

FAITH AND WORKS

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Faith and works by W. A. O'Conor

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W. A. O'CONOR

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AND WORKS**

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BY THE
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FAITH AND WORKS.

I. THE place which faith occupies in the teaching of Scripture may be profitably discussed without dwelling on its supernatural origin and guidance—more especially if we are in any danger of losing our full sense of responsibility under the expected influence of an overpowering inspiration. In our bodily frames there are some organs which work independently of our will or consciousness, and others which we put in motion voluntarily and with conscious design. Now, in preserving physical life our part is not to rest satisfied because the processes of respiration, digestion, and assimilation are going on without our care, but to supply proper food, air, and exercise, by the use of the organs which are placed under our control. And the measures which we take to effect these purposes are taken, not because we disregard the inner unconscious functions, but because we assume them, and trust to their continuance. Just in the same way, there are involuntary and unconscious, and voluntary and

conscious functions in the mind. The former are beyond our knowledge and control; the latter are placed under our superintendence and management. The laws by which the mind grows, by which it takes in and assimilates external impressions, we have nothing to do with. But we have everything to do with the character of the impressions which we furnish to it, and the habits which we fix upon it. And the pains which we take to present pure images to the mind, and to avoid impure ones, to contract good habits of thought and to shun bad ones, are taken, not because we ignore the inward process which a power not our own is conducting, but because we admit and believe in it. According to these analogies, it may be very beneficial to discuss the external and intelligible side of faith.

II. The opinion, rather implied than distinctly avowed by some persons, that faith is wholly mysterious in its origin and nature, so that it is quite independent of reason or external influences, seems to proceed from a confusion between faith and its objects, belief and the things believed, and to base itself on the phenomena of matured belief rather than on those of its first stages, which are naturally an easier subject of investigation. The act of the mind when it assents to certain Christian doctrines, as, for instance, to the Incarnation of the Son of God, and the Atonement, may be contemplated and comprehended while the

doctrines themselves lie beyond the range of comprehension; although, when the mind gets into a state of fusion with its tenet, when the doctrine interpenetrates and colours and characterizes the mind, it is only natural that the incomprehensibility of the doctrine should conceal the reasonableness of its original adoption. The belief that Jesus was the Son of God is proved by His life, miracles, and doctrines. These avowedly appeal to our reason and affections. The consent of the understanding to the mysteries which He teaches is a voluntary deference to authority which has demonstrated itself to be more than human. Both the belief and the consent are rational acts, since a reason can be assigned for either. But after all has been said or conceded about the origin or possible modifications of faith, the essential matters that remain to be considered, the conditions under which it saves the soul, and the tokens that accompany salvation, must always stand, so long as we read the Scriptures and employ our understandings, in the full noonday of clearest observation.

III. The really important question in connection with the subject is this,—Whether there is any faculty, or condition, or frame of the mind, natural or inspired, or partly the one and partly the other (let it be called faith, or trust, or confidence, or resignation to God's will, or acquiescence in the plan of salvation), which, of itself, without external actions, renders men accepted

by God; or whether, in order to reach this acceptance, in addition to the inward faculty or frame, external works are also required. This is the practical inquiry, in which all differences of opinion about faith culminate at last.

IV. Now, this question, stated as it has been, is capable of two very different meanings. It may be understood as expressing uncertainty whether there is any attitude or relation of man towards God which, without its having any tendency to affect or without actually affecting the conduct, gains the divine favour; or it may be understood as raising the issue whether there is any attitude or relation which, considered apart from its natural and actual results in the conduct, without taking their worth or their existence into the account, secures our salvation. Faith without works may signify faith that has no tendency to produce works, and never does produce them; or it may mean faith that has a tendency to produce works, and that does produce them, considered apart from them. Those two meanings should be kept separate and distinct. Although there are very few persons, perhaps, who would assert that they hope to be saved by faith without works, or by faith, and not by works, in the former sense, yet many persons are liable, in the intricacies of a complicated argument or in the heat of controversy, to lose their bearings, and to contend for some form of words which they have never clearly

defined for themselves. Some persons, for instance, expressly assert that we are saved without external works by the mere act of the mind or heart when it sees and believes that the atonement of Christ purchased pardon for all who accept it. Others, on the contrary, are of opinion that the mere inward act of belief is not sufficient, but that we must perform corresponding actions, live in holiness and obedience, and deny our evil desires; and that without acting thus we cannot be saved. It is obvious that, in this form of the controversy, they who maintain that we are saved by faith without works mean, though often unconsciously, without the works which are the product of faith; for there could be no conceivable object or meaning, in their case, in denying the necessity of works which have no connection with faith, seeing that their opponents, who hold that works are necessary to salvation, always mean the works of faith. St. Paul says that we are justified by faith without the deeds of the law; but this differs widely from saying that we are saved by faith without the deeds of faith. In St. Paul's argument the opposing principles are faith and law. The Jews held that they could be saved by the deeds of the law without faith; or, if they did not formally hold it, such is the doctrine which St. Paul imagines and combats. With us the argument is in reality between faith considered by itself, and faith considered in conjunction with its works, some holding that we are saved by faith without any

consideration of the works of faith, without any kind of necessity for them; others holding that the works of faith are in some way indispensable to our salvation, as well as faith itself. Both these doctrines are substantially founded on Scripture, and our present object is to bring them into agreement. The doctrine that we are saved by a faith which has no tendency to produce works, and does not produce them (if there be such a doctrine), is obviously irreconcilable with the necessity of works and with the portions of Scripture which state that necessity.

V. Now, in the first place, it is Scriptural to say in an absolute sense that a man is justified and saved by faith. Even though no passage can be found in the Bible which states that we are justified by faith without works as opposed to faith accompanied by its proper works, yet, as faith is often put forward absolutely, in distinction from some other principle, and we are said to be saved by faith and not by that other principle, it must be inferred that the essential character of faith, considered apart from any manifestation of it, is the saving or justifying medium.

VI. Besides, it is reasonable to say that we are saved, and accepted as in the way of salvation, by faith, considered singly. Works cannot be of any moment in God's sight. If I profess friendship for a man like myself, it is only right that I should prove