

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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RIGHTEOUS BEFORE GOD: NOW AND FOREVER?

The sad development surrounding John Piper continues to snowball. Piper boldly announced that “we should not speak of getting to heaven by faith alone in the same way we are justified by faith alone.”¹ Piper is contending that salvation is a much broader concept than justification. Brad Mason, in his survey of the issues, makes the following observations:

“I agree that Salvation is a broader term than just Justification. As we discussed last time, the benefits of Union with Christ are two-fold, Justification and Regeneration – the latter to be taken in its widest sense to include all that answers to our corruption of nature (illumination, the death of the old man and resurrection of the new, sanctification, and ultimately glorification); the former answering to our guilt. To be sure, the Scripture speaks of Salvation itself as having a past referent, a present referent, and a future referent. We read the following uses throughout:

“Past tense: *‘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. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them’ (Eph. 2:8-10).*

“Present tense: *‘For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who **are being saved** it is the power of God’ (1 Cor. 1:18).*

“Future tense: *‘Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we **shall be saved** from wrath through Him’ (Rom. 5:9).*

“It is common in systematics to divide these tenses into differing benefits, past tense being Justification, present tense being Sanctification, and future tense being Glorification. Piper’s breakdown is a bit different in his article:

- In *justification*, faith receives a finished work of Christ performed *outside* of us and counted as ours – imputed to us.
- In *sanctification*, faith receives an ongoing power of Christ that works *inside* us for practical holiness.
- In *final salvation* at the last judgment, faith is confirmed by the sanctifying fruit it has borne, and we are saved through that fruit and that faith. As Paul says in 2 Thessalonians 2:13, ‘God chose you as the first fruits to be saved, *through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.*’

“It seems to me that Piper speaks comfortably in both ways, but here is pointing up the judicial or forensic aspect of Salvation relative to both the past and the future. But no matter. I presume we all agree that each of these benefits do in fact flesh out the more holistic meaning of ‘salvation,’ beyond just justification. But a major problem, as I see it, is that these inseparable benefits of Union with Christ by faith are often

unduly disjointed. They are treated as though one is initially justified – right with God, as Piper puts it – and then one begins the next phase on that basis, i.e., Sanctification; then at the end of the lifelong work of Sanctification, one comes to the Last Judgment, passing through to the final and consummate stage of Glorification. Particularly for Piper, the future aspect of Salvation follows a judgment *based upon all of what has gone before*. Thus, fruits are brought forward as confirmations of living faith in the Last Judgment such that one cannot properly say that this future aspect of Salvation is ‘by means of faith alone.’

“But this multi-step progress of Salvation, passing from one state to the next in order, seems to obscure the meaning of Justification itself. Justification is a judicial declaration of ‘not guilty’ and ‘perfectly righteous’ in Christ. As many have pointed out (including [gasp] N. T. Wright), the law-court imagery of Justification, viz., the Judge declaring one innocent and righteous from the Seat of Judgment is properly *in view of the Final Judgment*. When will the books be opened and the judicial sentence passed by God seated on His throne? When will the verdict be read? At the end of the ages, Justification itself is the present declaration that one is, and will duly be pronounced ‘not guilty’ when the actual Judgment occurs. Sentence has not yet been passed. But by Union with Christ, the declaration of future salvation is already sealed. Thus we read (as quoted above), *‘Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him’* (Rom. 5:9). Having been Justified, we have been saved and *will* be saved. By the Holy Spirit we ‘were sealed for the day of redemption’ upon our conversion, ‘were saved in this hope’ of the final redemption, and by faith wait for ‘Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come’ (Eph. 4:30; Rom. 8:23-25; 1 Thess. 1:8-10).

“This is what is truly precious about the doctrine of Justification: it is not just the first step from which one moves on into the rest of the benefits of saving Union with Christ. It is the declaration at the beginning of what will be at the end. Justification is the definitive, present, juridical, and authoritative pronouncement on the whole of the believers walk to Glory; that is, a pronouncement on the whole of what constitutes Salvation in its broadest sense. Justification answers our guilt in Adam, both now and at the Last Judgment. This declaration is true and unchanging from the moment of faith and Union, through the entire course of Regeneration, Sanctification, and Glorification. It pronounces the end at the beginning and all along the way. And how are we Justified – how do we receive this holistic declaration of ‘not guilty’ and ‘perfectly righteous?’ *By faith alone. Sola Fide.*”²

The late G. C. Berkouwer, in addressing the historical context in the struggle over the *sola fide*, duly noted the role the Reformed confessions played. “Needless to say, this does not mean that the confessions are absolutely decisive. They themselves arise from the conviction that we can and may speak only as we put ourselves under the yoke of Scripture. Our reflection, too, and for the same reason, must proceed in the train of Scripture. But we can hardly circumvent that bitterest of all struggles for a pure understanding of the gospel, the Reformation of the sixteenth century. It was then as at no other time that justification through faith was trumpeted as the article with which the Church stands or falls. *Sola fide* was not presented as a discrete aspect or section of the confession. It embraced the whole gospel. And this conviction is reflected in a number of Reformed and Lutheran confessions.

“The Heidelberg Catechism, after it has presented the Apostles Creed, asks what the *profit* of all this really is. It had already turned this keen, practical edge to each of the various individual articles: Christ’s holy conception and birth (Q. 36), His sacrifice (Q. 43), His resurrection (Q. 45) and ascension (Q. 49), and the glorification of our Head, the Christ (Q. 51). It asked, furthermore, about the *comfort* of the doctrine of the resurrection of the body (Q. 57) and Christ’s return (Q. 52). In concrete fashion, thus, the significance to the believer of God’s mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ was brought to the foreground.

“Finally, in Lord’s Day 23, the question is put: ‘But what does it profit you now that you *believe all this?*’ The answer, which is related to the whole of faith and its content, is: ‘*That I am righteous in Christ before God, and an heir to eternal life.*’ Faith has intense relevance to this ‘profit,’ this benefit with which the Catechism is so warmly concerned. Faith is not a reasonable acceptance of certain truths, after which it

can be set aside for the immediate practical affairs of the day. Through faith man participates in reality, a comforting reality, to be sure, and in a perspective of an eternal future.

“The phrase *in Christ* is included in the declaration of personal justification. We are, as it were, conducted into a court of law to hear a merciful declaration of pardon. But the answer displays to us the unique character of this declaration. The accusation was not without grounds; it was secured by incontrovertible facts. The offense that had to be judged was the reality of great sin against God. And this was not something brought up out of a hazy past; the accused is still set for a plunge into the worst of evil. This is all so irrefutable that the sinner can do nothing but admit the justness of the charge. There would seem to be no possibility of acquittal. But there is an unparalleled counterbalance to the reality of guilt. Christ Jesus is confessed: He has satisfied; He makes good the righteousness, justice, and holiness; and He is the cause of the pardon. He is the surprise of God’s unexpected salvation from the just accusation that still is being brought against us. The impossible has here become undoubted reality. The result is an electrifying and truly incomparable judgment of pardon. The doors swing open; the soft lights of the new freedom are shed over our whole future – we are heirs of eternal life.

“It is in this connection that faith is mentioned, qualified by the word *alone*: justification is through faith alone. We are now miles away from a cooperation between divine salvation and the human work of faith. For this faith is directed exclusively to Christ, in the recognition that His righteousness and His acts alone could create the amazing situation in which a man can say: ‘. . . God, without any merit of mine, of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never had nor committed any sin, and myself had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me’ (Lord’s Day 23). Notice the phrase *as if*. It suggests, perhaps, that we are being told of a fiction, an illusion, a pretence. It recalls the so-called ‘As if’ philosophy of Hans Vaihinger, who tried to demonstrate the great significance of the fictitious for the various sciences. But this ‘as if’ of the Catechism has to do with far more than a fiction. There is, indeed, an element of analogy, for we have not in reality performed this obedience. We have certainly sinned and are certainly sinners. We were in fact disobedient and slaves of sin. But the creative force of Christ’s righteousness is so good and so tender and so miraculous that the new situation can be sketched in terms like the Catechism’s ‘as if.’ The reality of our performance is not commensurate with the ‘as if’ of the Catechism, and yet we are faced with the immeasurable blessing of Christ’s work which is valid for eternity at God’s judgment seat. Jesus Christ is the secret of the ‘as if.’ He is its content. Therefore it is an accurate formulation of the message of divine justification. It finds its counterpart in Scripture: ‘Come now, and let us reason together, saith Jehovah: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool’ (Isa. 1:18). ‘I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake; and I will not remember thy sins’ (Isa. 43:25). ‘I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins: return unto me; for I have redeemed thee’ (Isa. 44:22). ‘Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth over the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? He retaineth not his anger forever, because he delighteth in lovingkindness. He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot; and thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea’ (Mic. 7:18, 19).

“There is a striking commentary on the *quasi* of Lord’s Day 23 in Zechariah 3, where Joshua the high priest, with Satan at his right hand, stands before the face of the angel of the Lord. Joshua, accused by Satan, wears a filthy robe, yet the accuser is turned away. ‘And Jehovah said unto Satan, Jehovah rebuke thee, O Satan; Salem rebuke thee; is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?’ (Zech. 3:2). But there is a difference in Lord’s Day 23; here the accuser is not Satan but our own conscience. The ‘as if’ for this reason gets a unique color; it stands in bold relief against the drabness of our own stained conscience and confessed guilt.

“Everything is really said in an unobtrusive phrase, *in Christ*. The possibility and reality of justification are concentrated in this one phrase. This appears most clearly in the manner in which faith is approached. It is not added as a second, independent ingredient which makes its own contribution to justification in

Christ. On the contrary, faith does nothing but accept, or come to rest in the sovereignty of His benefit. Further, to ward off any misunderstanding, Lord's Day 23 declares with a touch of emphasis, that we are not acceptable to God because of the worthiness of our faith. Grace is exclusively and totally God's; therefore, says the Catechism, we can do nothing else but accept it through faith (Q. 61). To walk the way of faith is simply to admit that Christ is the Way. These are the accents of the Reformation."³

CONCLUSION: I close with Calvin's comments of Acts 13:38-39: "Thus it is said in Paul's sermon in the thirteenth chapter of The Acts: Through Christ is forgiveness of sins announced to you, and everyone who believes in him is justified of all things from which the law of Moses could not justify him (Acts 13:38-39). You see that, after forgiveness of sins, this justification is set down, as it were, by way of interpretation. You see that it is plainly understood as absolution, you see that it is separated from the works of the law. You see it as the mere benefit of Christ, and you see that it is received by faith. You see finally that a satisfaction is introduced where he says that we are justified from our sins through Christ. Thus, when the publican is said to have gone down from the Temple justified (Luke 18:14), we cannot say that he achieved righteousness by any merit of works. This, therefore, is what is said: after pardon of sins has been obtained, the sinner is considered as a just man in God's sight. Therefore, he was righteous not by approval of works but by God's free absolution. Ambrose has, accordingly, fitly expressed it when he calls the confession of sins a lawful justification.

"And to avoid contention over a word, if we look upon the thing itself as described to us, no misgiving will remain. For Paul surely refers to justification by the word "acceptance" when in Eph. 1:5-6 he says: 'We are destined for adoption through Christ according to God's good pleasure, to the praise of his glorious grace by which he has accounted us acceptable and beloved' (Eph. 1:5-6). That means the very thing that he commonly says elsewhere that 'God justifies us freely' (Rom. 3:24). Moreover, in the fourth chapter of Romans he first calls justification 'imputation of righteousness.' And he does not hesitate to include it within forgiveness of sins. Paul says 'That man is declared blessed by David whom God renders acceptable or to whom he imputes righteousness apart from works, as it is written: 'Blessed are they whose transgressions have been forgiven.' (Rom. 4:6-7; Ps. 32:1). There he is obviously discussing not a part of justification but the whole of it. Further, he approves the definition of it set forth by David when he declares those men blessed to whom free pardon of sins is given (Ps. 32:1-2). From this it is clear that the righteousness of which he speaks is simply set in opposition to guilt. But the best passage of all on this matter is the one in which he teaches that the sum of the gospel embassy is to reconcile us to God, since God is willing to receive us into grace through Christ, not counting our sins against us (2 Cor. 5:18-20). Let my readers carefully ponder the whole passage. For a little later Paul adds by way of explanation: 'Christ, who was without sin, was made sin for us' (2 Cor. 5:21), to designate the means of reconciliation (cf. vs. 18-19). Doubtless, he means by the word 'reconciled' nothing but 'justified.' And surely, what he teaches elsewhere – that 'we are made righteous by Christ's obedience' (Rom. 5:19) – could not stand unless we are reckoned righteous before God in Christ and apart from ourselves."⁴ And this surely means that our good works or character have absolutely no role in our right to eternal life. "In true holiness it is not hard to understand that our works cannot even be a part of our righteousness, since they are polluted and imperfect. When the Catechism speaks of the imperfection of our good works, it intends to express our guilt; it complains humbly in the obedience of faith that we are still so far removed not from some moral ideal but from the Lord."⁵

ENDNOTES

¹ Cf. his 9/25/17 post, "Does God really save us by faith alone?" (<https://desiringgod.org/articles/does-god-really-save-us-by-faith-alone>).

² B. Mason, "Rachel Miller Contra Mundum? The 5 Solas and John Piper, Part I & II (<http://www.heartandmouth.org>).

³ G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Faith and Justification* (Eerdmans, 1954), pp. 40-43.

⁴ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Book III, ch. XI, sec. 3, 4).

⁵ G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies In Dogmatics: Faith and Sanctification* (Eerdmans, 1954), p. 130.