

# John Fletcher's View of the Relationship of Faith and Works

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A major concern of theology since the days of Paul the Apostle has been the relationship between faith and works.<sup>1</sup> As various parties within the Protestant tradition have dealt with this matter, two opposite interpretations have been possible. On the one hand, there is the possibility of positing a doctrine of salvation by works. This is called "legalism" by its opponents, by which is meant a self-righteous confidence in one's own good deeds.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, there may be posited a doctrine of salvation by faith alone, accused often of the disparagement of works, the tendency towards license and antinomian error.<sup>3</sup>

John Fletcher of Madeley dealt with the problem of the relationship of faith and works in a masterful manner. Before coming to Fletcher, however, it is helpful to delineate more fully these two opposite interpretations found in Protestant thought. Most Protestant theologians may be understood as somewhere between the two extremes just indicated, but the "polar opposite" positions which follow are given to clarify the issue.

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1. Cf. Romans 5:1-2 and 6:1-2; Galatians 5:1-6 and 5:22-25; James 2:17-18. The "Athanasian Creed" seems to have this issue in mind. It requires for "eternal salvation" that one believe rightly faithfully (*fideliter credat*). It also speaks of Christ's coming "to judge the quick and the dead" and of the requirement of all men to "give account for their own works." (*Et reddituri sunt de factis propriis rationem*). Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom* (New York, 1887), II, 68-69. Reinhold Seeberg (*Textbook of the History of Doctrines*, trans. Charles E. Hay, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1964, I, 68, 76, 78, 79), discusses the problem in Hermas, 2 Clement, and Ignatius. Arthur Cushman McGiffert (*A History of Christian Thought*, New York, 1932, I, 325-26), discusses the problem in John of Damascus, as a representative of Eastern thought.
  2. An example of legalism may be seen in the tendency of some Pietists and Anabaptists to see the Bible as the revelation of a new law.
  3. This extreme may be seen, for example, in John Agricola (1492-1566).

## THE PLACE OF FAITH IN PROTESTANT THEOLOGY

A tenet basic to classical Protestant theology is that, quite apart from human merits, man is justified before God by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Man cannot earn justification before God; its sole source is grace, and because it is a free gift, it is received only by faith.<sup>4</sup>

The New Testament is used by such Protestants to support the proposition that grace and not human merit is the foundation of the Christian life. Paul writes that "A man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ."<sup>5</sup> John is used to support this position,<sup>6</sup> as well as other New Testament writers.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, for the classical Reformation tradition, as for Wesley, justification by grace through faith is at the heart of the gospel.<sup>8</sup>

A concomitant of the doctrine of salvation by faith is the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's merits to the believer. Imputation has a forensic or judicial meaning. Imputation usually is understood to mean that the believer is not personally made inwardly righteous, but Christ's righteousness is by imputation put to the account of the believer so that he is entitled to all the rewards of the imputed righteousness. Important to the doctrine of imputation is that man is not *made* righteous but only *accounted* righteous (*iustitia externa et aliena*). Imputation may be carried so far as to represent Christ as

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4. See Karl Barth, *Die Kirchlich Dogmatik*, Vierte Band, Erster Teil, "Die Lehre von Der Versohnung" (Zurich, Evangelischer Verlag Ag. Zollikon), p. 685.
  5. Galatians 2:16, R.S.V. See also Romans 1:16, 17, 3:21-31; 5:1, 2, 9:30-32; 10:3-11; 11:20, 23; Galatians 2:20; 5:4-6; 1 Corinthians 1:21; Ephesians 2:8; 3:12, 17; Philippians 3:9.
  6. John 1:12; 3:15, 18; 6:29, 47; 7:39; 20:29.
  7. Matthew 18:3-6; 21:22; Mark 1:15; 11:24; Luke 8:11, 12; Acts 13:39; 15:9; 16:31; Hebrews 4:2, 3; 10:39; 11:6; 1 Peter 1:8, 9.
  8. E.g., Martin Luther, *Martin Luther Werke* (Munich, C. Kaiser, 1954, Weimar Bohlau, 1883), 10.1, 11.299, 40/I.33, 72, 335, 613, 679. Hereafter, this will be referred to as W. A. (Weimerer Ausgabe). Paul Althaus, *Die Theologie Martin Luthers* (Germany: Gutersloher Verlagshaus, 1962), p. 200. John Calvin, *Institutes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), III, xi, 1. Francois Wendel, *Calvin: Sources et Evolution de sa Pensee Religieuse* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), p. 193. John Wesley, *Standard Sermons*, ed. Edward H. Sugdon (London: Epworth Press, 1961), I, 37-38. Wesley's *Works* (Grand Rapids: n.d.), V, 12; VII, 204; VIII, 50-58, 275, 281, 361-63, 428-30; IX, 110-17; X, 179, 349; XIII, 499-500. Colin Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (New York: Abingdon, 1960), p. 69.

dying for man also as keeping all the law for him. Some have even stated that Christ has kept the law to save man from the necessity of keeping it. A mild form of antinomianism is sometimes a characteristic of the forms of Protestantism which over-emphasize imputation. Antinomianism may be seen as an extreme interpretation of the antitheses between law and gospel. While, by no means does antinomianism inevitably spring from the doctrine of imputation, it may do so.

That an antinomian interpretation of "faith" took its rise even as early as apostolic times may be seen from such passages as Ephesians 5:6, Romans 3:8, 31, and James 2:17-26. Throughout the history of the church, when there has been a revival of the doctrine of justification by faith, some form of antinomianism has usually been present. In the fourth century, for example, Augustine apparently encountered it. He disapproved and wrote against it in his tract *Contra adversarium legis et prophetarum*. At the time of the Reformation, there were antinomian elements in the "left wing," some of whom went about in mobs seeking to deliver people from "legal bondage" and proposing to introduce them to "Gospel liberty." Agricola is an example of one who resisted all attempts to make any law binding upon the Christian.<sup>9</sup>

In England, Tobias Crisp (1600-1642), an Anglican clergyman, developed, out of high Calvinism, the doctrine of antinomianism. Basing his doctrine on election and imputed righteousness, he maintained that an elect person is not condemned even when found in unbelief or sin, and that repentance and faith are not necessary for salvation.<sup>10</sup> Later in the eighteenth century there was another revival of antinomianism in the Church of England and among the Dissenters. The Wesleys, John Fletcher, and other leaders of the evangelical revival both encountered and opposed this trend.

These examples indicate that the Protestant doctrine of salvation by faith (*sola fide*) may be so interpreted as to lead to a position which abrogates any obligation on the part of the Christian to do good works. That such an extreme interpretation is not generally considered representative of Protestantism may be seen by the place that a concern for good works has in the thinking of most Protestant theologians. It is to this concern (along with its dangers) that we now turn.

9. Joachim Rogge, *Johann Agricolas Lutherverstandnis* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, n.d.), p. 237.
10. See Henry C. Sheldon, *History of Christian Doctrine* (New York, 1886), II, 141.

## THE PLACE OF WORKS IN PROTESTANT THEOLOGY

If Protestantism has emphasized the place of faith, it has also shown a concern for good works. This latter concern is characteristic of most Protestant theologians. Luther, well known for his doctrine of *sola fide*, writes of their importance.<sup>11</sup> "Believe me," he writes, "Christ did not come that you might remain in your sins and damnation; for you will not be saved if you do not stop sinning" (*Dan du wirst nicht selig du horest den auff zu sundigen*).<sup>12</sup> He has been followed in this concern by Melancthon,<sup>13</sup> Calvin,<sup>14</sup> Wesley,<sup>15</sup> as well as the Augsburg Confession,<sup>16</sup> and the XXXIX Articles.<sup>17</sup>

The tendency to over-emphasize the importance of works has been criticized by many as betraying a lack of confidence in Christ's work for the sinner. The major objection made to legalism, by many Protestants, is that faith may be reduced to a purely ethical concept, and God's grace is not given due regard.<sup>18</sup> Thus, while most Protestants have seen a legitimate place for works in the religious life, they have insisted that legalism falsely interprets the place of works, with the result that insufficient glory is given to God for man's salvation.

Contrary to either of the rigid opposites described above, most theologians within Protestantism have recognized a legitimate place for both faith and works in their theology. At the same time, it has been seen that either the doctrine of faith or the doctrine of works may be so emphasized as to lead to totally opposite positions—antinomianism or legalism. If both faith and works have a place in

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11. W. A. 30/I. 191 (*Der Grosse Katechismus*, 1529), 47.110; 50.599. See also Ewald Plass, *This Is Luther* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1948) p. 167. Gordon Rupp, *Luther's Progress to the Diet of Worms* (Chicago: Wilcox and Follett, 1951), pp. 73, 177. Walther Lowenich, *Von Augustin Zu Luther* (Mainz: Heinz Prustel, 1959), pp. 262, 265.
  12. W. A. 47.110.
  13. Seeberg, *Textbook of the History of Doctrines*, II, 361, 364.
  14. *Institutes*, III, vi, 3; III, xi, 1; III, xvi, 1-4. See also Seeberg, *Textbook of the History of Doctrines*, II, 404.
  15. Wesley's *Works*, III, 25, 30; VII, 277, 389. See also his *Standard Sermons*, XVI through XXVIII, for his series of sermons on the Sermon on the Mount.
  16. Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, III, 20.
  17. *Ibid.*, III, 494.
  18. Many see both Luther and Wesley as being in a "legal" state before their assurance of salvation.

Protestant theology, and if both have been subject to extreme interpretations, some more adequate relationship is needed.

The problem of a proper balance between these two doctrines is as old as Christianity itself. It has engaged some of the best and most sensitive minds of the church. This basic issue was one which may be seen on the religious scene in eighteenth century England. It was a concern of the leaders of the evangelical revival, because of its practical implications. John Fletcher, Wesley's "vindicator" and "designated successor"<sup>19</sup> was intricately involved in this issue. It is to his theology that we now turn.

### FLETCHER'S TWO GOSPEL AXIOMS

Fletcher asserts, "Our doctrine entirely depends upon the two Gospel axioms..."<sup>20</sup> As to the relation of these two axioms to faith and works he writes, "The two Gospel axioms stand unshaken upon the two fundamental, inseparable doctrines of faith and works—of proper merit in Christ, and derived worthiness in his members."<sup>21</sup> Fletcher confesses that the connection of the two gospel axioms, like that of matter and spirit, is a "deep mystery,"<sup>22</sup> but that it is basic to any proper understanding of God's salvation economy.<sup>23</sup>

At this point these two axioms must be spelled out. The following arrangement represents Fletcher's views.<sup>24</sup>

#### I

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| 1. Every obedient believer's salvation is originally of God's free grace. | 2. Every unbeliever's damnation is originally of his own personal free will. |
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#### II

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| 1. God's free grace is always the first cause of what is good. | 2. Man's free will is always the first cause of what is evil. |
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19. Although Wesley officially requested Fletcher to succeed him, Fletcher's death preceded that of Wesley by some six years.  
 20. John Fletcher, *Works*, ed. Joseph Benson (London, 1806-16) 9 Vols., V, vii. (Hereafter this will be referred to as *Works*.)  
 21. *Works*, IV, 93.  
 22. *Works*, V, 181.  
 23. *Works*, II, 213, 235; IV, 310; V, 228.  
 24. *Works*, IV, 310.

## III

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| <p>1. When God's free grace has begun to work moral good, man may faithfully follow Him by believing, ceasing to do evil, and working righteousness, according to his light and talent.</p> | <p>2. When man's free will has begun to work moral evil, God may justly follow him, by withdrawing His slighted grace, revealing His deserved wrath, and working natural evil.</p> |
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Thus God is the wise Rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.

Thus God is the righteous Punisher of them that obstinately neglect Him.

Stated simply, Fletcher's two gospel axioms are as follows: (1) God's grace is the sole source of man's salvation; (2) man's sin is the sole source of his damnation. The first axiom extols God's mercy and the second clears His justice.

Fletcher laments that there are some who, carried away by an injudicious zeal for the first gospel axiom, and misled by a faulty understanding of the Scriptures, decry all works in general.<sup>25</sup> There are also those who overemphasize the second axiom and are led into Pharisaism.<sup>26</sup> The former "pour upon him Christ our shame" and the latter "rob God of his glory."<sup>27</sup>

It would seem that such a theology, which embraces these two gospel axioms of Fletcher, advances God's glory in every way—entirely ascribing salvation to His grace, and at the same time completely freeing Him from the supposition that He arbitrarily damns sinners by His unaccountable sovereign acts. Moreover, these two axioms call for a response, on the part of man, that does justice to the large number of Scriptures—often decried as "moralistic"—which deal with good works. Fletcher points to a doctrine which may well be heeded by the church today, for it is a doctrine that posits a total reliance upon grace and, at the same time, responsibility on the part of man.

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25. *Works*, IV, 53 n.

26. *Works*, II, 215.

27. *Ibid.*

## FLETCHER'S DIALECTIC OF FAITH AND WORKS

It remains to be seen precisely how Fletcher holds the doctrine of faith and the doctrine of works together. This is done by keeping each doctrine in a dialectical tension.<sup>28</sup> In dealing with the relationship of the two doctrines, Fletcher was confronted with three choices. In the first place, he could have come out clearly on one side and denied any validity to the other. This would have been to erase any dialectical tension between the two truths. In the second place, he could have resolved the dialectical tension of the two truths by explaining one in the light of the other. This would also invalidate the dialectic by destroying the tension. A third option open to Fletcher was to refuse to dissolve the dialectical tension between the two and to insist upon the validity of both truths. This would be to recognize the truth of both divine grace and human responsibility. This latter method was his choice. The following passage is illustrative of his method.

Christ is always the primary, original, properly meritorious cause of our justification and salvation. To dispute it is to renounce the faith and to plead for Anti-Christ. And yet, to deny, that, under this primary cause, there are secondary, subordinate, instrumental causes of our justification, and consequently of our salvation, is to set the bible aside...<sup>29</sup>

His doctrine of faith and works turns upon this dialectic. In the day of conversion, we shall be saved freely as saints through the merits of Christ and by the evidence of works.<sup>30</sup> "Should you ask, which is most necessary to salvation, faith or works; I beg leave to propose a similar question: which is most essential to breathing, inspiration or expiration?"<sup>31</sup> It is equally clear from Scripture and reason, asserts Fletcher, that we must believe in order to be saved consistently with His holiness.<sup>32</sup> For him, the gospel is understood correctly only when the two gospel precepts—believe

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28. Indeed, this method is seen in all of his doctrinal developments, be it faith-works, mercy-justice, Christ as Saviour-Chris as Judge, free grace-free will, divine goodness-human obedience, God's promises-God's threatenings, the merits of Christ-the derived worthiness of man, or God's foreknowledge-man's free agency. See *Works*, IV, 279.

29. *Works*, IV, 11.

30. *Works*, IV, 7.

31. *Works*, IV, 10-11.

32. *Works*, IV, 21-22.

and obey—are balanced, and faith and works kept in tension with each other.<sup>33</sup>

### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FLETCHER'S DOCTRINE OF FAITH AND WORKS

For his own century, as well as for subsequent generations, Fletcher's position on faith and works has become largely the view of the Methodist movement. Traditionally Methodism, as well as other branches of the church, has followed him at this point perhaps because his view seeks for a balance and the avoidance of any extreme position. One may ask the question as to what is the significance of Fletcher's understanding of faith and works in the present theological scene.

Much of the current theological vigor within Protestantism has been strongly influenced by a rediscovery of Reformation thought—particularly that of Luther. In his crusade against what he considered a completely perverted view of the gospel, Luther so emphasized faith that works were greatly minimized. He tended completely to separate faith and works, gospel and law. Much current theological opinion follows the Reformer and so stresses the doctrine of man's bondage to sin and that of *sola fide* that there may be a failure to give sufficient emphasis to human responsibility, ethical growth, and the works of faith.

The church ever stands in debt to the tradition of Luther and his contemporary descendents, the Crisis Theologians, for the emphasis upon *sola gratia* and the bankruptcy of human merit. Nevertheless, this should not obscure the important New Testament emphases upon human responsibility, the new life in Christ, and a faith which works by love. The scriptural witness to the factors of human responsibility and good works is too strong to dismiss them as "moralism" or "legalism."

Fletcher's emphasis upon regeneration of the human spirit, which is productive of a real change and ethical growth, is significant. The renewed Christian, in Fletcher's thought, is enabled to do good deeds that are commanded. Ethical results are to be seen in the Christian life, and man stands as obedient or disobedient at the judgment. To yield to an overly pessimistic view of man's redeemed nature is to fail to have an appreciation for the miracle of the new birth and the power of the Holy Spirit in man's regenerated

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33. See *Works*, II, 27, 340.

nature. To be sure, there may be an overly optimistic attitude towards sanctification with an unrealistic view of the nature of the new life in Christ. Such a view could result in pride and a reliance upon one's self, on the one hand, or discouragement and despair in the face of an utterly unrealistic standard, on the other. But a balanced view, such as that of Fletcher, seems needed. To fail either to appreciate the nature of the new birth or to claim too much for the redeemed Christian is to emphasize one truth at the expense of minimizing the other. Fletcher's significance may be seen in that he seeks a balanced view.

For Fletcher it is necessary to emphasize both divine grace and human responsibility; and a failure to do so results in a vitiation of the basic theological principles and doctrinal structures of classical Christian theology. The true gospel, for Fletcher, is a scriptural gospel, in which evangelical promises are properly guarded by evangelical rules of judgment; and the doctrine of grace wisely connected with the doctrine of justice.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, the witness of John Fletcher comes to the church today, and in the words of the final line on his tombstone, "He being dead, yet speaketh." One of his major concerns was an issue which is very much alive at the present—the issue of faith and works. This issue will ever remain vital in theological dialogue. It perhaps will never find theologians in full agreement precisely because of its dialectical nature. But that the Vicar of Madeley speaks eloquently and profoundly to this subject there is no doubt.

34. See *Works*, VI, 303.