

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Scripture Memory		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	76		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Romans 3:21-26; Galatians 2:20-21		
Date:	March 1, 2020 (a.m.)		

IMPUTATION: THE HEART OF THE REFORMATION

There are five great Latin phrases that have played a significant role in the history of Evangelicalism. They are *sola fide*, by faith alone; *sola gratia*, by grace alone; *sola Christo*, by Christ alone; *sola scriptura*, by Scripture alone; *soli deo Gloria*, to God alone be the glory. They are each intimately related to the doctrine of justification by faith. The late R. C. Sproul has cogently argued that *sola fide*, justification by faith alone, is *not* “a secondary or peripheral matter with respect to the gospel, but an essential and necessary element of the true gospel. A gospel lacking *sola fide* is a different or perverted gospel that is not *the* gospel.”¹ He goes on to argue “that the concept of imputation is essential to *sola fide*.” Of course it follows that Luther called justification by faith alone, “the article of a standing or falling church,” *articulus stantis aut cadentis ecclesiae*. He meant by that statement that it was the fundamental article of the faith of the church and determined whether the church would stand or fall. If the biblical doctrine of justification was received and taught, the church would stand. If the doctrine were abandoned, the church would fall. As one recent, important book pointed out: “The doctrine of justification only by faith must be traced back to its source in the person, character, and purpose of the triune God. It is first and foremost about what God has done, in perfect holiness, justice, and compassion, to deal with the forensic element of our predicament as sinners: we all must appear before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10). It has its sharpest focus in the person of Christ and particularly in his blood shed as a propitiation for our sins, which grounds the imputation of Christ’s righteousness and its reception by faith. God’s act of justification takes place within the larger context of a full-orbed and complete salvation that addresses not only the forensic aspects of the human condition but every other aspect as well. More fully, God’s redemptive work fits within the entirety of his work *ad extra*. Yet what matters most is that it is entirely, from beginning to end, a work of God.”²

I. **THE PERMANENT PRINCIPLES SET FORTH.**

A. ***The Heart of the Gospel is Justification.*** The two passages (Romans 3:21-26 and Galatians 2:15-21), remind us that there are a trio of theological relatives that are the illegitimate offspring of natural religion fertilized by the gospel. These hybrids are: Pelagianism Romanism, and Arminianism. Justification by grace through faith, that which is taught by Genesis 15:6, when rightly understood, overthrows them each. The contention of Pelagianism, that man is able to keep God’s commandments and be without sin, is refuted by Abram’s justification, not by works, but by faith. Romanism, which teaches a salvation “to be gained by stages through working a sacramental treadmill,” is also refuted by Abram’s justification. In Arminianism (which is actually semi-Pelagianism), we have an unwitting legalism, at least in its Wesleyan manifestation, in that salvation is traceable to the decision of man’s free will. The grace necessary to salvation is added after man by his free will decision takes the first step. Let me define justification by simply citing the words of the Westminster Confession, “Those whom God effectually calleth, he also freely justifieth: not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ’s sake alone; not by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness; but by imputing the obedience and

satisfaction of Christ unto them (cf. Romans 4:5-8; 2 Corinthians 5:19, 21; Titus 3:5, 7, etc.), they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness by faith; which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God” (Chapter XIII).

- B. ***The Ground of Justification is Imputation.*** This study has addressed the three great acts of imputation that are set forth in Scripture. *First*, there is the imputation of Adam’s sin to men (cf. Romans 5:12). *Second*, there is the imputation of the sins of the elect to Christ (cf. Galatians 3:13; 2 Corinthians 5:21). *Third*, there is the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the elect (cf. Romans 3:24-26). It is in this last imputation that the heart of justification is found. Romans 3:21-26 is the normative passage on the subject. To use an old Latin phrase, this text is referred to as the *sedes doctrinae* (lit. the seat of doctrine) on justification. There, Paul points out that the conferring of righteousness is grounded in the satisfaction to God’s holiness and justice rendered by the propitiatory sacrifice of the Son of God. Thus, by reason of Christ’s work in sheer grace, the righteousness of God, a righteous standing before Him, is conferred upon the elect believer.
- C. ***The Fundamental Principle of Justification.*** The fundamental principle of justification is grace, or the unmerited love and favor of God toward man. The scriptural defence of the gracious character of justification is found in such passages as Romans 3:24; Acts 15:11; and Titus 3:7. The passages are pellucid and require no comment. From the theological standpoint justification must be by grace because of the fact of human sin and guilt (cf. Romans 3:23, 8:7-8), because of the fact of Christ’s death (cf. Galatians 2:21), and because of the need of assurance of acceptance (cf. Romans 4:16), and because the end of all God’s works must be His glory (cf. Romans 11:36; Galatians 1:3-5). The fact of the death of Christ may be the greatest of the theological proofs of justification by grace apart from law-works, for, if righteousness were to be ours by human works, then the death of Christ becomes meaningless, or perhaps the greatest blunder the universe has ever seen, with God the perpetrator, since He allowed Christ to die at the hands of wicked men. As Berkouwer puts it, “God would be guilty of throwing himself away.”³
- D. ***The Means of Justification.*** The Scriptures are clear in affirming that faith is the means of justification. It is expressed in Genesis 15:6, in Romans 3:21-26, 4:1-8, and in many other places too numerous to cite. Perhaps the plainest passage is Ephesians 2:8-9. It is illustrated in the Bible by the figures of looking (John 3:14-15), eating and drinking (6:50-58), and coming to Christ (5:40, 7:37-38, 6:44, 65). Faith is object-centered and God-centered, being, as we have said already, personal and propositional. Involved in it is a receiving of Scripture and an embracing of Christ. Justification comes to us *through* faith, and not *because of* faith. The ground of justification is the merits of the Redeemer won through the cross. The means of appropriation is faith. The New Testament never says that we are justified *because of*, or *on account of*, our faith, although as soon as the New Testament is completed we find the church fathers speaking in that way.⁴ The fact that some of the early church fathers lapsed into this mode of speech only indicates that their departure from the apostolic doctrine of sovereign grace had already begun. Faith is simply the means of appropriation, having of itself no justifying merit. John Calvin has some vigorous words on the point in his controversy with Andreas Osiander, the German Lutheran Reformer, who had certain doctrinal views that even the Lutherans found unacceptable. Calvin calls Osiander a Sophist, saying, “Yet, in the meantime, I do not admit the distorted figures of this Sophist when he says that *faith in Christ* – as if an earthen pot were a treasure because gold is hidden in it. For the reasoning is similar: namely, that faith, even though of itself it is of no worth or price, can justify us by bringing Christ, just as a pot crammed with money makes a man rich. Therefore, I say that faith, which is only the instrument for receiving righteousness, is ignorantly confused with Christ, who is the material cause and at the same time the Author and Minister of the great benefit.”⁵ The second generation of Reformers, such as Ursinus and Wollelius, thought of faith as “grasping” Christ, that is, the means by which He and His saving capacity is apprehended.⁶ Others have called faith the hand of the heart, saying the same thing by means of a different figure. In the light of all that has been said, it should be unnecessary to make the point that faith is not a work; it is the gift of God, as numerous passages in the New Testament indicate

(cf. Philippians 1:29; Ephesians 2:8-9; 1 Corinthians 4:7; 12:3, etc.). Those who have questions about this need only read some of Augustine's Anti-Pelagian treatises.

II. *THE DESCRIPTION OF JUSTIFICATION.*

A. *The Manner, or Principle (Romans 3:24, "Freely")*. Two words demand definition, if we are to understand the apostle here. They are the words *to justify* and *propitiation*. The former word is often misunderstood, being given the force of *to make righteous*, or *to be righteous*. In spite of able and learned attempts to make the word mean *to make righteous*, it must be given the forensic, or legal, sense of *to declare righteous* (cf. Deuteronomy 25:1; 1 Kings 8:32; Isaiah 5:23; Romans 2:13, 3:4, 4:3-25 [notice the use of the word *to reckon* with *righteousness*]; 5:17, "*the gift of righteousness*").⁸ Since justification represents a judicial declaratory act *actus forensic* (the ancient theological term), the righteousness conferred upon the sinner is "an exterior but not an interior change in man."⁹ However, since God's judgment is according to truth, He cannot pronounce anyone righteous who is not truly righteous. Thus, it becomes clear that the justification of the sinner involves "the gift of righteousness," the precise Pauline phrase found in Romans 5:17. Throughout the fourth chapter of the letter, the apostle uses the expression *to reckon* or *to impute*, righteousness, which is closely related to the term, "the gift of righteousness." Thus, to sum up the matter, the sinner is justified by our holy God through the imputation of righteousness, an act grounded in the merits of the cross. Speaking of sinners justified by God, Packer says, "they receive from God the right to be treated, and the promise that they shall be treated, no longer as sinners, but as righteous."¹⁰ It is common among the unorthodox to accuse God of "legal fiction," since all knowledge that man is still *homo peccator*, or sinful man. Such overlook, or do not comprehend, the principle of representation. In justification Christ is our representative, and we are regarded as united to Him in His work of satisfying the divine claims against us. What He has accomplished He has accomplished for us, and the benefits of that work of paying our debt are graciously and freely reckoned to us (cf. Romans 4:1-8). The inward cause of our justification is God's free grace, while the outward cause is the redeeming work of Christ. The term *imputation* is a term derived "from merchants' columns,"¹¹ as the older commentators like to put it. That is, *to impute* is similar to our *to put to one's account* and is, thus, an accountant's term (cf. Philemon 18). Paul expounds justification in chapters four and five of Romans where righteousness is spoken of as God's gift (5:17) and is reckoned to the believer (4:3-11). Imputation or *interchange*, what Luther called *the wonderful exchange*, is at the heart of God's justifying grace. Sin is not reckoned to believers so that they are constituted righteous (2 Corinthians 5:21). In 1 Corinthians 1:30, Christ is described as our righteousness from God. Again Philippians 3:9, *not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but . . . the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith*, parallels Paul's statement in Romans 10:3 *not knowing the righteousness of God and seeking to establish their own righteousness, they did not submit to the righteousness of God* (a literal translation).¹² I therefore conclude that the Biblical understanding of justification means to declare a person righteous by virtue of the imputation of the merits of Christ.¹³

CONCLUSION: What was once the hallmark of historic Evangelicalism (*sola fide*) is now considered a matter of no great significance. Philip Everson has recently noted this sad decline and laments that in the minds of many professing Evangelicals there is a downright hostile attitude toward those who would seek to maintain this Reformational distinctive. "As long as there is a love for the Lord Jesus Christ, a concern to make Christ known to others, and a desire to meet together in fellowship, what is the value of drawing attention to bygone wars of religion, to arguments over doctrine, many of which seem to have been caused through a misunderstanding about words? It has been suggested that evangelicals and Roman Catholics should bury the hatchet and work together for the common good in the face of secularism, paganism and militant Islam. Both groups are apparently in agreement in affirming their acceptance of justification by faith. But is it really the case that Roman Catholics agree with Protestants, especially those of evangelical persuasion, on this item of faith which has for centuries kept them apart?"¹⁴ Martin Luther clearly saw what

was at stake here. He described how he came to understand God's justifying righteousness in this way, "I greatly longed to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans, and nothing stood in my way but that one expression, *the justice (righteousness) of God*, because I took it to mean that justice was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant. Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that *the just shall live by his faith*. Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before *the justice of God* had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate of heaven . . ."15

ENDNOTES

¹ R. C. Sproul, *Getting the Gospel Right: The Tie That Binds Evangelicals Together* (Baker, 1999), p. 155.

² Mark Thompson, "The Theological Case for *Sola Fide*" in *The Doctrine on Which The Church Stands or Falls*, ed. Matthew Barrett (Crossway, 2019), p. 438.

³ C. G. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Faith and Justification* (Eerdmans, 1954), p. 78.

⁴ The early church father known as Clement of Rome (Ca. 88-100 A.D.), used language in I Clement 10:7 that is out of harmony with The Apostles. His phrase, *on account of faith* is not found in the New Testament. Cf. J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers* (rpt. Baker, 1973), p. 17.

⁵ John Calvin, *Institute of the Christian Religion*, ed. by John T. McNeill, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles (The Westminster Press, 1960), I, 733-34 (III.xi.7).

⁶ Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, rev. and ed. By Ernst Bizer and trans. by G. T. Thomson (Baker, 1978), p. 544.

⁷ Cf. C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Harper & Brothers, 1957), pp. 74-76. Professor Barrett's handling of the Greek word meaning *to justify* leaves much to be desired. His contention that the Hebrew word lying in back of the Greek word means *to make righteous* in the Hiphil stem is not true, as a casual look at the concordance will show (cf. Deuteronomy 25:1; 1 Kings 8:32, etc.). Further, his contention that the legal sense leads to Pelagianism, in which faith becomes a righteous work or righteousness in germ, or to a *legal fiction*, is also false. He asserts that God cannot pretend that black is white (p. 75). Faith, however, in Scripture is a gift, not a work, and the work of Christ as our representative is not fiction. It is a costly achievement in divine mercy and grace.

⁸ Cf. David Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings: Studies in the Semantics of Soteriological Terms* (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 155-62.

⁹ Heppe, p. 544.

¹⁰ J. I. Packer, *God's Words: Studies of Key Bible Themes* (InterVarsity Press, 1981), p. 142.

¹¹ Heppe, p. 549.

¹² Cf. the extended discussion by Philip Everson in *The Great Exchange: Justification by Faith Alone in Light of Recent Thought* (Day One Publications, 1996), p. 17.

¹³ I owe the substance of this message to S. Lewis Johnson's lectures on Justification. Dr. Johnson was my professor of Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in 1984-85.

¹⁴ Everson, p. 10.

¹⁵ Cf. Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Abingdon, 1951), p. 50.