

## JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

Mormons need to hear the glad tidings of justification by faith. It provides **(1) pardon from all sin**, and **(2) a perfect righteousness in Jesus Christ**. Mormons fail to realize that keeping laws (even if called “the laws of the gospel”) never has been the basis of anyone’s righteousness in the sight of God. The Bible declares, “By the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin” (*Rom 3:20*). The righteousness that God demands of sinners, and which he provides for them in the gospel, is “without” or “apart from” the law. “But now the righteousness of God *without the law* is manifest” (*Rom 3:21*). Believers are justified “*freely* by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood” (*Rom 3:24-25*). The Scriptures teach that men are pardoned, God’s law is satisfied, and God’s wrath is propitiated, by faith in the completed work of Christ.

Mormon priests, like the priests of old, perform their works in vain. “And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, *which can never take away sins*” (*Heb 10:11*). How pitiful that Mormons still think salvation depends upon subservience to such priests, and that there can be no salvation outside their fold! They dare say,

Except men come to these legal administrators and learn of Christ and his laws as newly revealed on earth, they cannot be saved in his everlasting kingdom hereafter.<sup>4</sup>

The works of Mormon priests are no more able to save than those of Israel’s priests. What a contrast to the full assurance enjoyed by trusting in Christ who by one sacrifice for sin “*perfected forever* them that are sanctified.” Of *believers*, not *law-keepers*, God says, “Their sins and iniquities will I remember no more” (*Heb 10:14,17*).

Mormons don’t realize that in addition to pardon from all their sins, they may have Christ’s perfect righteousness ascribed to them, “even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that *believe*” (*Rom 3:21-22*). David knew “the blessedness of the man unto whom God imputeth righteousness *without works*” (*Rom 4:6*). Abraham “*believed* God and it was counted unto him for righteousness” (*Rom 4:3-5*). And why was so much written about Abraham’s righteousness by faith? “Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him; but for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we *believe* on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead” (*Rom 4:23-24*).

Mormons who refuse the free gift of complete pardon and perfect righteousness are much like the Jews of which Paul said, “They have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they, being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God” (*Rom 10:2-3*). A righteous God demands that we be righteous! Our only hope is to be clothed in the righteousness of Christ!

## FAITH ALONE

Mormons teach that justification comes “through the *faith* and *good works* of the sinner,” and “is conditioned upon *individual effort*.”<sup>5</sup> Talmadge ridicules the doctrine of “justification by belief alone” calling it “a most pernicious doctrine.”<sup>6</sup> He accuses us of teaching that “a wordy profession of belief shall open the doors of heaven to the sinner.”<sup>7</sup> This caricature of Christian doctrine is not taught by the Christian Church. The atonement of Christ alone opens the doors of heaven. A sinner who by faith identifies himself with Christ is justified, not by what he does, but by Christ’s death.

Mormons claim to believe in grace alone. McConkie says,

All men are saved by grace alone without any act on their part, meaning that they are resurrected and become immortal because of the atoning sacrifice of Christ.<sup>8</sup>

However, listen to him further on salvation:

All men by the grace of God have the power to gain eternal life. This is called salvation by grace *coupled with obedience* to the *laws* and *ordinances* of the gospel.<sup>9</sup>

Salvation in the kingdom of God is available because of the atoning blood of Christ. But it is received only on *condition* of faith, repentance, baptism, and enduring to the end in keeping the commandments of God.<sup>10</sup>

**By adding works to faith, Mormons destroy the very essence of grace.** God’s election of his people is of grace: “And if by grace, then it is no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then it is no more grace: otherwise work is no more work” (*Rom 11:6*). These principles are mutually exclusive because works receive a merited reward but grace is poured out upon those who are undeserving. “Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that *worketh not*, but *believeth* on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness” (*Rom 4:4-5*). Grace is unmerited favor, the free gift of God. The Mormon’s attempted combination of works and faith reveals a misunderstanding of both.

## FAITH PLUS WORKS

Mormons teach *baptismal regeneration*. “As a result of this act of obedience remission of sins is granted.”<sup>11</sup> On the authority of *Doctrine and Covenants* they teach that one who is not baptized cannot be saved. It reads, “And he that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, and he that believeth not, and is not baptized, shall be damned” (*112:29*). Jesus did not add the last negative which is logically very strong. It’s one thing to say, “He that is of age votes,” but quite another to say, “Anyone who does not vote is not of age.” It’s one thing to say, “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved” (*Mark 16:16*), and quite another to say, as Mormon founder Joseph Smith does, “He that believeth not and is not baptized shall be damned.” Baptism is essential for Mormons because

they think it is “the means whereby each sinner may receive a cleansing from his past.”<sup>12</sup> And the only baptism they recognize as valid is one performed by Mormon officials.<sup>13</sup>

Also necessary for salvation is the laying on of hands by the Mormon priesthood for receiving the Holy Spirit. Of this and baptism, it is said, “Without these ordinances one could not be saved.”<sup>14</sup>

The bestowal of the Holy Ghost, which is to be regarded as a conferred right to his ministrations, is effected through the ordinance of the Holy Priesthood, accompanied by the imposition of the hands of him or those officiating.<sup>15</sup>

But the Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit comes upon *all* who believe (*Rom 8:9,14; 1 Cor 12:13*). Romans and Galatians set forth plainly that there can be no mixing of law and gospel or works and grace as the ground of justification before God. Mormons who view baptism and laying on of hands as essential to salvation desperately need to be confronted with Paul’s words to those who preached “faith *plus* works” in his day:

Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified (*Gal 2:16*).

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God: *not of works*, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *unto* good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them (*Eph 2:8-10*).

## FAITH “WITHOUT WORKS”

Why is the Mormon message a “**false**” gospel? The Bible is filled with passages that teach that we are justified by *faith alone*<sup>16</sup>—“justified by faith without the deeds of the law” (*Rom 3:28*). The gospel proclaims “*salvation by faith*.” Mormons teach that justification comes by “faith *plus* obedience.” Their gospel proclaims “*salvation by works*.”

Justification is by faith alone; it is specifically said to be “**without works**.” In fact, faith must be alone, or it is not “faith” in the biblical sense of the word. The very idea of “believing on Christ” means that we trust him as the One who *finished the “work” of salvation*, so that there is nothing left for us to do. “But to him that *worketh not*, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness *without works*” (*Rom 4:5-6*). Faith and works here exclude one another. When the “Judaizers” of Galatia tried to teach justification by “faith *plus* circumcision,” Paul condemned them as “false brethren,” teaching “another gospel” (*a false gospel*), and uttered the strongest of curses upon them (*Gal 1:6-9; 5:1-4*). The Bible teaches that to add any “works” to “faith” is to believe in “salvation by works” and to place oneself under a curse.

But someone may say, “*Yes, but Paul was speaking here only of the works of the Mosaic law, not works of obedience to Christ. It’s true that we can’t be justified by faith plus keeping the law of Moses, but we can be justified by faith plus obedience to the commands of Christ.*” Nothing could be further from the truth! When Paul set out to contrast “salvation by faith” with “salvation by works,” he was not for one moment limiting himself to the works of the law of Moses. He often singled out the law because it was the particular “religious hang-up” of the people of his day. But when Paul says that justification is by faith and that “works” can have no part in it, he is speaking of *all human activity or goodness whatsoever*.

Consider Romans 9:11, “For the children being not yet born, *neither having done any good or evil*, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth.” What does Paul mean by the term “works”? *doing “any good or evil.”* Or again, God “hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace” (*2 Tim 1:9*). Here “our works” are contrasted with “God’s own purpose and grace.” What are “works” then? Not the deeds of the law of Moses only, but *anything in the realm of human activity and initiative*. Even truly righteous deeds are ruled out: “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us” (*Titus 3:5*). It’s obvious that Paul intended his words to mean any and all religious ceremonies or commandments that men might set forth alongside of faith as a condition of justification, not just the ones that happened to be a problem in his own day.

## FAITH WORKS BY LOVE

Someone else may say, “*But James teaches that faith without works is dead*” (*James 2:14-26*). Very true! But we need to understand that Paul is dealing with the *nature of justification* and James is dealing with the *nature of faith*. James is telling professing Christians, who show no evidence in their lives of a likeness to Christ, to show him their faith (*James 2:18*). But faith cannot be seen; thus the best way for us to prove our faith is to be “doers of the word, and not hearers only” (*James 1:22*). Those who do the word of God will live a righteous life in loving obedience to God (*Matt 7:21; 1 John 2:17*). In other words, their “faith will work by love” (*Gal 5:6*). That’s why James said: “I will shew thee my faith by my works” (*James 2:18*).

*Faith alone* justifies, but the faith that justifies *is never alone!* It’s always accompanied by good works. It’s always seen through a righteous life of godliness and holiness. James is concerned for professing believers who are not truly saved; they’re not justified. They have faith, but their faith is “dead.” It’s useless, idle and unfruitful (*James 2:17,20*). Only that faith that bears fruit is alive and genuine. Jesus taught that a tree is known by its fruit (*Matt 7:16-20*). Just as works do not produce justification, the fruit does not bring the tree into existence. The fruit only reveals what type of tree it is and whether it’s alive or dead.

When James says that Abraham was “justified by works when he offered up Isaac” (2:21), he doesn’t mean that Abraham’s sins were not forgiven until that time. Abraham was justified some 35 years before! (see Rom 4:9-11). James is simply saying that justifying faith always manifests itself through works. Our *persons* are justified before *God* by faith; our *faith* is justified before *men* by works. “He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (1 John 2:4). The true believer will desire to obey Christ’s commands, including the command to be baptized. But good works are the *outcome* (Eph 2:10), not the *cause* (Eph 2:8-9), of salvation in Christ.

“Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:26). As newborn sons we behave like sons. That behavior is not the *cause* of sonship, but the *result* of sonship. If a regenerated and legally adopted son of God should disobey his divine parent (as all do), he does not lose his sonship; he loses fellowship, and the loving Father chastens his sons (Heb 12:5-11); and Jesus is the erring child’s Advocate with the Father (1 John 2:1). Parents know that no child can live up to the standard of perfection; they do not disown children for failing to keep every rule. If divine sonship depended upon unwavering obedience to the commands of Christ there would be no sons! None were ever saved in such a way. Mormons may say people will then “sin that grace may abound” (Rom 6:1); but the fact that they raise the same objection to Christian doctrine that was raised against Paul’s teaching, is good evidence that Christians are preaching the same doctrine as that of the apostle—justification by faith alone!

## FAITH IS NOT A WORK

Someone may say again, “But even if you say that men are saved by ‘faith alone,’ still ‘believing’ itself is just another type of ‘work’—something men do in obedience to Christ which obtains the favor of God.” Absolutely not! When God pronounces sinners to be “just” in his sight, he’s looking to the blood and merits of Christ, not the faith of man! The gospel is not a “new law,” a series of steps “1, 2, 3, 4” that men confidently obey in order to “get saved.” On the contrary, the very idea of “believing in Christ” involves giving up entirely on all of our own “doing” and ability. Justifying faith, in its very essence, is reliance upon another. It’s the attitude of one who has given up all hope of anything virtuous he can ever do, including his own “believing,” “repenting,” or “obeying.”

The sinner who trusts in Christ is like the poor swimmer who finally realizes that left to his own efforts he’ll drown, ceases to struggle against the lifeguard, and completely relaxes in his care. Whoever claims that faith is just the beginning of salvation, and that you must do this and that struggling to keep afloat the rest of your life, has not trusted in Christ. Our Lord gives a fine illustration of this in John’s gospel when he explains saving faith in terms of the serpent in the wilderness (Num 21:4-9). Just as the serpent was lifted up by Moses that men might *look upon it* and be saved, so Jesus

would be lifted up on the cross that whosoever *believes* (“looks”) upon him might have eternal life. How were men saved in relation to the serpent? by “looking plus works”? by “looking plus baptism”? by “looking plus obedience”? No! *by “looking” alone!* “When he looketh upon it, he shall live” (Num 21:8). And since faith is the gaze of the soul upon Christ, it is impossible to exercise biblical faith and at the same time be looking to ourselves and our obedience. Those who put confidence in anything but Christ, whether it’s their “faith,” “repentance,” “obedient baptism” or “laying on of hands,” are still trusting in their own works and must surely perish.

When Moses lifted up the serpent of brass on that pole, those Israelites were to cease completely from doing anything; their eyes were to be totally directed away from themselves. The promise was, “Every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live” (Num 21:8). That was their sole instruction: *just look!* Nothing else. They were not to calculate the size of the serpent to determine the extent of the venom. They were not to lance the wound, and go about sucking out the poison. They were not to take any antivenom or antibiotics of any kind; they were not to apply a tourniquet, watch the swelling, or consider the discoloration of their flesh; they were not to call for help from their kinsmen, the doctor, or the priest; they were not even so much as to cast another glance at the wound—there was nothing for them but just to believe God, and cease from all their doing, and all their efforts, and all their anxieties, and *look away!*

Our eyes are to be fastened upon Christ alone, lifted up as our Substitute on Calvary’s cross. “If a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld...he lived” (Num 21:9). He lived! “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:14-15). Salvation reaches us *just where we are*, and *just as we are*: desperate, empty, wounded and guilty. True faith is not a giver, but a receiver. It’s not an actor, but an onlooker. It’s not a builder, but a beholder. □

*Not saved are we by trying, from self can come no aid;  
Tis on the blood relying, once for our ransom paid.  
Tis looking unto Jesus, the holy One and Just;  
Tis his great work that saves us; it is not try, but trust.*

*No deeds of ours are needed, to make Christ’s merit more;  
No frames of mind or feelings, can add to his great store;  
Tis simply to receive him, the holy One and Just,  
Tis only to believe him, it is not try, but trust.*

## References:

(1) James E. Talmadge, *Articles of Faith*, p77 (2) *Ibid.*, p17 (3) Bruce R. McConkie, *What the Mormons Think of Christ*, p27 (4) *Ibid.*, p31 (5) Talmadge, *op. cit.*, pp87,89 (6) *Ibid.*, p107 (7) *Ibid.*, p108 (8) McConkie, *op. cit.*, p24 (9) *Ibid.* (10) *Ibid.*, p28 (11) Talmadge, *op. cit.*, p120 (12) Charles W. Penrose, *Repentance and Baptism*, p5 (13) *Baptism, How, and By Whom Administered?* (Salt Lake City: Desert News Press) (14) Samuel O. Bennion, *Fundamental Principles of the Gospel*, p35 (15) Talmadge, *op. cit.*, p165 (16) John 3:14-18; 5:24; 6:47; Acts 13:39; 16:31; Rom 1:16-17; 3:21-22; 5:1-2; 9:30-33; 10:1-13; 1 Cor 1:21; Gal 2:16; 3:1-14; Eph 2:8-9; Phil 3:8-9; 1 Pet 2:6-8; 1 John 5:1

## WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

The gospel of Christ is good news of pardon to the guilty, addressing all as equally guilty before God. It reveals an atonement sufficient for all; and every sinner is commanded to receive it as a faithful saying, that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Tim 1:15). The gospel is addressed to those who are “far from righteousness” (Isa 46:12); who are poor, and blind, and naked; who have no money to purchase salvation, no merit to recommend them to the favor of God (Isa 55:1; Luka 7:42).

Christ came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance (Matt 9:13). If we are not sinners, we have nothing to do with the gospel; and if we are sinners, let us not reject the counsel of God against ourselves, by vainly supposing that anything about us gives us a peculiar claim to his favor, or by imagining that our sins are too great to be forgiven. The thief upon the cross was saved by faith in Jesus, and none shall enter heaven in any other way. Our only plea is this—“God be merciful to me a sinner.”

Although the Scriptures are so clear on this subject, it is a stumbling-block and foolishness to the great body of those who hear the gospel. It offends their pride to be put upon a level with the outcasts of society; surely, they think, some difference will be made; but they err, not knowing the Scriptures, nor understanding the malignity of sin or the grace of God.

They view salvation as a kind of bargain which God proposes to make with his creatures, that on certain conditions he will accept them; while in fact it is the message of reconciliation, equally addressed to all mankind, declaring that a full atonement for sin has been made upon the cross, and inviting every sinner of Adam’s race instantly to approach God through Christ.

When Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, it was a remedy equally adapted for all who had been bitten (Num 21:8; John 3:14-15). By looking to the serpent the patient was healed; and in reference to this emblem, Christ, indiscriminately addressing all mankind, says, “Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is none else” (Isa 45:21-22).

While the gospel is preached freely to all, it is “the power of God unto salvation” only to those who believe (Rom 1:16). But it is vain to talk of being justified by Christ’s righteousness, unless our hearts are “purified by faith” (Acts 15:9). We may profess faith in Jesus while we are slaves to sin; we may deceive ourselves, and affirm that we are trusting in Christ while we are living after the flesh; but every branch in the vine that beareth not fruit shall be cast into the fire (Matt 3:10; John 15:2).

If we believe Christ’s gospel, it will effectually work in our hearts (1 Thess 2:13), and teach us that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world (Titus 2:11-12); and if what we believe does not produce this effect, it is not the true grace of God in which we stand. We are deceived. “They that are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts” (Gal 5:24). □

## THE MORMON MESSAGE EXPOSED

When Mormons are asked—“Is Christ’s shed blood the only basis for the forgiveness of sins?”—they will extol the atonement of Christ. One of their most influential authors, James E. Talmadge, says:

However incomplete may be our comprehension of the scheme of redemption through Christ’s vicarious sacrifice in all its parts, we cannot reject it without becoming infidel; for it stands as the fundamental doctrine of all Scripture, the very essence of the spirit of prophecy and revelation, the most prominent of all the declarations of God to man.<sup>1</sup>

*The Book of Mormon* is equally emphatic:

There could be no redemption of mankind save it were through the death and suffering of Christ, and the atonement of his blood (Alma 21:9).

In spite of this, Talmadge says,

We hold that salvation from sin is obtainable *only through obedience*, and that while the door to the kingdom has been opened by the sacrificial death and the resurrection of our Lord the Christ, no man may enter there except by his personal and voluntary application expressed in terms of *obedience* to the prescribed *laws* and *ordinances* of the gospel.<sup>2</sup>

Christ’s work only “opens the door”; man’s work must do the rest. Christ makes the down payment; Mormons must make payments all their lives.

For Mormons, then, the atonement was not completely provided by Christ. Elder Bruce R. McConkie ridicules the Christian belief that salvation is based on the merits of Christ alone and not on the ground of human merit.

Christians speak often of the blood of Christ and its cleansing power. Much that is believed and taught on this subject, however, is such utter nonsense and so palpably false that to believe it is to lose one’s salvation. Many go so far, for instance, as to pretend, at least, to believe that if we confess Christ with our lips and avow that we accept him as our personal Savior, we are thereby saved. His blood, without any other act than mere belief, they say, makes us clean.<sup>3</sup>

It is true that the doctrine of justification by faith in the merits of Christ’s work alone *can be distorted*. Nevertheless, anyone who believes that the atoning work of Christ provided only an *opportunity* for people to *achieve their own salvation* has missed the heart of the gospel.