

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

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ABRAHAM'S JUSTIFICATION

Ecclesia Reformata Et Semper Reformanda – “The Church Reformed and Always Reforming” – a very noble expression and one that the Reformers would wholeheartedly endorse. As Protestants who like to call their church *reformata*, we must not forget that the truths we embrace are not found first of all in our creeds and confessions of faith, as important as these are, but in the Bible itself. For that reason, we know that the *ecclesia reformata* must also be *semper reformanda*, always to be reformed by the Word of God. Reformed people do not think that the Protestant Reformation was a once-for-all reformation or transformation of the church (Luther and Calvin would have been the first to insist on this!). As a Reformed church, we are *ecclesia audiens*, a listening church, always ready to reexamine itself by listening to the Word of God. The *ecclesia reformata* is supposed also to be *semper reformanda*, reformed and always to be reformed. There is also a statement made by the Puritan John Robinson (1575-1625) that expresses the same thought. “God yet has more light to break forth from His Word.”¹ In both cases, the underlining premise is the ultimate authority of Scripture as captured in the Reformation’s motto, *Sola Scriptura*. As often is the case, however, these noble statements can be abused. When people advance views that are clearly out of harmony with the key Biblical doctrines established and defended by the Reformers and their heirs, the appeal is made that this is an advancement when in fact it is a serious departure (and in some cases a complete repudiation of the Reformation²). Every heterodoxical group can make the claim that their views are an improvement upon what historic Christianity taught (Joseph Smith and the Mormons come to mind). Martin Luther said that given the importance of the doctrine of justification by faith alone, he foresaw the enemy of Christ, the Devil, doing all he could to destroy it. Thus the great Reformer lamented *A misso articulo justificationis simul amissa est tota doctrina Christiana*. This prompted the Puritan giant John Owen to bemoan, “I wish he (Luther) had not been a true prophet when he foretold that in the following ages the doctrine hereof would again be obscured.”³ Even in Owen’s day, the high point of Reformed orthodoxy, this essential doctrine was under assault, and not only by traditional adversaries like Roman Catholics and Socinians,⁴ but by people who claimed to be Reformed, like the Puritan Richard Baxter.

John Piper has for some time now been playing a similar tune. Even though he insists that justification is by grace alone through faith alone, he also insists that final salvation is conditioned by sanctification via good works. Scott Clark, in his ongoing analysis of this development, points out that, “if our justification is merely initial then it is also only provisional. It means that we are still in a covenant of works. Under a covenant of works we must perform perfect righteousness in order to meet the test and receive the wages. This is the teaching of holy Scripture: ‘Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due’ (Rom 4:4). It was with Paul’s distinction between grace and works (Rom. 11:6) or law and gospel that our theologians taught the distinction between the covenants of works and grace. The two covenants reflect two distinct principles.

“One of the things that we have relearned through this controversy is that at least some of those who reject what we confess about these things do so for the same reason that folk have always rejected our confession: they do not believe that it will lead to sanctification and good works. During the Reformation (and after), our critics in Rome and among the Anabaptists agreed that the Reformation message of salvation by grace alone through faith alone must be rejected because it will not produce the desired results. They were quite plain about this. The Reformation churches (Reformed and Lutheran), however, were convinced that sanctity, and the good works following from sanctification, are the fruit of God’s gracious salvation of his people.”⁵

One of the key texts appealed to by the Reformers was Romans 4:1-8. The teaching of the Apostle Paul in Romans 4 is crystal clear on the plan of salvation. He writes, “But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness” (4:5). Thus, the apostle is continuing his discourse on justification by faith on the principle of grace. The ultimate question, the way of salvation, is his theme. Walter Lüthi, the able Swiss pastor of a past generation, commented in this way on the importance and difficulty of the fourth chapter, “The argument continues to revolve round the question of how man can enter Heaven, if at all; and if so, under what conditions. This question is undoubtedly important enough for us to make an honest effort to answer it. If this fourth chapter is not easy to read, we must not forget that we are concerned here with the ultimate, great and universal truth, the mystery of life and death, of time and eternity, without knowledge of which our existence would be like a room without windows – for after all, it seems to me that there are far less important problems over which we rack our brains and study no end of thick books, because no effort is too great for us to arrive at their solution.”⁶

I. WHAT ABOUT ABRAHAM?

The purpose of the apostle in this chapter is to answer just such a question, that is, to show that God’s method of dealing with men in Old Covenant days is the same as His method of dealing with men in New Covenant days. There is just one way of justification before God.

A. *The problem* (Rom. 4:1). After dealing with some of the consequences of salvation by grace through faith alone, the apostle in this chapter turns to the consideration of a natural question that might have been posed by a reader of Scripture, particularly a Jewish reader. “Paul,” one might have said, “you have eliminated the Law and works as a means of salvation, and therefore, boasting. But what about the teaching of the Scriptures, the teaching of the Old Testament? Were not the men of the Old Testament (the Scriptures to the Hebrew) justified by keeping the Law of Moses?” Lloyd-Jones has suggested that *three* reasons motivated Paul in explaining the justifying grace of God further. In the *first* place, he wished to help the Jewish believers in the Christian church, who may have been puzzled a bit by the matter. And *second*, he wished to emphasize that God had one way of dealing with men. And *third*, he wished to exclude any boasting by saved men, the idea of boasting being still on his mind, for Jewish men had become so enamored with it because of their rich spiritual history. He does begin chapter 4 with, “What shall we say then, that Abraham, our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found? For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath something of which *to glory*, but not before God” (cf. 4:1-2). The connection of the chapter is with the thought of 1:2 and 3:21. In the former passage, Paul said that the gospel was promised beforehand in the Holy Scriptures, while in the latter he said that the righteousness of God offered in the gospel was “witnessed by the law and the prophets.” Further, in 3:27, he referred to the fact that the divine method of justification shuts out boasting. Tying it all together in chapter 4, he takes up the story of Abraham’s justification, underlining with great power the fact that there is only one method of salvation in any age, that of grace, and that it excludes human boasting (cf. 3:27-28).⁷

- B. ***The partial answer*** (Rom. 4:2). The answer of the Apostle Paul is a partial one to the problem raised in the opening question of the chapter. As a word of explanation, he points out that if Abraham were justified by works, or his efforts (including faithful obedience), he might have cause of boasting. That boasting, however, would not be valid before God. The relevance of mentioning Abraham and justification by works indicated by the comments of Cranfield, “That Abraham was justified on the ground of his works was indeed what Paul’s Jewish contemporaries were accustomed to assume. According to Jub. 23.10, ‘Abraham was perfect in all his deeds with the Lord, and well-pleasing in righteousness all the days of his life;’ and in Kidd. 4.14 it is stated that, ‘we find that Abraham our father had performed the whole Law before it was given, for it is written, Because that Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws [Gen. 26:5].’ He was one of the righteous ones not needing repentance – ‘Thou therefore, O Lord, that art the God of the just, hast not appointed repentance to the just, to Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, which have not sinned against thee; but thou has appointed repentance unto me that I am a sinner’ (Prayer of Manasses (8)). On such a view, Abraham clearly has ground for glorying.”⁸ Paul’s words “but not before God,” rejects the boasting, which necessarily carries with it the denial that Abraham was justified by any kind of works. Before God, however, even Abraham had nothing to boast of. Boasting before men and boasting before God are two entirely different matters. Before God, Abraham was as *ungodly* as any man in Ur of the Chaldees, so far as his position before Yahweh was concerned. He was a lost sinner until God intervened in his life of sin and called him by grace into salvation and righteousness. Even then, however, he could do nothing for anyone else. “If ever a man had the qualities to become what the Roman Church calls a saint, then it was Abraham. But the only instance we know of when Abraham might have made intercession in Heaven by reason of his good works – that is in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus – does not really suggest the cult of a saint: for Abraham tells the rich man that he can do nothing for him in Heaven.”⁹ Abraham’s boasting could only be in the Lord who saved him. In the citation from the Old Testament, the Apostle Paul has quoted from the Greek version of Genesis (the Septuagint), but he has varied working a bit in order to emphasize the fact that Abraham believed. He throws forward the word “believed” in order to trade upon it. Thus the pronounced emphasis: Abraham *believed*, not *achieved*, Charles Hodge wrote, “The argument thus far is founded on the assumption that no man can appear thus confidently before God, and boast of having done all that was required of him. If the doctrine of justification by works involves, as Paul shows it does, this claim to perfect obedience, it must be false. And that Abraham was not thus justified, he proves from the sacred record.”¹⁰
- C. ***The exposition of the Scripture*** (Rom. 4:4-5). It is remarkable to see how the apostle uses the Old Testament and argues New Testament theology. There is a beautiful harmony in the teaching of the Bible, and that is not all. There is also manifest here a remarkable plan. We look at what God has done in Abraham’s case and see in it an illustration of the precise way that he deals with us. I am forced to see that my salvation is not something contingent, uncertain, or accidental. It is clear that the whole program of God has been thought out in the past, then carried out through the centuries of time. What he began in the dawn of time is carried out in my life! He, with measured step, completes His grand purposes. What a comfort it is to realize that my salvation stands secure in the heart and work of a sovereign God. The fourth and fifth verses expound the point of the citation, the gracious character of man’s salvation, by pointing out the nature of grace and work. The one who works has a right to be compensated in accordance with his work. Paul uses the term “wages” to describe this relationship that links both parties by means of an enduring law. The believer is not given wages because he does not work. In the

relationship between God and the believer, God is the one who works, whereas the believer is the recipient. That which the believer is granted, he is given by grace (*charis*). That is why imputation occurs. The one doing the giving determines by his own voluntary decision how he wants to respond to the one who believes in him. An obligation that requires compensation (*opheilema*) arises only from works; therefore, there is no need for a rationale (*logismos*) to substantiate the compensation and to determine its extent, since the one who works himself determines the extent of the compensation by means of his effort.¹¹

II. THE PLAIN TEACHING OF SCRIPTURE

A. *The citation of Scripture* (Rom. 4:3). The apostle now supports his point by an appeal to the Word of God, in this case an appeal to Genesis 15:6. Would that there were many more people in this land who turned to the Scriptures as the Supreme Court of truth (cf. Isa. 8:20). If any Jewish man was well known to his obedience, it was Abraham. It was he who responded to the command of God to emigrate to a strange land, and gathered his possessions and family and went out, not knowing where he was going or what he was letting himself in for. But the epistle to the Hebrews (11:8-19) highlights his faith (he believed God) and his obedience is linked with his belief and sprang from it. In the case of salvation, however, it is different, Paul says. There we have a man not working, but simply believing. Thus, it is clear that his faith is reckoned toward the intended result of a righteousness that pleases God. There are several points to be made here. In the first place, one should notice the use of the term *logidsomai*, rendered by the words “counted,” “reckoned,” and “imputed” in vv. 3-8. It means *to put to one’s account*. Lloyd-Jones illustrates in this way, “For instance, you remember what Paul says in writing to Philemon about Onesimus. He says, ‘If he has defrauded you and if he owes you anything, put that down to my account, I will repay it.’ The Apostle did not owe Philemon anything; but he tells Philemon to put it down to his account as if he did owe something. That is ‘imputing.’ We employ the term when we may be having an argument with somebody. We say, ‘Ah, but now you are imputing a statement to me which I did not make.’ Or we may say, ‘You are imputing motives to me and you are not fair.’ What we mean is that that man is putting into our mouths, or into our position, which is not there at all; he is imputing it. The thing is not there but it is put there by somebody else. That is exactly the meaning of the term here, and it is the whole essence of this matter of justification by faith only. It puts that to our account. When we have nothing at all, God puts in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. He imputes it to us, He reckons it to us. He just takes it and puts it there, as it were in our account, and thereby clears our guilt and debt. He does not *make* us righteous in so doing, as we have seen. We are left, in this matter of justification, exactly where we were, but God puts this to our account and thereby clears our debt. He pronounces that all His claims against us are satisfied.”¹² In the *second* place, it is clear from Paul’s words that “believeth” is a word of grace (cf. vv. 4-5, 16). It is, therefore, not a work, being conceived of by the Apostle as given to the believer by God (cf. Eph. 2:8-9). *Third*, one notices that it is the ungodly that are justified. There are no godly people (cf. 3:23; Luke 5:32; 19:10). Eight times the word *logidsomai* is found in vv. 3-11. Paul lays great stress on the fact that righteousness is imputed to the believer in grace. The imputation of the active and passive obedience of Christ is essential to a proper understanding of justification. Finally, did you notice the two things that Paul has singled out about Abraham? Well, first, he singled out the fact that he did not work for his salvation. And then, second, he called him “ungodly.”

III. THE PARALLEL OF DAVID

In the final verses of the section, vv. 6-8, David is brought in as being in agreement with Abraham, insofar as the method of salvation is concerned. It is not another illustration on a level with the illustration of the patriarch, as the words, “even as,” suggest. The rest of the chapter continues the exposition of the meaning of Abraham’s experiences. He, Abraham, is Paul’s subject, but David’s words are in harmony with the principles of God’s dealings with Abraham. David is chosen, because the covenantal promises made to Abraham are repeated to him (cf. Matt. 1:1; 2 Tim. 2:8). The connection between the two passages, Genesis 15 and Psalm 32, lies in the use of the term *logidsomai*, to impute or reckon, which is found in both of them. Psalm 32:1, however, deals with the negative side of the matter, i.e., the non-imputation of sin, or forgiveness. It is evident, then, that forgiveness somehow involves the imputation of righteousness. The key is that sins are sins of both commission and omission. It follows that, if sin cannot be imputed to a man, he has neither omitted one commandment required, nor committed one breach of God’s law. Thus, the non-imputation of sin does not leave him neutral; so far as righteousness is concerned it really means that he is righteous, not having omitted any positive act of good work.

CONCLUSION: Three final observations in light of Piper’s position. *First*, if in the final and ultimate justification our personal obedience and conformity to godliness (as seen in our character and conduct = good works) is even remotely a determining factor in our vindication in God’s eyes, then we are left in a constant state of apprehension – with no assurance that we will not end up condemned. Thankfully the apostle Paul says God *only* justifies the ungodly (v. 5), not people who (with the help of the Holy Spirit) make themselves godly. *Second*, belief, according to Paul, is equated with *trusting* and not with our efforts to be obedient (a work). Therefore, the claim that faith is to be understood as faithful obedience is to be rejected. Obedience is a fruit of faith, but as we have established throughout this series, obedience is not a synonym for faith.¹³ *Third*, note the word “never” in the NIV (the ESV has “will not”) of verse 8. Justification for the Apostle Paul included a *total* and *complete* forgiveness. To even suggest that something we do (or become) plays a decisive role in our salvation nullifies the Reformation’s doctrine of *sola fide*. John Davenant (1572-1641), one of the English delegates to the Synod of Dort, urged that great caution must be used in this matter. Allison, in his masterful book, points out, “So concerned is he about possible confusion on this point, Davenant actually urges great restraint in saying that good works are necessary to justification. He fears that if the necessity is conceded, it will be construed as a concession that good works *cause* justification. He points out that the Church frequently refrains from certain expressions which, though true in themselves, lend themselves to false inferences in particular situations.”¹⁴ Would that John Piper heeded Davenant’s concern.

ENDNOTES

¹ Called the “Pastor of the Pilgrims,” he organized the church, a large portion of which eventually sailed on the Mayflower that landed at Plymouth, Massachusetts on November 11, 1620. Robinson, however, died in Holland.

² The advocates of the New Perspective on Paul -- James D. G. Dunn, E. P. Sanders, and N. T. Wright -- are very frank in their negative assessment that Martin Luther and John Calvin at the time of the Reformation misunderstood what the Apostle Paul taught about justification and so constructed an erroneous and misleading doctrine of justification that Protestantism has unwittingly followed to this day. Where as the New Perspective explicitly rejects the views of the Reformers, the followers of Norman Shepherd implicitly do the same. Listen to the words of John Kinnaird, one of Shepherd’s disciples. Regarding justification he declares, “These good works are a required condition if we would stand in the Day of Judgment and they are supplied by God to all His people . . . Who are these people who thus benefit – who stand on the Day of Judgment? They are those who obey the law who will be declared righteous . . . On the Day of Judgment I will hear God declare me to be righteous. As to the reason for that, it is not because of the works, even though it will be in accord with the works. The reason will be: first, because it [God’s declaration that John Kinnaird is righteous] will be true because God will have changed me so that I am really and personally righteous. After all, we will

be crowned with righteousness. This is the result of the work of the Holy Spirit in my sanctification in this life.” Cf. *The Trinity Review* (No. 237, Nov., 2004), p. 4. This constitutes a categorical reversal of the Reformation and an endorsement of the Roman Catholic view that justification is based on sanctification.

³ *The Works of John Owen VI* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1974), p. 67.

⁴ Long before Shepherd claimed that “faith” in *sola fide* meant “faithful obedience,” the 16th cent. heretical group known as the Socinians (they denied among other things the doctrine of the Trinity) put forth a similar thesis. John Owen addressed this error. “Concerning this faith and trust, it is earnestly pleaded by many that *obedience* is included in it; but as to the way and manner thereof, they variously express themselves. Socinus, and those who follow him absolutely, do make obedience to be the essential form of faith; which is denied by Episcopius. The Papists distinguish between faith *informed* and faith *formed* by charity: which comes to the same purpose, for both are built on this supposition – that there may be true evangelical faith (that which is required as our duty, and consequently is accepted of God, that may contain all in it which is comprised in the name and duty of faith) that may be without charity or obedience, and so be useless; for the Socinians do not make *obedience* to be the essence of faith absolutely, but as it justifieth. And so they plead unto this purpose, “faith without works is dead.” But to suppose that a death faith, or that faith which is dead, is that faith which is required of us in the gospel in the way of duty, is a monstrous imagination.” Op. cit. p. 103.

⁵ R. Scott Clark, *The Heidelberg, Both/ And: Free Justification and Gracious Sanctification* (Nov. 5, 2017).

⁶ W. Lüthi, *The Letter to the Romans: An Exposition*, trans. By K. Shoenenberger (Knox, 1961), p. 48.

⁷ D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *The Plight of Man and the Power of God* (Zondervan, 1977), p. 157.

⁸ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans I* (T&T Clark, 1975), p. 227.

⁹ Lüthi, p. 51.

¹⁰ C. Hodge, *A Commentary on Romans* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1974), p. 106.

¹¹ Adolf Schlatter, *Romans: The Righteousness of God* (rpt. Hendrickson, 1995), p. 109.

¹² Lloyd-Jones, p. 167.

¹³ In B. B. Warfield’s extensive analysis on the philological background to the word “Faith,” there is no reference to the notion that Biblical faith is synonymous with obedience, cf. *Biblical and Theological Studies* (P&R, 1973), pp. 404-444.

¹⁴ C. F. Allison, *The Rise of Moralism: The Proclamation of The Gospel From Hooker to Baxter* (Moorehouse, 1966), p. 11.