I was chagrined to realize that through the years I had held up the heroes of faith as heroes of works instead. That is much more serious than the slant of a bell on a book cover!

In teaching about those men presented to us as examples of faith, I always felt the need to quickly emphasize their obedience lest someone might think they were righteous because of faith! I knew those worthies of the past could not be saved by dead faith, and I thought that most everybody else believed they could!

I wonder now, however, just how many people really believe they can be saved by an inactive faith. Most all who tell the sinner to “just believe” go on to advise them to pray “the sinner’s prayer,” to call on the Lord, to invite the Lord into their hearts, to commit their lives to God, or some other such expression of active faith. Even though they may leave baptism out because they think it would be an effort to do works of salvation, they still require some active work of faith.

In the first sentences of Hebrews 11, it is declared, “*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old received divine approval.*” Yes, those men and women were heroes of faith.

Abel was already righteous before he offered his sacrifice by faith. God bore witness of his righteousness by accepting his gift. He was not a sinner made righteous by offering a legally specified sacrifice in a legally specified manner. God accepted him and his sacrifice because he was righteous already. God rejected Cain and his offering, not because it was the wrong thing but because he was already an evil person (1 John 3:11-12). Abel’s faith brought forth the response of worship but the emphasis in the story is his faith rather than his worship.

Although no specific action is accredited to Enoch, he “walked with God” (Gen. 5:22) “. . . before he was taken up he was attested as having pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please him.”

“By faith Noah, . . . took heed and constructed an ark . . . and became an heir of the righteousness which comes by faith (11:7) By faith, or works? He achieved his righteousness by following the exact instructions given for building the ark. Right? That is the “works righteousness” that I always concluded with. How misdirected I was! “But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord” (Gen. 6:8) before the command to build an ark was given. The faith through which he had found favor led him to do what God told him, else we can be assured that he would have become a drowned believer.

“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called...” (Heb. 11:8-12). From that start it was easy to review the tests that Abraham’s faith survived, finally reaching its zenith when he offered Isaac. There and then God declared, “Now I know you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me” (Gen. 22:12). Wasn’t that when he was accounted righteous and became pleasing in God’s sight? Does not James tell us, “Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar?” (James 2:21)?

If we could interview James and ask him, “James, do you mean that Abraham was still an unjustified sinner through all those years since God called him until he set about to offer Isaac?” we could expect him to respond in this manner, “Oh my! No! No! Abraham was continuing to act on his original justifying faith. Faith is not completed in a point in time. It had to be a continuing thing. Faith should be a growing thing. The essence of faith involves more than mental acceptance of some facts. ‘You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by works’ (2:22). Don’t you understand that faith must be active or it is dead?”

There are at least five distinctions of works:

1. Works of law. “For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from **works of law**” (Rom. 3:28). Law has no power to save, neither the Law of Moses nor any other code of law. Even an unbeliever might conform to regulations of law.

2. Works of merit or “earning power.” “For if Abraham was justified by works, he has **something to boast about, but not before God**” (4:2). “.. it is the gift of God – not because of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:9). If we could do works that would merit God’s grace, then we could boast. It would no longer be grace, a gift, but something we earned or had enough goodness to deserve.

3. Evidence of living faith. “For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so **faith apart from works is dead**” (James 2:26). “Obedience of faith” (Rom. 1:5; 16:26) is an evidence of living faith, hence, it becomes a part of the essence – the definition – of faith. If dead faith is effective, the demons are justified. Factual faith falls short of meeting the definition of saving faith.

4. Completing works. James identifies the fourth as the active element of faith: “*You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by works.*”

Faith must be sustained. It is not something like a birth that is experienced once for all time, but it is more like life which must be maintained at all times. Faith bringing continued justification is always conditional, “...*if you hold it fast – unless you believed in vain*” (1 Cor. 15:2). Paul and Barnabas went about “..*strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith..*” (Acts 14:22). Many references call for maintenance of faith. It can be renounced (1 Tim. 5:8). We may all yearn as the apostles did for Jesus to “*Increase our faith*” (Luke 17:5).

The faith that God accounts for righteousness is not itself correctness with God. None can claim correctness (Rom. 3:9-18). Righteousness is not accomplished in us by our own doing or that of God. We can only be sinners accounted or reckoned as justified through his free gift (Rom. 5:15-17; all of Ch. 3). Because we cannot do justifying works ourselves, we are totally dependent on grace. Justification is a gift.

Since dead faith avails nothing, active faith is essential. Breathing is not usually defined as life, but because life is sustained by it, it actually becomes a part of the essence of life. When we speak of a living person, we know that it is a breathing person. In similar manner, works cannot be defined as faith, but because living faith cannot be sustained without works, activity becomes a part of the essence of faith. When the Scriptures speak of a faithful person, we know that believer is active. With that understanding it is appropriate to say a person is justified only by faith for we are speaking of the full essence of faith. Evidently, James was referring to faith in its full definition when he spoke of the necessary activity of faith.

Works do not produce faith, but living conviction initiates activity. My endeavor should have always been to produce faith, like Hebrews 11 illustrates. That is what the evangelists did as recorded in Acts. When conviction was sufficient, appropriate action followed. That is the emphasis of Hebrews 11.

5. Actions of acceptance. Jesus died for all but all will not be saved. His salvation is offered to all but it is not accepted by all. It is forced on no one else evangelism would be a senseless activity. The gospel was proclaimed to produce faith which would bring forth repentance and submission to baptism as is illustrated on Pentecost. Baptism does not save, is not a response to demands of law, nor is it a meritorious deed. It is the submissive act of acceptance instructed by Peter who held the keys of the kingdom entrusted to him and spoke as the Spirit gave him utterance. How sad it is that preachers today refuse to tell sinners what Peter told them to do!

It must be observed that the heroes of faith had neither sufficient faith nor works to produce a flawless character. They were not justified by personal perfection. None could develop the ultimate perfection of character or obedience. If either, or both, of those qualities were necessary for right standing before God, they would have been hopeless. Our prospect is no better. God does not perfect our character but, by his grace, he accounts us as though we were perfect. Our right standing before God is a gift – not an achievement even by grace which we must reach out to receive.

“Therefore,” in view of the inspiring examples of those heroes of faith, the writer urges,
“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:1-2). []

(Cecil Hook: FR 31; August 1998, revised in October 2006)

“I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24).