

Keeping The Faith

The question isn't "do you truly believe" but, "who do you trust"?

The Faith | Works 'Conundrum'

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Acceptance By Grace Through Faith Alone

The simple truth that we find acceptance with God by grace through faith alone is the Bible's most beautiful theme. Grace began long ago when God set in motion the means for humanity to find their way back to Him, to find their way home. He promised Adam and Eve that [a redeemer](#) would come who would save humanity from the [consequences of their sin](#). That redeemer would be His very own Son, born for the specific purpose of reconciling the world back to God (John 3:17). The earth waited, enduring times of difficulty and futility, restless and expectant for the promised Prince of Peace to appear.

With the arrival of Emmanuel, 'God-With-Us', the reality of a whole and healed relationship with God for every person was realised. Brutal tyranny at the hands of sin and death was finally overthrown in the person and ministry of God's Son, whose death on the cross struck the final blow to mortality.

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince

of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.” – Isaiah 9:6-7, NIV

Salvation Isn't Earned

This work of salvation, in its entirety, was set in motion and completed by God. Humanity had no contribution in any of this. The Bible is very clear that salvation is given freely, as a gift, and is never attained by works.

*“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.”
– Romans 5:1-2, NIV*

Paul the Apostle was a champion for the need for a grace-led, faith-full life. He had been converted from a life steeped in religious tradition and law, a life in which a man could become 'more righteous' before God than his fellow man, simply by achieving greater adherence to law. Yet Paul learned that right standing with God was not to be achieved through law-keeping – and in fact was impossible to be achieved this way – but by personal belief in God's promises. Paul learned of the true gospel and He speaks of it often throughout his letters in the New Testament – that of being 'saved by grace through faith alone and not by works, least any man should boast' (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Paul is very adamant that justification – that is, “right standing with God” – is by faith alone. What are we to make then of the words of Paul's contemporary, James, who writes “As you can see, a man is justified by his deeds and **not by faith alone.**” (James 2:24). It seems, at least initially, that these two men are in contradiction with each other.

Justified By Deeds And Not By Faith Alone

In reality, James and Paul are actually in complete harmony and a closer look at James' letter not only gives us a better understanding of what *faith really is*, but also warns us of the sobering reality that *information doesn't always equal transformation*.

Paul wrote his [letter to the Galatians](#) addressing the growing idea at that time that right standing with God depended on what Jesus did **plus** additional 'spiritual acts' that are undertaken, that we are made "right with God by **what we do**". This is performance-based Christianity and Paul reaffirmed to the Galatians that anything which adds to our standing in the eyes of God, apart from the performance of Jesus on the cross, is legalistic teaching and counterfeit Christianity.

James, when writing his letter and speaking of 'what we do' is concerned with counterfeit Christianity of another kind – the unauthenticity of a life that is 'Christian' in name only. He is tackling another dangerous distortion of the gospel of grace, the idea that believers can 'continue in sin that grace may abound'. That the new life is the same as the old life, the only difference being that a person has become 'saved'. That is to say, that nothing about the way the believer behaves or lives after being [saved](#) is necessary to change, that verbally expressing our faith in Jesus is enough and that we don't need to 'do better' because God's grace covers all our shortcomings anyway.

The truth, James says, is that *yes, we are made right with God by believing and professing our faith in His promises. Yet, it cannot be real faith, the faith that counts with God, unless its demonstrated by an active, loving response to God's grace.* This is, as Paul agrees, "faith working through love." (Galatians 5:6), demonstrated in a Christian's life by 'what they do'.

James starts his letter by asking an important question:

“Do you think you’ll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say, “Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!” and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup – where does that get you? Isn’t it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense.” – James 2:17-24 MSG

He goes on to reiterate his meaning in the plainest of language, saying “Just as the body is dead without breath, so also faith is dead without good works.” (James 2:26, CSB).

Works Are Essential Evidence Our Faith Is Real

The kind of faith that is real, saving faith is shown to be vital, living and demonstrable in action.

To illustrate his full meaning, James gives two examples from the life of [Abraham](#), whom he describes as ‘the friend of God’ (James 2:2). The first was when God promised Abraham a great line of descendants, even though at the time Abraham and his wife were both old and childless. Abraham didn’t doubt God for a second and James cites this faith (Genesis 15:6) as “reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.” Abraham believed God was ‘good for His word’ and this is why, James says, he was justified.

Paul, when also commenting at length on the life of Abraham (Romans 4), does not say “Abraham *worked* for God and therefore was justified.” Neither does he say “Abraham *undertook acts of love* and, because of this, was justified.” or that “Abraham *made progress in character reformation* and therefore

was justified. He says, "Abraham **believed** God and that faith was credited to him as righteousness." He and James are both referring to the same event in Abraham's life and are both drawing the same conclusion – that Abraham was 'made right with God by his faith.

However, James goes on to reference a second event in Abraham's life, found in Genesis 22. Here, God is testing Abraham, looking for the kind of works that show Abraham's faith to be not just words but real and living – demonstrable in action. This is not the same kind of justification which gave Abraham right standing with God, but rather a test of Abraham's original profession of belief. Was it the living kind of faith which produces a genuine response or a dead faith that has no effect on life at all?

James therefore has a different meaning in mind than Paul when Paul concludes that people aren't justified by works. James is answering another question entirely: **Does the ongoing and final reckoning of our righteousness depend on works as the necessary evidence of a true and living faith?** The answer to that question is an unequivocal yes!

If you were to ask James and Paul, "How does a person obtain right standing with God and receive '[the righteousness of God](#)'?", both men would answer "As a gift of grace. Trust God, believe His promise and that faith alone will be counted as righteousness."

However, if you asked them, "Does our final right standing with God depend on works of love?", Paul will answer "No, not if by 'works', you mean deeds done to show that we somehow deserve God's blessings" (his point in Romans 4) but James will answer "Yes, if by 'works', you mean evidence of a faith that is alive and active in a believer's life". Both are in agreement with each other, based on those definitions.

Works, in the way that James defines them, prove that our

faith is real. When James says that we are not justified by faith alone, he means that the faith which justifies or makes us 'right with God' does not remain alone but bears the fruit of the new, spirit-led life. Any other kind of faith is counterfeit, in reality, dead, and completely useless.

What Does Living Faith Look Like?

"Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." – 1 John 4:11

Living faith is really another name for [discipleship](#); learning to replicate the pattern and example left by Jesus in both word and action. Paul concludes his letter to the Galatians by discussing this very thing, making it clear that being called to 'freedom in Jesus' is not an excuse to do whatever we want, but rather 'freedom to serve one another in love' (Galatians 5:14). It's in the **believing** and **doing** that faith is made alive, vibrant and visible.

James agrees with Paul in this, again referencing the life of Abraham:

"Wasn't our ancestor Abraham "made right with God by works" when he placed his son Isaac on the sacrificial altar? Isn't it obvious that faith and works are yoked partners, that faith expresses itself in works? That the works are "works of faith"? The full meaning of "believe" in the Scripture sentence, "Abraham believed God and was set right with God," includes his action. It's that mesh of believing and acting that got Abraham named "God's friend." Is it not evident that a person is made right with God not by a barren faith but by faith fruitful in works?" – James 2: 21-24, MSG

Depending on God and accepting His gift of grace – truly accepting it – will radically transform our lives. It will challenge everything we do, our belief systems and possibly

even misplaced prejudices about others. It will compel us to behave justly to others, with impartiality, even though the world around us might not be just or impartial. It will compel us to do better and be better, not so that we 'earn God's favour' but so that our faith can be seen as a reality, not just a matter of empty words.

"But what happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.

Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives." – Galatians 5:22-25, MSG

Awareness of, and responding to the love of God is at the heart of our Christian lives. We are who we are, first and foremost, because of God revealed in Christ. Yet if our 'loving union with God' doesn't result in a living faith, shown by our good works to others, then, as 1 John 4:7-21 says so eloquently, our love for God **simply isn't real**. This kind of faith is a counterfeit Christianity and nothing more than a corpse.

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Leaving

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

Leaving is never because of just one thing. Not really.

It's the result of a thousand, inconsequential *one things* that all converge in a single moment of sudden, irreconcilable difference.

For me, the eventual leaving of the religious community I grew up in began as a tiny question fluttering at the back of my mind.

Back then, I'd never met a question I didn't want to take apart, examine, rearrange and then carefully reassemble, perfectly ordered, and satisfactorily answered.

I'm, by nature, a lover of straight lines and exact dimensions. I find predictable angles strangely comforting, the even length and width of squares reassuring. Curved, irregular edges and uneven portions, I had decided, are one of life's great menaces. Questions without answers were anathema.

Questions + Answers

However, this question-with-no-answer was an uncomfortable and irregular shape, one that I could not find a corresponding answer to in my existing theology. It was like a jigsaw piece that had been accidentally caught up from another puzzle, and no matter how I turned it around in my mind, I could not make it fit into my existing framework.

I was possessed with an uncomfortable sensation that something didn't add up, that what I had been told no longer carried

sufficient weight or authority. It was an inconsistency I could not overlook nor satisfactorily explain, an unexpected bump in an otherwise smooth spiritual life.

But back then, it was just *one thing*. It stood alone in its irregularity and I let it sit, like a bothersome pebble in my shoe, not fitting, never resolved. This question wasn't the explosion, merely the spark; but when I cast my mind back to all the *one things* that finally resulted in my departure, I get no further back than this question.

This is a difficult article to write in many respects. I have many friends and family still within the community that I have left. The thoughts I share are entirely my own and are not intended to imply any lack of conviction or sincerity in any one of them, or indeed anyone else from within that community. I hope I am able to write about my experiences with respectful thoughtfulness for the many loving and good people who remain there still.

Yet I am also aware that I cannot be alone in my uncomfortable questioning. There must be others who have asked, if not the same questions, ones that are very similar and who have then sat with the same unsatisfactory answers, ones that simply won't fit.

What are we to make of such inconsistencies? Does faith ask us to suspend our questions or does faith ask us to push deeper into them, despite the challenges, despite the possibility we may need to admit another answer is not only possible but probable and necessary?

You may be wondering what the question was. Well, it was hardly earth-shattering. It was a question of *when and where a woman ought to wear a head covering*. Yes. I grew up in a head-covering church.

Principles + Applications

(I would like to make a brief comment at this point; if you are a woman – particularly one who I know personally – who believes head coverings for women are a biblical principle that should be applied in perpetuity and therefore choose to cover your head, I deeply respect your conviction. I am not seeking to change your conscience on this issue. But I can bet you have questions, particularly if the application of this principle in your church looks anything like it did for me...)

The religious community I grew up in wore head coverings for church services, Bible classes, and Sunday school, but not fellowship meals or family Bible readings. We wore them at church preaching meetings, but not during community hall cleaning or evangelistic neighborhood visits. We would wear them for youth activities, more specifically, the formal part of the event but we wouldn't wear them for the supper and games that followed, nor at church picnics or community outings.

We would wear them during formal preaching and Bible exposition but not during informal discussion group activities. We would wear them for church worship (although a woman wasn't able to 'pray or prophesy', despite the scriptural prerequisite of 'a covered head' being satisfied), and remove them immediately afterward.

Head coverings denoted submission we were told, yet submission, strangely, didn't seem to be required in the home, on trips to the beach, or when we were doing the grocery shopping. Little discussion was given to the biblical principle of submitting *one to another* and what that might possibly mean.

Finally, head coverings were required for a church meeting of business, which was neither an act of worship nor a church service of any kind. The question took shape in my mind and

refused to be dismissed – why?

Why did we wear head coverings anyway? What was their purpose then or now? Are they even required now? What is submission really? Women had clearly prayed and prophesied in public worship then, why no longer? Or why, even with the required head covering in place did women ‘remain silent’? Why on earth did we wear head coverings to a business meeting?

Did we have it all completely wrong?

I’m not proposing to suggest an answer in this article to the questions this particular subject raises (if such an answer exists) or that the questions I’ve noted form a comprehensive list of all the relevant points of discussion. I’m simply highlighting the moment, for me, that scriptural principle and practical application suddenly appeared to be inconsistently applied and self-contradictory.

Just one question. One little spark.

Piles Upon Piles

Time passed. Over the years, the questions gathered in untidy piles in my mind.

Why did we bemoan the state of the world yet we seemed to do very little by way of community engagement or civic involvement to fix it?

Why did we seem to know a great deal about the end times and prophecy yet precious little about the here and now; the practicalities of Christian witness; paying our taxes, saving our marriages, stewarding our lives and finances well?

Why didn’t more of us recycle?

Why could we eat lunch with our non-believing co-workers but not socialise with them over dinner?

Why was taking communion at church – *common union* – such a solitary and miserable affair, hemmed in on either side by silence and woeful introspection?

Why, if we were a people saved and redeemed and made new, did we sing such mournful hymns of lament?

Why, if woman was created to stand alongside man, equal partners in the great mission of God to fill the earth with His glory, were the women I saw all around me prohibited from contributing in meaningful ways within the church; in teaching; evangelising, praying, and leading the congregation with wisdom and grace?

Why did I see power posturing and spiritual manipulation manifesting themselves in a community born out of the sacrificial heart of Jesus, *who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many*? Why did *nobody* do anything about it?

Why, when we were meant to celebrate *grace*, did we seem to reward *intelligence*, beginning at a young age?

Yearly examinations to determine biblical knowledge were undertaken each year by Sunday School students. The questions were often difficult and, it seemed, purposely disorientating. The premise seemed clear: the more you knew, the more spiritual you were and the closer to God you got. We all received prizes at an end-of-year award ceremony, for what exactly I'm still not really sure, but 'first in exam' and 'first in class' always got a mention and an additional prize.

I don't recall any mentions for *character development*, *personal growth*, *kindness*, or *showing Jesus to others*.

The motivation may have been sincere but the subliminal messaging was flawed. We were taught to compete against each other, not run alongside each other. We were taught that what we knew was more important than who we were being.

It often seemed to me that the word of God was something to be sermonised from, bored by, afraid of, or wielded, weapon-like at others, but never the spirit-breathed and living words of Heaven's Creator, active and able to deeply transform our hearts and lives, shaping us for His purpose.

Compliance seemed more relevant than character, uniformity more desirable than unity and, in the end, what I could *explain about Jesus* significantly more important than whether I actually loved Jesus and was following him (or at least trying to).

The Spark Ignites

All the things I've mentioned, the questions I've shared (and the many I've left out) can most likely be found in many other churches or religious communities, to a greater or lesser degree. And no church is perfect or has it all sorted, this I am willing to admit.

None of these things, alone, were enough to cause a leaving.

But I did resolve to do something about my questions, to seek opportunity and space to ask them, to give voice to my doubts, to challenge my perception of Christian life, and, if necessary, to adjust and reorient my direction.

To let scripture speak to me, unfiltered, and be confident that the Spirit would lead me in all truth. To allow my questions and convictions to sit in tension with one another while my Christian life continued to grow and deepen, built on the solid rock of faith in Christ.

To believe that the important things God wished me to know, He would make known.

I can't say for sure whether, in the end, it was I who left or whether I was the one who was left; perhaps it's more accurate to say that I was simply a strange shape that no longer fitted

into a space that could not change.

Like the question that started this journey of deconstruction, I was now an uncomfortable and irregular part, a puzzle piece that no longer worked with the whole. The posture I had adopted and the resulting reorientation were now incompatible with my existing religious community.

Officially, I was ex-communicated, an ecclesiastical term weighted with censure and disapproval. *We can no longer affirm you as a Christian.*

It implied I had not measured up to the expectation of Christian living, and this judgment sits uncomfortably with me. I have no glaring moral issue or unrepented sin that would give cause for such action. The seeming dismissal of the authenticity of my faith was painful and difficult to understand.

This only resulted in further questions. What happened to *come and let us reason together*? Who decides whether another Christian's life of faith is lacking?

What really is the purpose of ex-communication in scripture? How much power, if any, should Christians wield over each other in spiritual matters?

What makes a Christian *Christian* anyway? Is it what I know or Who I trust?

Why does the church gather? How is unity in Christ really achieved?

Where did I belong?

I did not deserve ex-communication. And yet here I am, on the other side of something that, at one time, seemed the most scandalous thing that could happen to any Christian.

I find that I belong nowhere and everywhere. That a leaving is

also a beginning. And that, when Jesus said *you will know the truth and the truth will set you free*, he really meant it.

I have not been ex-communicated by God.

Still Asking Why

Why did I feel the need to write about this?

Well, firstly, I don't think I am alone, in my questions or my sense of something not quite fitting right. I am certain that there are others out there, people I know well and people who may be strangers, who are *asking questions*.

And I want to tell you, it is okay to ask those questions; don't be deterred in your asking. *It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings.*

The true function of Christian theology is faith that seeks understanding; to not just know more about God, but to *know God*. We start with what we do know – and Abraham, the great father of faith is given as the classic example – *that God exists and He is a faithful rewarder of those who seek Him*. And then we keep searching, and asking, and growing, and learning, and building our life on this certainty, all with the intent to *know God more*.

Our questions aren't just interesting, they're vital to an informed, robust faith that will last us a lifetime of Christian journeying.

Secondly, you may be afraid to ask your questions. I want you to know that I understand your fear and your hesitancy; your desire to avoid similar censure. And yet I would say to you, *in everything we have won more than a victory because of Christ who loves us. I am sure that nothing can separate us from God's love—not life or death, not angels or spirits, not the present or the future, and not powers above or powers*

below. Nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord.

You are God's beloved child and He is not afraid of your questions. If you commit your heart in faith to Him, He will lead you in all truth. *Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.*

And finally, to those who would feel the need to censure such questioning, I would urge you to pause and reconsider. The Christian faith is not defined by all the things we could possibly know or articulate. None of us would dare to claim we have all knowledge or fully understand all there is to know about God.

The Christian life is not an academic exercise.

The Christian life is built upon the simple premise: *This Jesus, who was crucified, God has raised again to life and he is both Lord and Christ.* Those who confess this truth are God's children, adopted into the household of faith by God's grace.

The question then becomes not *what do I know but who am I being?* Are our lives demonstrating the fruit of a walk guided by the Spirit; *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control?* Jesus told us *by their fruit you will recognise them;* that these are the markers that will distinguish a true follower from one who is a follower in name only.

The local church does have a corporate responsibility in the moral matters of each Christian's life (another day, another blog), but *the people are the church, we are all responsible to each other* to encourage, disciple, equip, and, if necessary, admonish in our Christian walk.

And how can we grow, make mistakes, experience grace, or

mature in our discipleship if we cannot ask questions and, if needed readjust, no matter how uncomfortable?

This is the messy but vital reality of the local church; filled with sinning and flawed humans who are being renewed daily by the grace of God, asking their questions and voicing their doubts along the way.

Leaving is never because of just one thing. It's the result of a thousand, inconsequential *one things* that all converge in a single moment of sudden, irreconcilable difference. Every question I had ever had, every answer I had been given, and every answer I hadn't found brought me to the painful realisation that this was a religious community in which I no longer fitted.

In the end, leaving was inevitable.

As I have written this article, I have endeavoured to share my thoughts and experiences in an accurate and factual way, as they relate to me personally, summarising many aspects for brevity. For some of you reading this, my words may have deeply resonated with you and your experience closely mirrors my own.

Others reading this may be confused, disappointed, angry, or offended by what I've shared and may have received this article as critical or directed personally at them or someone they know. It is true that I have written in such a way that gives a critique of sorts. However, I would respectfully remind my readers that criticism is simply an evaluative or corrective exercise that can be applied to any area of human life, and is perhaps at its most relevant in the evaluation of our spiritual lives. Critique, while uncomfortable, can be the catalyst for much-needed reinvigoration, renewal, and revival.

No part of this article is intended to be received as

criticism of any one individual, or offensive or divisive in nature.