

Work of God

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Calvinistic Work

Those who take a Calvinistic view of faith are quick to use Jn 6:29 to advance their soteriology by claiming that saving faith is a work of God—in the literal sense of being produced by God. This position is then fortified with a Calvinistic interpretation of Eph 2:8-9 in which faith is viewed as a gift of God. It is a work of God produced within man and irresistibly given to man.

Dualistic Work

But, strangely, advocates of this rationale do not necessarily stop with affirming that faith is a work of God in Jn 6:29. They also appeal to the popular interpretation that sees work in this passage as a work of man—in the generic sense of being something we do. After all, the people being addressed have just been told by Jesus to work for eternal life (Jn 6:27). And they respond by asking, “What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?” (Jn 6:28) And Jesus responds, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent” (Jn 6:29). Obviously, *the work of God* is something they are expected to do. So it is also in some sense a *work of man*.

Alternate Proposal

We will challenge both the popular opinion and the Calvinistic interpretation of Jn 6:29 in that we do not find it necessary to see saving faith as literally being considered a work of either God or man in this context. And we certainly do not find it necessary to understand *work of God* to mean *produced by God*. Granted, many FG writers would readily succumb to the popular opinion that saving faith is a work in some sense of the word. Yet they would reject the conclusion that it is a work in the Calvinistic sense. So even if a Calvinist were successful in circumventing our argument that faith is not a work in this passage, he would still have to contend with the various other manners in which saving faith is considered a non-Calvinistic work by non-Calvinists other than ourselves.

The argument being employed herein, however, heads the Calvinistic argument off at the pass by contending that saving faith is not a work in the literal sense of the word. But this is the result rather than reason for our argument. The primary motivating factor for not considering saving faith a work is due to the Pauline contrast between such faith and work. In Paul’s mind, and evidently in the minds of his Greek speaking readers, the two were not to be equated. Thus, we reject considering soteriological faith a work because Paul rejects such association. Our second reason for not considering such faith to be a work is because Jesus’ statement does require such an association. Jesus is making a play on words with the word *work* in Jn 6:29 to refer to what is *required* rather than produced by God. *The work of God* contextually is to be equated with the moral rather than irresistible *will of God* (Jn 6:38-40). Additionally, the word *work* is being used ironically in contrast to the work they are performing. Moreover, it is being used metaphorically to refer to faith as the requirement.

Popular FG Perspective

Nevertheless, in refuting the popular misconception in which everything we do (including coming to saving faith) is considered a work, we will need to respond to some FG advocates whose statements are appealed to by Calvinists in defense of equating faith with works. [Art Farstad](#), for example, writing from a FG perspective, has made the claim: “Anything that the believer does to the glory of God is a good work.” But by this definition, which is derived from 1Cor 10:31, if God is glorified by our coming to faith, would not even saving faith be considered a good work? Indeed, in this same article, Farstad states his belief that soteric faith is the only work we are required to do in order to avail ourselves of the greatest good work which is Christ’s atonement (Jn 6:29). But if believing in Christ is *good*, and it is, and if believing in Christ is a *work*, as Farstad maintains, then believing in Christ is a *good work*. Farstad correctly affirms that we will be rewarded for our good works. But this poses a problem with his statement about faith being a work, and some would twist this to mean that we are rewarded for saving faith. A twisted syllogism of his argument might be expressed as:

Farstad's *Far Side*®

1. God rewards all our works.
2. Saving faith is a work.
3. God rewards saving faith.

Following this line of reasoning would certainly lead one to conclude that the eternal life given in response to saving faith is not a gift but a reward. After all, a gift is not a reward (see [What is Work](#)). But the Bible explicitly says that eternal life is given as a gift in regeneration. Therefore, the gift of eternal life cannot be a reward. In calling saving faith a work, Farstad leaves a number of paradoxical questions unanswered: “Why does God not reward us for this work of saving faith?” Does Farstad intend for our work to be understood as a work in the same sense as Christ’s greatest work? Why does Farstad set our “work” in Jn 6:29 off with quotation marks? Is this to indicate to the reader that he does not really consider faith to be a work in the same sense as Christ’s work? If so, in what sense is it a “work”? Is our faith a good work because it is in Christ’s good work? If so, is saving faith our greatest good work because it is in Christ’s greatest good work? But if our saving faith takes its character as well as its value from its object, then it is just as much a good work as was Christ’s greatest work. We are therefore on firm ground for questioning Farstad’s definition and confusing, if not contradictory, statements. We have demonstrated the fallacy of his definition of good work regarding 1Cor 10:31 elsewhere,¹ now we will do the same for his assumption that faith is a work in Jn 6:29.

Required by God

Although Calvinists, contrary to Calvin, interpret *work of God* as a genitive of source to mean work produced by God, we agree with Calvin and interpret it to mean *required by God*. BDAG defines *work* (*ergon*, β) in Jn 6:28-29 as *the deeds that God desires*. The *work of God* is the work He wants us to do. Thayer likewise regards work in this passage as *the works required and approved by God*. BGAG and Thayer also jointly cite Jer 48:10 from the LXX as a case in point to show that it is required work: “Cursed is the one who does the work of the Lord carelessly” (TM).

BKC concurs that faith is *required* from us in this evangelistic invitation in Jn 6:29. This certainly fits the context better. Jesus is not promising them that God will produce faith in them; rather, the Lord is telling them that God requires faith from them. BDAG and Thayer also cite Rev 2:26 as being another case in point from Johannine literature, where we are exhorted to keep the deeds of Christ until the end. It is an exhortation for our perseverance in faith, not a promise of Christ’s production of faith. Christ does not promise to produce faith in believers until the end. Instead, He requires misthological faith from them until the end if they are to receive the promised reward. Likewise, soteriological faith is required from us if we are to receive the gift of eternal life.

One can easily find other such examples in the GJ where the *work of God* refers to doing the *will of God*. When Jesus says, “We must work the *works of Him* who sent Me,” He does not mean that we are to sit by passively while God does the work for us or through us (Jn 9:4). Rather, it is to be taken in the same sense as when He says, “My food is to do the *will of Him* who sent Me, and to accomplish *His work*” (Jn 4:34). We do *His will* by doing *His work*. The *work of God* is the *will of God*. It is what **we** are supposed to do. It is the work that He has given **us** to do (cp. Jn 5:36; 17:4), not the work which He produces for us. But perhaps the most emphatic example comes from the context itself:

²⁷Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life...”

²⁸They said therefore to Him, “What shall we do, that we may work **the works of God**?” ²⁹Jesus answered and said to them, “This is **the work of** God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.”...³⁸For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but **the will of** Him who sent Me. ³⁹And this is **the will of** Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. ⁴⁰For this is **the will of** my Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him, may have eternal life; and I Myself will raise him up on the last day.” (John 6:27-40)

In the context of Jn 6:29, *the work of God* is that we do *the will of* the Father by believing in the Son (Jn 6:38-40).² It is not a genitive of production but a genitive of possession. It is God's *work, desire, will* that we believe.³ Saving faith is what He requires from us, not what He gives to us. He requires it from us because we are the ones responsible for producing it!⁴

Seek for God

Additionally, when the shift in how the word *work* is being used contextually is noted, it becomes apparent that Jesus is using irony to metaphorically shift the synonymy. We will first quote the passage with expanded explanation and then focus on the shift.

²⁶ Jesus answered them and said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, **you seek Me**, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves, and were filled.”²⁷ Do not **work** [= metaphor for *seek*] for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man shall give to you, for on Him the Father, even God, has set His seal.”²⁸ They said therefore to Him, “What shall we do, that we may **work the works of God?** [They misconstrue the metaphor for *work*, and think that Jesus is actually telling them to meritoriously work for eternal life since they fail to distinguish the precondition from the condition.]”²⁹ Jesus answered and said to them, “This is the **work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.**” [Jesus shifts the metaphor for *work* from *seek* to *believe* to refute their notion that works are the response God wants. What God actually requires is faith, not work.]

Jesus is making a play on words with the word *work* in Jn 6:29 to expose their works-oriented mentality so that He may refute it with singularity and irony. He uses singular *work* as opposed to their plural *works*. He metaphorically defines this work as something that would not normally be considered a work—faith. This is like saying, “The work God actually requires is that you not work but believe.” For those who claim that faith in v. 29 is a work is like saying non-work is work. The semantic potentiality in which the word *work* could be used to simply refer to something you do or to something God requires provides Jesus with the opportunity to make a play on words that allows Him to speak ironically and metaphorically. He is not using the word *work* normally (except in terms of potential semantic possibilities); rather, He is speaking metaphorically in order to refute them ironically.

1. The work of God is the will of God.
2. The will of God is that you believe rather than work.
3. Therefore, the work of God is that you believe rather than work.

In short, the will of God is that you not work. To be sure, work in terms of seeking is the precondition to be able to meet the condition that you believe rather than work. Saving faith is the result of work rather than a work itself. Saving faith is the result of seeking rather than seeking itself. Saving faith is resting upon what one has found. It is to move from being a seeker to a finder, that is, to a believer. Since seeking is the actual work we are to perform in this passage, faith is not actually a work. The substitution will not work. You cannot substitute *seek* for work in vv. 28-29, only in v. 26.

²⁶ Jesus answered them and said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, **you seek Me**, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves, and were filled.”²⁷ Do not **work** [= *seek*] for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man shall give to you, for on Him the Father, even God, has set His seal.”²⁸ They said therefore to Him, “What shall we **do**, that we may **work** [= meritoriously do] the **works of God?** [= the will of God]”²⁹ Jesus answered and said to them, “This is the **work of God** [= the will of God], that **you believe** [= nonmeritoriously do] in Him whom He has sent.”

The transitional nature of *work* in the context is apparent. It starts out as metaphorically referring to *seek* and ends up as metaphorically referring to *believe*. It is metaphorically transitional in moving from a meritorious response to a nonmeritorious response.

1. *Work = seek = meritorious precondition* (cp. Heb 11:6).
2. *Work = do = meritorious performance as condition for eternal life*.
3. *Works of God = will of God = meritorious things as conditions for eternal life*.
4. *Work of God = will of God = believe ≠ work*.

Jesus begins by exhorting them to stop spending all their energy trying to get their bellies full and instead spend their energy doing the work necessary to come to saving faith, to *work for* eternal life. Their ears perk up at the thought of working for eternal life. This fits their work-oriented outlook. So they respond by asking what kind of works they have to do. Jesus throws their expectations into reverse by metaphorically giving a single work—faith. Its metaphorical nature is seen in the definition itself, in the contextual transition, in the broader context which uses many metaphors for faith, and in the general understanding at that time which accepted as a given that such faith was not a work. But some will respond, “But Jesus says that faith is a work so it must be a work!”

Yes, Jesus says that faith is a work in this passage. He also says that He is a vine and that we are branches in ch. 15. Does this mean that we are to ignore the context of that chapter and say that we are literal branches? Of course not. Also, in this very context of ch. 6, Jesus repeatedly says that He is bread (Jn 6:32-35,48,51). Jesus, in fact, makes a transition from their literal use of the term to His metaphorical use: “They said therefore to Him, ‘Lord, evermore give us this [literal] *bread*.’ Jesus said to them, ‘I am the [metaphorical] *bread* of life; he who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.’” How can we be so dogmatic in saying that *work* means literal *work* in this context when *bread* does not mean literal *bread* a few verses later? Why unnecessarily pose a conflict between Jesus and Paul? Why not just admit that Jesus takes their phrase and uses it ironically to show that they are missing the point in thinking that the condition for eternal life is a work?

Clear Speech

Paul and his readers certainly did not regard saving faith to be a work in any true sense of the word. We submit, therefore, that Jesus is not using the word *work* in its normal fashion. Rather, He uses a play on words to use it to point to the *will of God* to show that what they must do is believe rather than literally work. The *work of God* is that *work* not be considered work in the normal sense of the word. There are those who adopt the Calvinistic mindset who at this point would quote [Art Farstad](#) again: “In John 6:28, after Jesus fed the 5,000 with the five loaves and two fishes, the Jews asked Him, ‘What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?’ A very good question deserving a clear, concise answer!”

It is then retorted that understanding Jesus as speaking ironically would not qualify as a clear or concise answer. On the one hand, one is inclined to respond that if the populace in general did not regard faith a work, as Paul’s statements lead us to suspect, then they should be able to discern the meaning readily enough. In a few moments, Jesus will in fact give one of the most clear and concise answers ever made: “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has eternal life” (Jn 6:47; MT). On the other hand, one is left puzzled by the sentiment that assumes that Jesus must speak blandly in order to answer appropriately. To be sure, Paul said that he ought to speak forth the mystery of Christ clearly. He was under obligation to *make it clear* (Col 4:4). But where do we read that Jesus was under obligation to speak clearly? In fact, it is His enemies who think that they have a right to impose upon Him to speak clearly: “The Jews therefore gathered around Him, and were saying to Him, ‘How long will You keep us in suspense? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly’” (Jn 10:24; cp. 8:25). Do those today who demand that Jesus speak plainly in the text in calling faith a work make themselves an enemy of the text?

They certainly are not doing justice to the context. Have they not read that in the very chapter where Jesus commences this discussion by calling faith a work that He pours on the metaphoric language so strong in picturing faith as eating His flesh and drinking His blood that many, even of His followers, will stop following Him? His very own followers acknowledge: “This is a difficult statement; who can listen to it?” (Jn 6:60). What is clear to many of us was not clear to many of them. If Jesus does not feel compelled to make His

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sayings just as easy as possible for His followers in the past, can we be so certain that He feels under obligation to make them just as plain as possible for His followers in the present? Did He not warn us that He speaks in parables to conceal the truth from those who do not have eyes to see or ears to hear (Mt 13:13; Lk 8:10)? Claiming that Jesus clearly equates faith with work is like the Sunday School teacher I heard who claimed that Jesus spoke in parables to make the truth so clear that it would be easy for everyone to understand it. Not so!

Jesus may not be using parables in GJ, but He is certainly not limiting Himself to speaking plainly either. When He challenged His critics to destroy the temple, they did not understand what He meant because He was making a word play on the word *temple* that even His disciples would not understand until years later (Jn 2:18-22). In the next chapter, when Nicodemus comes to Him, Jesus tells him that he must be born *anōthen*. This could mean *again* or *from above* and leaves Nicodemus scratching his head. Is it physical or spiritual, literal or metaphorical? Jesus does not clear up the matter greatly for Nicodemus by titling Himself *Son of Man* and comparing Himself to a serpent on a pole (Jn 3:13-14). In the next chapter, we encounter a Samaritan woman who is trying to figure out how He is going to get living water out of a well without a bucket. We pat ourselves on the back for understanding that *living water* does not literally refer to running water, but then think that faith in Jn 6:29 is literally a work, in the very chapter where many of His followers grumble and stumble over His words because they take His metaphors for faith literally rather than metaphorically (Jn 6:61)! It seems that His modern day followers are still stumbling over the metaphorical description of faith in this passage in considering it a literal work. Jesus speaks so cryptically that His enemies cannot even understand when He is talking about the Father (Jn 8:27). Although Jesus presents what we today consider a clear illustration about the shepherd, John informs us, “This figure of speech Jesus spoke to them, but they did not understand what those things were which He had been saying to them” (Jn 10:6). The misunderstanding is so bad that many of His listeners think He is insane (Jn 10:20). It is in this context, that His enemies demand that He tell them plainly who He is (Jn 10:24). He finally does so (Jn 10:30), but then turns right around and makes a play on the word *gods* to escape being stoned. In the upper room, Jesus acknowledges that He has been speaking in figurative language but will speak plainly (Jn 16:25). And here, in the closing words of His final discourse with His disciples before He is to be crucified, we finally almost hear a sigh of relief from His disciples as they say: “Lo, now You are speaking plainly, and are not using a figure of speech” (Jn 16:29). Those who insist that faith must clearly be a work in the heart of all this figurative speech are failing to take the context seriously.

Not a Work

We are therefore in firm agreement with Olson’s comments on Jn 6:29: “Some have mistakenly thought He was saying that faith is a work. Nothing could be farther from the truth! Rather, He was seeking to wean them away from their works-obsessed mindset. Faith is to be set in contradistinction to works in order to maintain the grace principle of salvation (Rom. 4:16)” (*Calvinism*, 262). Govett likewise responds concerning this verse “Is faith a ‘work’ No! It is in contrast to works. But our Lord uses it by way of allusion to their question” (*John*, 252). Those who cannot see the allusion are bound to see an illusion. They will imagine that faith is actually a work when in fact they are seeing a mirage caused by not carefully considering the shifts in the context or the appeal to normal usage in the Pauline texts.

Summary

Although faith might be regarded as a *work of God* in the literal sense of being the response required by God, the fact that it is called the *work of God* rather than *will of God* is due to contextual factors that cause the word *work* to intersect the semantic sphere of normal usage only metaphorically. The *work of God* is actually the *will of God* in this context. It is not literally a *work* but simply refers to faith metaphorically so that faith is not regarded as a work by the One requiring it. The Lord uses irony to make a word play that uses their own terminology to expose the antonymy of their works-oriented mentality with what is actually required by God. The Lord requires faith as opposed to works. We therefore find the Lord’s intended meaning to be in complete harmony with Paul who insists that soteriological faith is not a work. Saving faith is not a work of God or of man. It is simply not to be taken literally as a work.

¹ See [Doxological Versus Misthological Amoralism](#).

² See “Faith is a Response that God Requires from Us” in *The Outer Darkness*.

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³ Godet would call it a genitive of reference so that it “designates not the *author* of the work (*Augustine*), but the one with reference to whom it is done: the question is of the work which God *requires*” (*John*, 580; emphasis his). In either case, it denotes what God *requires*.

⁴ See [Gift of God](#). For those who still insist upon a genitive of source, we point out that in that case it would have to be a genitive of co-source. Faith is synergistically produced in us by God and us. As noted in [Gift of God](#), this statement is true theologically, but I am very skeptical that this affirmation is the point being made contextually.