

Broken Clock



SalvatioB

Dean Taylor

*Let no man deceive you with vain words. Ephesians 5:6
Certain men crept in unawares...turning the grace of God into lasciviousness. Jude 4*

The funny thing about a broken clock is that it is perfectly right twice a day. Think about it ... that old clock might have been dead for years, but nonetheless, two times a day its little rusty hands proudly proclaim the time as accurately as the space program's best atomic clock. However, despite this brief momentary accuracy, for all practical purposes a broken clock is still worthless. And that's a bit the way that salvation is commonly taught and preached these days. It's often completely right for a moment...but by and large it is still broken.

Here's what I mean ... Modern Evangelicals are quick to point to the fact that to spend eternity with Christ we must be "born again." In describing this necessity to be "born again," they often highlight the holiness of God and sinfulness of man. They accentuate the fact that man is helpless to

save himself and therefore totally at the mercy of God for grace and forgiveness.

Now, this is all very appropriate and even "accurate." But much like the broken clock that is accurate only for a moment, this is usually where modern Evangelical salvation stops. It started out good, but it didn't keep going. The result is a salvation that is reduced to a "decision" or a "prayer"—not a new life.

Explanations of salvation like these can leave the sinner standing there "broken" without a ticking heart. When salvation is explained this way the results can be devastating. Even the most sincere "walk down the aisle" or the most passionate "sinner's prayer" is no substitute for Jesus' words, "take up your cross daily and follow me." Christianity is a life—not a one-time decision.

The Mass Murderer Goes to Heaven?

A few weeks ago the nation mourned over the news of yet one more homicidal catastrophe. This time a man named George Sodini from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania went into his sports gym with a loaded hand gun and savagely ended the lives of three women and injured nine others. Completing this fit of terror, the deranged killer finally turned the gun on himself and ended his own life as well.

Unfortunately, this type of tragedy is not unheard of on the landscape of modern America. What caught my attention in this case was that the killer left a journal. In his journal the killer mentioned the philosophy that enabled him to perform these terrible atrocities.

Aghast when I read it, I saw that Sodini claimed that his philosophy was the philosophy of modern American Evangelicalism—brought to its logical end.

The Journal

Writing a year before the murders, George Sodini wrote in his journal about his involvement in church. Speaking about the pastor of the church he attended for 13 years he said, “this guy teaches (and convinced me) you can commit mass murder then still go to heaven.”

Those words are chilling when you consider the consequences.

Skipping up a year to the day before the murder, George Sodini left what I consider his most disturbing journal entry. Most disturbing, because in this entry, Sodini articulated a modern American statement of faith—all too well. (The capital letters are all from Sodini’s own words):

Maybe soon, I will see God and Jesus. At least that is what I was told. Eternal life does NOT depend on works. If it did, we will all be in hell. Christ paid for EVERY sin, so how can I or you be judged BY GOD for a sin when the penalty was ALREADY paid. People judge but that does not matter. I was reading the Bible and The Integrity of God beginning yesterday, because soon I will see them.

Disclaimer

Sodini’s case—I admit—is certainly extreme. The man was obviously disturbed. A reading of the rest of his journal demonstrates clearly that he was a troubled man. So to

put the blame entirely on modern American Evangelicalism would seem a bit unfair.

But yet I wonder ... could it have been different if Sodini would have been taught a fear of God rather than a license to sin? Could it have been different if he would have been told that a despicable lifestyle actually matters to God? Could it all have been different if he had been taught that a sincere faith demands a response toward God in the way of amended life? And most important to this discussion, I wonder... was Sodini’s response solely a twisted mind, or was it rather an extreme application of a bad theology, taken to its logical end?

“At least that is what I was told...”

What exactly did Sodini mean when he attempted to justify his innocence before God—even while intending to commit mass murder—adding “at least that is what I was told”?

“This guy teaches (and convinced me) you can commit mass murder then still go to heaven.”

- Who told George Sodini that a person could kill someone and not “lose their salvation”?
- Who told George Sodini that faith existed only in mental beliefs?
- Who told George Sodini that his actions did not matter to God?
- Who told George Sodini that “grace” was some kind of blanket forgiveness policy”?
- Who came up with this strange doctrine?

If this was the teaching of some obscure cult somewhere in the world, it would have been bad enough. But tragically, what Sodini articulated in his journal—and ultimately put to practice in his life—is a theology that is proclaimed across tens of thousands of pulpits every day.

Where did this start?

During the Reformation of the 1500s, Martin Luther stood strong against the ceremonial-works religion of the Roman Catholics. The ideas of buying your way to heaven, praying to saints, and making pilgrimages to holy sites to earn your salvation were commonplace in his day. Luther fought against these things by arguing that salvation was “by grace through faith.” However, as often happens during times of debate, Luther reacted. He went from saying that salvation could not be obtained by works, to saying that works didn’t matter at all. By doing this, Luther made “faith” a purely

mental concept. “Actions”, or rather “works of faith”, were seen by Luther as non essentials.

Too Far

While I believe that Luther meant well, like the Gnostics of the early church before him he ultimately masterminded a Christianity that exists only in the mind. To be fair to Luther, he did at times teach that this mental faith should find its way to action. However, when it was all said and done, lifestyle to Luther was a mere bonus. Following Christ meant right thoughts about Christ, not actually following Christ in reality.

To give a graphic example of what I mean, concluding his thoughts in a revealing letter to a fellow minister, Luther said:

No sin can separate us from Him, even if we were to kill or commit adultery thousands of times each day. Do you think such an exalted Lamb paid merely a small price with a meager sacrifice for our sins? Pray hard for you are quite a sinner.¹

I think that very few Evangelicals today would ever say this kind of thing with such candor. But when I ponder the twisted faith of this mass killer George Sodini, what am I to think when I read Martin Luther’s words that a person cannot lose his salvation “even if we were to kill or commit adultery thousands of times each day”?

Partial Truth

The scriptures plainly teach that we are saved “by grace through faith.” No self-respecting Christian argues that point. The problem comes by the fact that Luther and many others after him have redefined the terms. The terms “grace” and “faith” no longer mean what they used to. Today, “grace” is basically defined as forgiveness. Some may stretch it and use the phrase “unmerited favor,” but still at the end of the day, what they usually mean by that is simply forgiveness. The term “faith” has been tragically reduced to mean a mere mental assent to specific facts about God.

1 *Let Your Sins Be Strong: A Letter From Luther to Melancthon* Letter no. 99, 1 August 1521, From the Wartburg (Segment) Translated by Erika Bullmann Flores from: *Dr. Martin Luther’s Saemmtliche Schriften* Dr, Johannes Georg Walch, Ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, N.D.), Vol. 15, cols. 2585-2590.

The Power of Grace

The Apostle Paul provided a nice balance when he wrote to the church at Ephesus about salvation. Warning about the danger of trusting in mere works to save them he said:

“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...”²

But then continuing the sentence, he went right on to say:

“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.”³

For Paul, salvation had a purpose. It was alive. It did something! Paul was passionate about what grace actually did in the life of the believer. When writing to his young disciple Titus, Paul spelled out a few of the things that he believed grace should accomplish. Pay close attention to what Paul told Titus that grace teaches us...

For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ; Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works. These things speak, and exhort, and rebuke with all authority. Let no man despise thee.⁴

Those are some powerful things that grace actually does. Much more than just forgiveness—grace is power!

Follow Me

In demonstrating what Christianity should be like, Jesus called a little child to him. He put the child in the middle of the crowd and said, “*Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.*”⁵

Apparently, Jesus regarded the theology of salvation as something very simple. So simple, that He said that we would need to be like little children in order to grasp it. I used to think that this simply meant that we needed to be

2 Ephesians 2:8-9
3 Ephesians 2:10
4 Titus 2:11-15
5 Matthew 18:1-4

pure-minded, innocent, loving, and care-free like children are. But that was before I had children of my own! And while I think that those qualities of child-likeness certainly are part of it, I think that there is more to the story—and this is it: *children follow*.

Children follow the good things I do, and unfortunately, they also follow the bad. As a matter of fact, I have found that I can “teach” them all I want, but what really affects their behavior is how I act. Children don’t see life in nuances of dogmas, creeds, theologies, algorithms, and flow charts. They simply watch, hear—and follow.

When I consider the conversion stories in the Gospels, I see the same thing. Jesus’ evangelism strategy was so simple that it was profound. More often than not, Jesus simply used two words—“*follow Me.*”

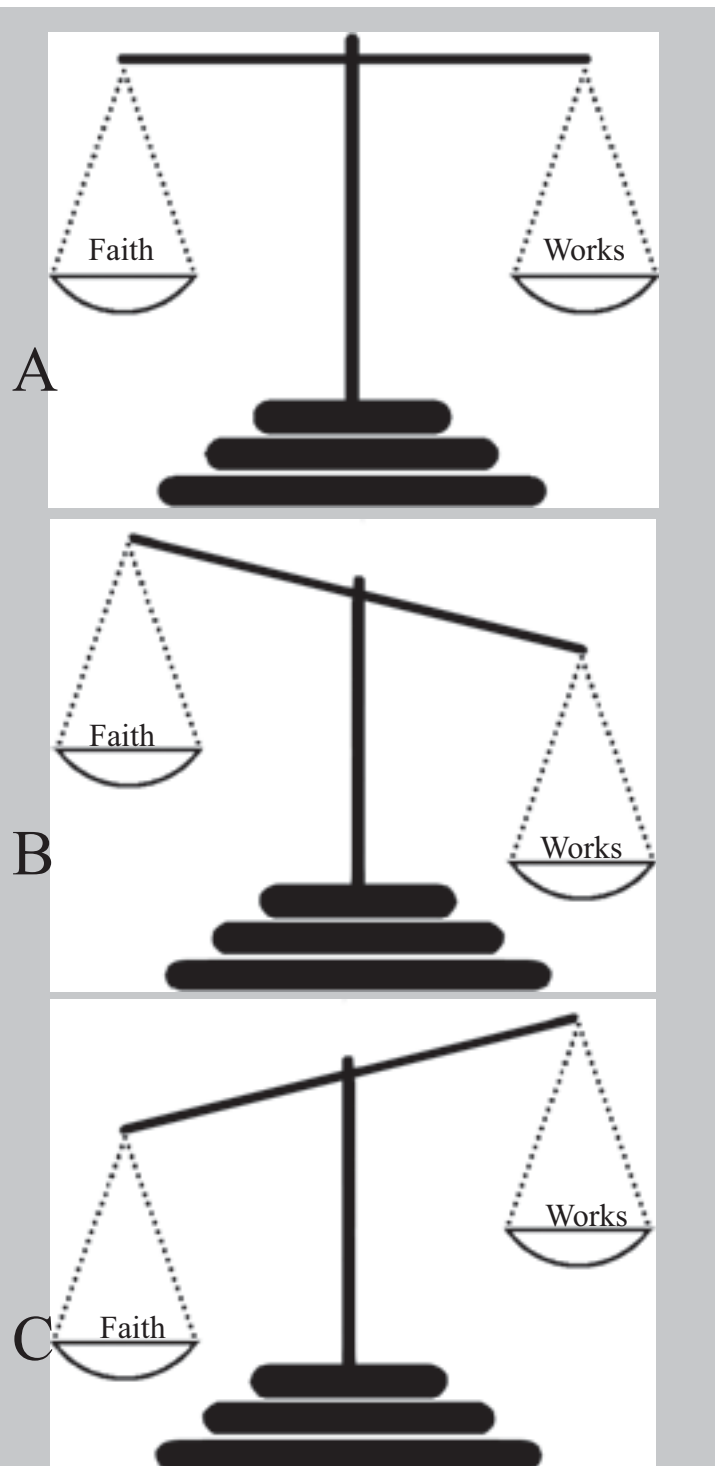
While those two words may be easy to say, they’re not at all easy to practice. As a matter of fact, in my own strength, they’re impossible. When I am confronted with this overwhelmingly simple command to “*follow Christ,*” I would be foolish to think that I could accomplish this in the power of my flesh. When I have tried to do this, I have fallen flat on my face.

Bussfertigkeit—Living Faith

In the early days of the 16th-century Radical Reformation, the topic of salvation was one of many issues that were taking center stage. The Anabaptists liked much of what they were hearing from the early Reformers such as Luther and Zwingli, but they soon noticed that something vitally important was missing. Like the broken clock, they saw that the salvation that Luther and Zwingli were preaching sounded good, but only for a moment. It was too often merely doctrinal, legal, or creedal: in essence, not alive.

The Anabaptists saw that humility before a holy God and thirst for God’s salvation was not just a momentary thing like joining the church, saying a prayer, or even walking an aisle—it was a way of life. To be saved by grace presupposed a continual life of living faith. The early Anabaptists felt salvation must go further than the head. They expected more from salvation than just new ideas and theology. The following letter from an early Anabaptist, struggling about his time among the Evangelicals of the 1500s, gives a glimpse of their position. He wrote:

While yet in the national church, we obtained much instruction from the writings of Luther, Zwingli, and others, concerning the mass and other papal ceremonies, that they are vain. Yet



Which of the above is correct?

- A
 - B
 - C
 - All of the above
 - None of the above
- (See next page for answer.)

The answer is...

...none of the above! (See previous page for question.)

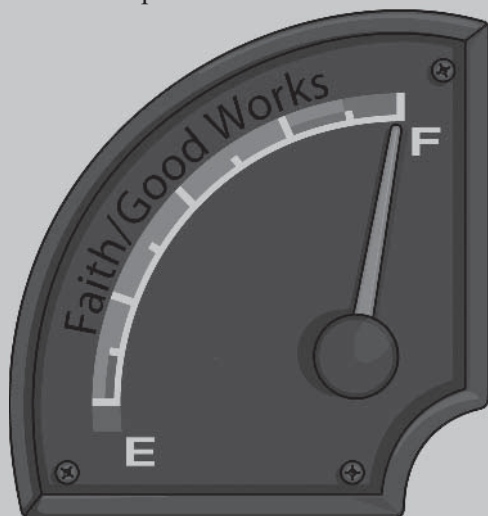
The next question...



What is wrong with this illustration?

This illustration has been used many times to show that if a person only has faith (or works), he will go in a circle. Both paddles are needed to move the boat to the goal.

The problem with both of the above illustrations is that they set faith and works in opposition to each other. True faith and good works never oppose each other, neither do they need to be “balanced”. Rather, they operate in perfect oneness. The following illustrations more correctly illustrate their relationship.



This above gauge shows the relationship between faith and good works. Either we are full of faith and good works, or empty of faith and good works. We cannot be full of faith and empty of good works, nor full of good works without any faith in Christ.

Do you doubt this? James, an apostle who walked with Jesus, said, “I will show you my faith by my works!”

See the next page for more ...

we recognized a great lack as regards repentance, conversion, and the true Christian life. Upon these things my mind was bent. I waited and hoped for a year or two, since the minister had much to say of amendment of life, of giving to the poor, loving one another, and abstaining from evil. But I could not close my eyes to the fact that the doctrine which was preached and which was based on the Word of God, was not carried out. No beginning was made toward true Christian living, and there was no unison in the teaching concerning the things that were necessary.

And although the mass and the images were finally abolished, true repentance and Christian love were not in evidence. Changes were made only as concerned external things. This gave me occasion to inquire further into these matters. Then God sent His messengers, Conrad Grebel and others, with whom I conferred about the fundamental teachings of the apostles and the Christian life and practice. I found them men who had surrendered themselves to the doctrine of Christ by “Bussfertigkeit” [repentance evidenced by fruits]. With their assistance we established a congregation in which repentance was in evidence by newness of life in Christ.⁶

A changed life was the gift they saw promised to them in the scriptures, and by faith these Radicals would settle for nothing less. That’s not to say that the Radical Reformers believed in a salvation by works either. They felt that any work done for Christ must be a work of faith and charity; empty works were still empty works.

As could be expected, this emphasis on a changed life quickly opened them up to the criticism that they were trying to earn their own salvation—a claim they quickly and adamantly denied. When it came to “salvation by faith,” they warned that error lies on both sides of the debate.

Beware of the Scribes and the Pharisees

In a beautifully worded warning from one of the founders of the Radical Reformation, Michael Sattler cautioned that Christians must beware of both the Scribes and the Pharisees. The “Pharisees”, Sattler taught, typified the type of faith that they had when they were Roman Catholics. He said that just like the Pharisees of the Bible, the Roman Catholics were trying to earn their salvation by works of the Law. Therefore he cautioned that we must beware of this tendency to endeavor to earn our own salvation.

⁶ Taken from an unpublished manuscript in the *Staatsarchiv des Kantons Bern*, (Unnütze Papiere, Bd. 80), entitled *Acta des Gesprächs zw’schenn predicantten und Touffbrüderenn* (1538), Copy in the Goshen College Library.

On the other hand, Sattler warned that the “Scribes” typified the Evangelicals. He gave the picture that Scribes teach beautiful things, write impressive books, and even preach magnificent sermons. However, like the Scribes of old, their salvation never penetrates into their lives. In other words, the Scribes spoke good things, but did not live them. “We must” Michael Sattler warned, “beware the Scribes and the Pharisees.”⁷

Empty works are still empty works. And any works that we think will replace or add to the work of Christ are still worthless. But to separate mental faith from acts of faith is to completely miss the message of the whole Bible. From beginning to end, the Bible is full of stories of visible, touchable, workable, sweatable, bleedable faith.

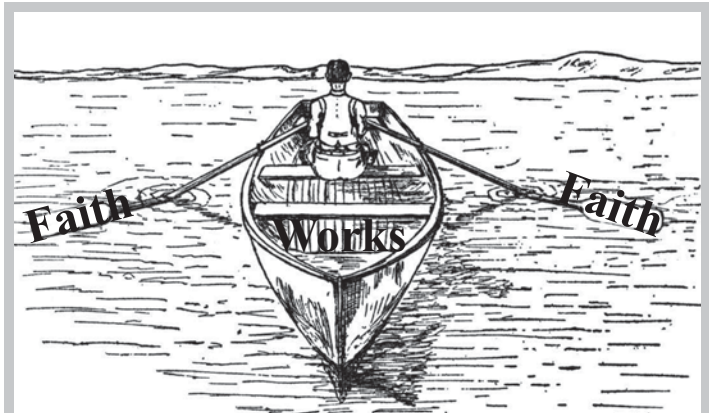
The Epistle of Straw

The book of James plainly said that “Faith without works is dead.” So why is that statement so controversial? James did not say that our works added to the merits of Christ’s atoning work. James simply said that faithful actions are evident demonstrations of our faith. It is interesting to note that the “works” James mentioned in Chapter 2 are not works from the Old Testament Law, such as circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, or dietary regulations. Rather, the works that James mentioned were fruits that a person evidenced when he has genuine faith.

For instance, James describes the “works” of Abraham as the actions Abraham did when he was willing to sacrifice his son on the altar. This was not Abraham trusting in himself, rather, this was an act of faith. After mentioning Abraham’s touching story, James tried to persuade us to understand this sacred truth saying:

“Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God. Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.” (James 2:22-24)

Why is this so scary to Evangelicals? Probably because this verse makes it absolutely clear that faith is something more than ideas and convictions in your head. Faith includes your body—your actions—or if I may use the word—your works. To dismiss the clarity of these statements, Martin Luther had the audacity to call the entire Epistle of James



Faith propels good works

In the above illustration, we see faith is what moves good works. What good would a pair of oars (faith) be without something for them to do? And how far would a rowboat go without any oars to move it? By this we can see that rowboats and oars are complementary, and in fact almost inseparable.

So it is with faith and good works. When faith is alive and well and moving, action and movement is produced, just as oars that are moving produce action and movement of the boat. They do not fight against each other: they are very complimentary.

Paul and James

Some people have done with Paul and James exactly the same thing as has been done with faith and works; they have been set in opposition to one another, or, have been seen as “balancing” each other.

Paul and James are not in contradiction, neither do they need to balance each other. This is because the works that Paul speaks about in Romans 4:2 and Galatians 2:16 (as well as in other places) are not the same types of works that James speaks of. Paul refers to “the works of the law,” referring to ceremonial works that can be routinely performed by any Tom, Dick, or Harry who is willing to go through the motions, such as circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, or not eating pork.

James, on the other hand, is referring to the spontaneous actions that spring forth from a man when he takes what God says and swallows it “hook, line, and sinker.” When a man or woman begins to believe God, it moves him/her to action. If you say you have faith, but you have no actions to prove it, you are like a set of oars in the middle of the ocean: minus any boat. Quite useless indeed! ~The editors

7 The Legacy Of Michael Sattler p. 115-116.

“An epistle of straw.” That should tell us something ... frankly, it scares me.

You must be born again

None of these things can be accomplished by fakers. There is no shortcut to heaven. Empty works are no better than empty faith. So...

- If we are actually going to honor the name of God,
- If we are going to please Him and glorify Him with our lives,
- If we are going to follow in Jesus’ great big steps,
... then we must be born again.

New Wine—New Wineskins

Near the beginning of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus gave His charge to Matthew the tax collector and other sinners who were at Matthew’s house with those challenging words: “*follow me.*”⁸ Right after this however, Mark recorded Jesus’ parable about becoming a new creation in the parable of old cloth and old wine skins.

“No man also seweth a piece of new cloth on an old garment: else the new piece that filled it up taketh away from the old, and the rent is made worse. And no man putteth new wine into old bottles: else the new wine doth burst the bottles, and the wine is spilled, and the bottles will be marred: but new wine must be put into new bottles.” (Mark 2:21-22).

In other words, the Christ-following life is not something that you can just tack on to your old life. That’s not going to work. If you do try, it will break.

Repent

Jesus used the word “repent.” That means completely changing the way I want to go, and following His way. That’s more than just a little decision or a “sinner’s prayer”—that’s becoming a whole new creation. If I try to tack Christianity on to my nonrepentant old lifestyle—like the unshrunk cloth or old wineskin—it’s going to rip and burst!

When being a follower of Christ actually means to follow Christ, what an exciting life awaits! Just two words say it all—“*follow me.*” That’s a living faith. That’s a salvation that is not just in my head—it’s real in my life—a ticking clock!“ ~