

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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R. C. Sproul on Saving Faith

John W. Robbins

One of the reasons the Gospel has disappeared from conservative Baptist and Presbyterian churches is the failure, even refusal, of their teachers to take their ideas from Scripture. One cannot properly teach or effectively defend the central Biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone unless one knows what both faith and justification are. R. C. Sproul has had enormous influence in Reformed circles, and unfortunately he is an example of the serious confusion about saving faith found in conservative churches. His ministry, Ligonier Ministries, has promoted some of the spokesmen of the Neolegalist movement in its publications and conferences. His son, R. C. Sproul, Jr., is affiliated with Douglas Wilson's Neolegalist denomination, the Confederation of Reformed and Evangelical Churches. Sproul's mentor, John Gerstner, was a lifelong disciple of Thomas Aquinas, the official philosopher of the Roman Catholic Church, and Sproul is as well. (In May 2001 *The Trinity Review* published an essay refuting Dr. Gerstner's ludicrous claim, published in *Tabletalk* magazine, that Thomas Aquinas was a Protestant.) But what many do not understand is that the theology of all these men has been corrupted by their Roman Catholic philosophy. Here is an illustration of that pernicious influence – philosophy corrupting theology – from R. C. Sproul's 1996 book, *Now That's a Good Question*. Dr. Sproul's essay is also published at the website of Ligonier Ministries. My comments are interspersed.

What Is Faith?

SPROUL: I think the whole concept of faith is one of the most misunderstood ideas that we have, misunderstood not only by the world but by the church itself.

ROBBINS: Dr. Sproul is absolutely correct. Faith is indeed an idea misunderstood by both the world and the church.

SPROUL: The very basis for our redemption, the way in which we are justified by God, is through faith. The Bible is constantly talking to us about faith, and if we misunderstand that, we're in deep trouble.

ROBBINS: Dr. Sproul is correct that the Bible constantly speaks of faith, and pastors and churches are in deep trouble because they have not listened to the Bible. In this essay, Dr. Sproul himself fails to quote anything the Bible says about faith.

SPROUL: The great issue of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century was, How is a person justified? Luther's controversial position was that we are justified by faith alone. When he said that, many of the godly leaders in the Roman Catholic Church were very upset.

“Godly Roman Catholic Leaders”

ROBBINS: Oddly, without warning or explanation, Sproul suddenly changes topics, from faith to justification. Please note well the adjectives Sproul uses: Luther's position on justification, which is in fact the Biblical doctrine, is “controversial,” but leaders of the Roman Catholic Church are “godly.” Sproul does not describe Luther or his doctrine as “godly,” nor does he describe Roman Catholic leaders or doctrine as “controversial.” He says “godly leaders in the Roman Catholic Church” were “very upset” at Luther's “controversial position.” This is not history; this is propaganda for Rome.

SPROUL: They [that is, “godly leaders in the Roman Catholic Church”] said, Does that mean that a person can just believe in Jesus and then live any way they want to live? In other words, the Roman Catholic Church reacted fiercely because they were afraid that Luther's view would be understood as an easy-believism in which a person only had to believe and never had to be concerned about bringing forth the fruits of righteousness.

ROBBINS: Rather than defending, or even explaining, the Biblical and Reformational doctrine of justification by faith alone – Sproul does not describe it as “Biblical,” or “correct,” but merely as “Luther's position” and “Luther's view,” as though the idea of justification by faith alone had originated with Luther – rather than defending justification by faith alone from the charge of antinomianism, as Paul does in *Romans*, Sproul denigrates justification by the

pejorative label “easy-believism.” In so doing he tries to make Rome’s murderous opposition to the Reformation understandable. This is inexcusable in any theologian, especially one who claims to be Reformed.

By Faith Alone: Only Believism

As a matter of Biblical fact, and contradicting what the Roman Catholic Church and R. C. Sproul say, all a sinner must do to be saved is to believe the Gospel: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life”; “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved”; “the just shall live by faith”; “for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves: It is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast”; “by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified”; “a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law,” and so on. The Bible clearly and emphatically teaches that a sinner is saved by belief of the Gospel alone, “apart from the deeds of the law.” That is why the blasphemous charge of antinomianism arose against the Gospel in the first place. If Paul and the other apostles had taught a false gospel of faith plus obedience as the way of salvation, the charge of antinomianism would never have been brought against them. Neither Rome nor many so-called “Reformed” theologians seem to understand that salvation is not a result of good works; good works are a result of salvation. It was that difference that divided the Christians from the Romanists in the sixteenth century, and it is that difference that divides the Christians from the Romanists in the twenty-first century.

SPROUL: It was crucial that those who were involved in the Protestant Reformation carefully define what they meant by saving faith. So they went back and did their studies in the New Testament...

ROBBINS: Sproul’s account makes it sound like the Reformers did not know what they were talking about: After the Reformation began, after “godly leaders of the Roman Catholic Church” had properly reacted to the Reformers’ controversial “easy-believism,” the Reformers had to go back and study the New Testament. This is not history; it is fiction.

SPROUL: ...specifically on the Greek word *pistein*, which means to believe, and they were able to isolate three distinctive aspects of biblical faith. The first is the Latin term *notitia*: believing in the data or the information.

Latin Fiction or Greek Truth?

ROBBINS: Let us ask what should be an obvious question: Why does Sproul suddenly shift from Greek to Latin? How does he get the Latin word *notitia* from the Greek word *pistein*? The Bible was not written in Latin. From *pistein* one can get cognate Greek words, Biblical words such as *pistis* and *pisteuo*, but not *notitia*. The word

notitia is not found in the Greek New Testament, but might be found in its Latin mistranslation called the Vulgate, which is the official Bible of the Roman Catholic Church. But Sproul has told us that “those who were involved in the Reformation” “did their studies in the New Testament.” The Reformers did not rely on a Latin mistranslation; they studied the Greek manuscripts. The Latin terms and analysis of faith that Sproul provides are not derived from Scripture, but from some other source.

Ironically, Sproul even gets the Latin wrong. *Notitia* does not mean “believing in the data or the information.” It refers to understanding, not believing. Sproul’s account of saving faith is not taken from Scripture; it is incoherent; and it begins with his misunderstanding of both the Greek word *pistein* and the Latin terms he prefers to use.

SPROUL: It’s an intellectual awareness. You can’t have faith in nothing; there has to be content to the faith. You have to believe something or trust someone.

ROBBINS: Notice that Sproul here uses the verbs “believe” and “trust” interchangeably, as synonyms. This is both good English and sound theology. Belief, that is to say, faith (there is only one word in the New Testament for belief, *pistis*) and trust are the same; they are synonyms. If you believe what a person says, you trust him. If you trust a person, you believe what he says. If you have faith in him, you believe what he says and trust his words. If you trust a bank, you believe its claims to be safe and secure. Strictly speaking, trust is belief of propositions in the future tense, such as “he will be good to me” or “this bank will keep my money safe.” This is important, because Sproul’s incorrect analysis of saving faith, his splitting it up into three parts, the third part being trust, depends on denying that belief and trust are the same thing. But here he correctly implies they are the same by using the words interchangeably.

SPROUL: When we say that a person is saved by faith, some people say, It doesn’t matter what you believe, just as long as you are sincere. That’s not what the Bible teaches. It matters profoundly what you believe. What if I believed that the devil was God? That wouldn’t save me. I must believe the right information.

ROBBINS: This is absolutely true. Saving faith is belief of the truth, not falsehoods; and not just any random truth either, but the truth about Jesus Christ and his work. Correct information is crucial to saving faith. The Gospel message, the Good News, is essential. Notice that news, information, doctrine, teaching, is always and only intellectual and propositional. It is meant to be understood. It is not felt, experienced, or emoted.

SPROUL: The second aspect of faith is what they call *assensus*, or intellectual assent.

ROBBINS: Who are “they” that divide saving faith, like all Gaul, into three parts? The New Testament writers did not do so. Sproul has not quoted a single verse from the Bible supporting his speculations about faith. Christians in the

pews need to realize that theologians who substitute Latin terms for Greek and divide saving faith into three elements are not exegeting Scripture; they are reading into it something that is not there. Perhaps that is why they use a language that is not there either. This is ventriloquism, not exegesis, and the ventriloquists make the Biblical authors speak the language of the Latin Church.

Misrepresenting James, Denying the Power of the Gospel

SPROUL: I must be persuaded of the truthfulness of the content. According to James, even if I am aware of the work of Jesus, convinced intellectually that Jesus is the Son of God, that he died on the cross for my sins, and that he rose from the dead I would at that point qualify to be a demon.

ROBBINS: Here Sproul's theological ventriloquism is blatant, for James says no such thing. Notice that Sproul does not actually quote James; he puts his own words into James' mouth. Here is what James actually says: "You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe – and tremble!" James says nothing about any demon believing that Jesus "died on the cross for my sins, and that he rose from the dead." James mentions only belief in one God – monotheism. Since belief in one God is belief of one true proposition, James says, "You do well." But monotheism is not saving belief because it is not about Jesus Christ and his work.

What is even worse than Sproul's gross misrepresentation of James is his denial of the power of the Gospel. The belief that Sproul says "qualifies [him] to be a demon" is, according to the Holy Spirit, the Gospel: "Moreover brethren, I declare to you the Gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved..... For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). Paul says these propositions are "the Gospel," and that by them, "you are saved." To the Romans he wrote: "For I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes...for in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'The just shall live by faith'" (Romans 1:16-17). Sproul, contradicting Paul, says that these propositions qualify anyone who believes them "to be a demon."

SPROUL: The demons recognize Jesus, and the devil himself knows the truth of Christ, but he doesn't have saving faith.

ROBBINS: Keep in mind that Sproul is discussing *assensus*, not *notitia*. According to Sproul, the devil is completely orthodox, at least on the doctrine of salvation: "The devil himself knows the truth of Christ" and this is not just "intellectual awareness" (*notitia*), but also assent

(*assensus*). The devil himself assents to the "truth of Christ." The devil himself "knows," "is aware of," and is "convinced intellectually" of the "truth of Christ." But still "he doesn't have saving faith." So in Sproul's soteriology, understanding and believing the "truth of Christ" cannot save. *Notitia* plus *assensus* together do not constitute saving faith, and they have no power to save. One can understand and believe the Gospel and still go to Hell, according to Sproul. This is a complete rejection of what the Bible teaches about faith and salvation.

Trust and Obey

SPROUL: The crucial, most vital element of saving faith in the biblical sense, is that of personal trust.

ROBBINS: Sproul here introduces a third element of saving faith, "personal trust." This, he says, is the most important of the three. One would have thought that the "crucial, most vital element of saving faith" is the Gospel, the Good News, but Sproul says it is not. According to Scripture, it is the Gospel that saves us. The Gospel is "the power of God for salvation." James, whom Sproul grotesquely misrepresents, refers to "the implanted Word, which is able to save your souls." The Word is effective, powerful, and saving. But Sproul says that the "crucial, most vital element of saving faith...is personal trust." Earlier he used the words "believe" and "trust" interchangeably, as synonyms. Now, he says, personal trust is one element of saving faith different from and in addition to both understanding and assent.

SPROUL: The final term is *fiducia*, referring to a fiduciary commitment by which I put my life in the lap of Jesus.

ROBBINS: Nowhere in Scripture are we commanded to put our life "in the lap of Jesus." No one, including, I suspect, Sproul himself, knows what this bizarre figure of speech means. The Scriptural command is to believe the Gospel, and the Gospel is Good News, that is, information, propositions, about Christ Jesus: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved." "The words that I speak to you: They are Spirit and they are life." There is not a word in the Bible about the lap of Jesus.

SPROUL: I trust him and him alone for my salvation.

ROBBINS: To trust a person, as we saw earlier, is to believe what he says, and to believe what he says is to trust him. In other words, there is no such thing as "personal trust" that is different from or better than understanding and believing his words. The unbelieving Jews of Jesus' day had fabricated a doctrine of non-propositional "personal trust" (they anticipated the twentieth-century Jewish philosopher Martin Buber and many other theologians), and Jesus rebuked them for it: "Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; there is one who accuses you – Moses, in whom you trust. For if you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?" (John 5:45-47). Jesus makes it clear, by using the phrases in apposition and inter-

changeably, that “believing Moses” means “believing his writings,” and “believing me” means “believing my words.” The apostate Jews professed a “personal trust” in Moses, even though they did not believe his writings. They praised the prophets, decorated their tombs, and did not assent to their doctrines. The apostate Jews, like many contemporary theologians, tried to separate persons from propositions. They trusted Moses, but they did not believe his writings. They praised Moses and refused to assent to his propositions. For that refusal to assent to Moses’ words they were damned.

In the Biblical sense, and in ordinary language, to trust and to believe are not two different mental actions, and any Jewish or Latin theology that tries to make them so is not Biblical. In Sproul’s soteriology, it is not possible to “trust Christ and him alone for my salvation,” because the “most crucial, vital element of saving faith,” the element that makes it saving, is not Christ at all. Instead, some undefined and perhaps undefinable psychological state that is neither understanding nor assent, but is different from both, is crucial and vital. If this psychological state is the “most crucial,” then we must make sure we “trust,” and “trust enough” to be saved. We must focus, not on Christ, but on our own psychological state. Salvation is swallowed up in subjectivism.

SPROUL: That is the crucial element, and it includes the intellectual and the mental.

ROBBINS: Sproul’s confusion deepens. Is trust a third distinct element in faith or not? If it is a distinct element, it cannot include the other two. Further, are “the intellectual and the mental” different? If so, how? To this point, Sproul has distinguished three elements in saving faith: *notitia*, *assensus*, and *fiducia*. He says that demons and men can both understand and assent to the Gospel and still go to Hell. Now he says that *fiducia* “includes” the “intellectual and the mental.” If that is the case, then *fiducia* seems to be synonymous with *faith*, the term Sproul is supposed to be defining. If that is the case, Sproul has not offered a definition of trust or saving faith, but a tautology. If *fiducia* includes all three elements, *fiducia* is *fides*, and we still don’t know what faith is.

What Is the Heart?

SPROUL: But it [personal trust] goes beyond it [“the intellectual and the mental”] to the heart and to the will so that the whole person is caught up in this experience we call faith.

ROBBINS: First, in the Bible there is no difference between the heart and the head (or mind). When God created man, he made only two things: his body and his mind (see *Genesis 2*). God breathed into the body of dirt, and man became a living soul. It is man’s mind that is the image, the breath, of God. Mind, soul, heart, spirit are not different parts of man; they are synonyms. Further, the will is not a separate faculty; what confused theologians and

philosophers have done is surreptitiously to change an activity of the mind, willing, into an entity, the will. (They have done the same thing with remembering.) It is the “whole person,” that is, the mind, who wills and remembers. The Bible does not teach nineteenth-century faculty psychology; it teaches that man is a unitary creature. It is the heart, the man himself, that thinks, reasons, plans, wills, remembers, and suffers. Man is a unitary creature, not several distinct faculties. Look up the verses on heart and head. Gordon Clark did so, and he published the results in his book *Religion, Reason and Revelation* 45 years ago. Theologians, pastors, and seminary professors have been ignoring his analysis of hundreds of verses ever since. Sproul’s account of saving faith is wrong because he does not derive it from the Bible nor base it on the Biblical view of man.

Second, saving faith is not an “experience” that Christians get “caught up in.” Scripture knows nothing of Sproul’s experientialism. Saving faith, according to Scripture, is understanding and assenting to the Gospel. It is understanding propositions – such as “Jesus died on the cross for the sins of his people” – and agreeing that those propositions are true. No natural man can believe the Gospel. Some natural men cannot even understand it. God alone gives men the gift of belief, and such belief is entirely an act of the mind. The mind, that is the whole person, understands, and the mind, the whole person, agrees. That is why Scripture refers to salvation as “coming to the knowledge of the truth” and emphasizes the importance of thinking, preaching, and understanding the Word. There is no command in Scripture to get “caught up in” any experience in order to be saved. There are many commands in Scripture to understand and believe the Word of God. Saving faith, contrary to what many theologians say, is simple child-like faith. It is simply understanding the Good News and accepting it as true.

“Faith” in the Reformed Confessions

Sproul (like all Elders in the PCA and OPC) has solemnly sworn that he believes the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. But the *Westminster Confession* does not define saving faith as Sproul defines it. This Latin trichotomy is neither confessional nor Biblical. Echoing Scripture, the *Westminster Confession* calls faith “the act of believing.”

In his book *What Is Saving Faith?* Dr. Gordon Clark meticulously examined scores of verses in which the Holy Spirit uses the word *pistis* and its cognates. No other modern Reformed theologian seems to have done this, and many theologians and pastors continue to parrot what they have heard in seminary about faith, rather than studying the Bible. In his answer to the question, What Is Faith? Dr. Sproul fails to quote a single verse of Scripture, and when he refers to James, he completely misrepresents him. According to Scripture, faith and belief are the same (*pistis*), and saving faith is assent to the truth of the Gospel – nothing more and nothing less.