

## 106 Why do you study the Scriptures?

I wrote this article a couple of days ago but felt that it needed polishing and ran out of time. This morning, I woke up seeing it differently, so I'm turning it around and giving you the conclusion first, albeit an even more tentative conclusion than usual.

Here's my idea. When we say 'salvation by works', what do we think of? Probably: 'You can't earn your way into God's favour by doing lots of good things.' And then 'salvation by faith' is that you have to believe that Jesus died on the cross to take away your sins. OK?

My conclusion is maybe that this isn't what Paul (and the Reformers) meant by saying: 'by faith, not by works'. Maybe 'works' is more like what the Pharisees did: spending loads of time searching the Scriptures to work out what's the **right thing to do** – then making it worse by dogmatically insisting that you now know what's right – then making it even worse by trying to force other people to do the 'right' things. (Over the centuries, the church has got that down to a fine art – to its shame.)

Here's my idea in a nutshell:

*Not by works...*

*by works he didn't mean doing good*

*by works he meant doing (and believing?) the 'right' things*

Isn't this what have I been doing for 50 years? I've been studying the Scriptures (I'm giving myself the benefit there in saying that I did what I did by *starting* from Bible study), working out what is the right thing to believe, and then persuading other people – whether that's other Christians or unbelievers (see my [0]).

Now here's the original start of this article:

At church on Sunday, my friend preached on Acts 10, and as the passage was read out, v.34 stood out to me as 'interesting'. Then my friend's sermon started with, 'What really stood out to me was v.34, at the start of Peter's sermon': *I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and **do what is right**.*

Now add to that Paul's words [105] in Rom 2:7 – *To those who by persistence in **doing good** seek glory, honour and immortality, he will give eternal life.* and 2:10 *'but glory, honour and peace for everyone who **does good**'.*

Add to that Jesus' own words that have been niggling me for ages [105, cf 60] about sheep/goats, heaven/hell (Mt 25:31-46), where he clearly states that we are going to be judged on the basis of whether or not we have cared for the poor and marginalised, i.e. **what we do**.

So that's Peter, Paul and Jesus – and I'm confident that James wouldn't disagree – so I'm thinking of forming a new church, called the 'Blessed Jesus Works Church', preaching that the Reformers were wrong, and that salvation is indeed by **works**.

OK, OK, I'm messing about, but reading and re-reading Romans 3-8 has set me thinking about what Paul actually meant by 'by faith, not by works'. I think we tend to think of that in terms of, 'You can't get to heaven by doing good works'.

Now this morning I read what I wrote earlier, and my point was going to be that you can prove whatever stupid idea you have, by picking and choosing which Scriptures you quote (maybe out of context). While that is true, thinking about it now, maybe all those verses **do** mean what they say. Maybe God **is** concerned about what we do?!

OK, so why **do** we study the Scriptures? As I wrote in version 1 of this article:

One verse that stood out to me recently was 3:2, where Paul says that the Jews *have been entrusted with the very words of God*. Put alongside that: Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch (Ac 8:26ff) *Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus*, and in the Emmaus encounter (Lk 24.27): *And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself*.

So could we, could I 'share the gospel' purely by using the Old Testament? I don't think I could. But, anyway, what was 'the gospel' that spread like wildfire? It was the good news of Jesus – it was the first-hand accounts of the person and actions and death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus, which proved that God was true to the promise given to Abraham. And that's good news!

Rescue, redemption, exodus, freedom, release, victory has come, and we're free from death – the logical and natural consequence of living lives **not** focused on God, **not** worshipping God, **not** living in communion with God (as Adam and Eve did) but doubting God (as Adam and Eve did) and thinking that we can work out for ourselves what's what. That leads to death.

So I think we should study the Scriptures to get back in touch with the person and work of Jesus/God/Holy Spirit and **not** to work out the exact mechanism by which we are saved and the exact way we (and 'they') should behave – that is being a Pharisee and that way leads to death by dogmatism. Our churches will die, our families will die, our communities will die, we will die.

Jesus said to the Pharisees: *You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.* (Jn 5:39f)

After 50 years of trying to be right, it's very difficult to turn away from that attitude (repent of it), but I try every day to sit more and more lightly on 'being right' (= 'works'), and instead spend more time getting to know the Person (= 'faith', or perhaps better, 'trust').

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