

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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

Website: www.churchredeemeraz.org

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Pastor/Teacher
Gary L. W. Johnson

Excursus: Justification Revisited (Part I)

Before returning to our Exposition of Romans 11:11-24, I want to once again look at the doctrine of justification as developed by the Apostle Paul in this epistle. The need to be firmly established in the truth of justification by faith *alone* continues to be a critical concern. Rightly did Luther declare of this doctrine, "There are few of us who know and understand this article, and I treat it again and again because I greatly fear that after we have laid our head to rest, it will soon be forgotten and will again disappear. . . . And indeed we cannot grasp or exhaust Christ, the eternal Righteousness, with one sermon or thought; for to learn to appreciate Him is an everlasting lesson which we shall not be able to finish either in this or in yonder life. When the article of justification has fallen, everything has fallen. Therefore it is necessary constantly to inculcate and impress it, as Moses says of his Law (Deut. 6:7); for it cannot be inculcated and urged enough or too much. Indeed, even though we learn it well and hold to it, yet there is no one who apprehends it perfectly or believes it with a full affection and heart. So very trickish is our flesh, fighting as it does against the obedience of the spirit."¹ Just this past week, Christianity Today carried a story detailing the resignation of a number of InterVarsity Fellowship staff members who took exception that InterVarsity Christian Fellowship had revamped its doctrinal statement in such a way that conscientious Roman Catholics could now sign it. InterVarsity's earlier statement (referred to as "The Bear Trap Statement"), adopted in 1960 at the national staff conference, specified that sinners are justified "by the Lord Jesus Christ through faith alone." By contrast, the revised Doctrinal Basis said that InterVarsity believes in "justification by God's grace to all who repent and put their faith in Jesus Christ alone for salvation." The word *alone's* shift in placement is significant, said Doug Sweeney, professor of history of Christian thought at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. "Tridentine Roman Catholics could not sign the Bear Trap Statement, for justification by faith alone was anathematized at the Council of Trent," said Sweeney. "Such Roman Catholics could sign the 2000 statement, however, for Catholics have always taught that salvation is found in Christ alone. Further, the 2000 statement allows for a Tridentine commitment to the necessity of faith being formed or perfected by love before one is finally justified. This is the doctrine that the 16th-century Reformers opposed most strenuously."²

What I found most interesting in this whole development, was the testimony of two high-profile former evangelicals who converted to Roman Catholicism. Francis Beckwith, the former president of the Evangelical Theological Society who recently reverted to Rome, told Christianity Today that he has "no doubt that the *New Perspective and Federal Vision* have had an effect on the Protestant-Catholic debate," and that especially N. T. Wright's influence has helped Protestants make the journey to Rome. "I have met several former evangelical Protestants who have told me that Wright's work in particular helped them to better appreciate the Catholic view of grace."³ Taylor Marshall, a graduate of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, who like Beckwith converted to Roman Catholicism, goes so far as to say, "If you buy into Wright's approach to covenantal theology, then you've already taken three steps toward the Catholic Church. Keep following the trail and you'll be Catholic." Marshall, now a PhD student at University of Dallas, attributes Wright's work to helping him conclude that the Reformed doctrine of justification *sola fide* was a departure from Scripture. Marshall briefly served as an Anglican priest before converting to Catholicism in 2006 and becoming assistant director of the Catholic Information Center in Washington, D.C. Marshall said he speaks with new Catholic converts every month, about half of whom have been "deeply influenced" by Wright. Said

Marshall, who blogs at PaulIsCatholic.com., “Salvation is sacramental, transformational, communal, and eschatological. Sound good? You’ve just assented to the Catholic Council of Trent.” What we have here is aptly described by Mike Brown, “Note carefully what Marshall says regarding buying into Wright’s covenant theology. Essentially what he is referring to is a collapse of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants into one and a flattening of the contours of redemptive history from old covenant to the new. Whenever such flattening out or monocovenantalism occurs, the distinction between law and gospel is inevitably blurred and the necessity of Christ’s active obedience imputed to the believer denied, at least to some degree.”⁴

I. Justification: Its Characteristics and Results

W. G. T. Shedd notes the following particulars in connection with the justification of a sinner.

- A. First, faith is the instrumental, not the procuring or meritorious cause of his justification: “God justifies, not by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ” (Westminster Confession 11.1). The reasons are . . .
1. Because faith is an internal act or work of man. If the sinner’s act of faith merited the pardon of his sin and earned for him a title to life, he would be pronounced righteous because of his own righteousness and not because of God’s righteousness. Faith is denominated a work: “This is the work of God, that you believe” (John 6:29). It is the activity of the man, like hope and charity, and can no more be meritorious of reward or atoning for disobedience than these acts can be: “In a right conception, *fides est opus*,” if I believe a thing because I am commanded, this is *opus*” (Selden, *Table Talk*).
 2. Because, as an inward act of the believer, faith is the gift of God, being wrought within him by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 2:8; Phil. 1:29). But a divine gift cannot be used as if it were a human product and made the ground of pardon and eternal reward. A debt to God cannot be paid by man out of God’s purse, though it can be so paid by God himself.
 3. Because the believer’s faith is an imperfect act. As such, it cannot be either atoning or meritorious.
 4. Because faith is not of the nature of suffering and consequently cannot be of the nature of an atonement. The believing sinner is “justified by faith” only instrumentally, as he “lives by eating” only instrumentally. Eating is the particular act by which he receives and appropriates food. Strictly speaking, he lives by bread alone, not by eating or the act of masticating. And, strictly speaking, the sinner is justified by Christ’s sacrifice alone, not by his act of believing in it.⁵
- B. Second,, the justification of a sinner is solely by Christ’s satisfaction: Justification does not depend partly upon the merit of Christ’s work and partly upon that of the believer. The Tridentine theory is heretical at this point because it makes the believer’s justification to rest upon Christ’s satisfaction in combination with inward sanctification and outward works. Scripture explicitly teaches that justification is by faith alone—not by faith and works combined: “A man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law” (Rom. 3:28).
- C. Third, the justification of a sinner is instantaneous and complete. It is a single act of God which sets the believer in a justified state or condition: “There is no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1); “who shall lay anything to the charge of God’s elect? Who is he that condemns?” (8:33-34); “he that hears my word and believes on him that sent me has everlasting life and shall not come into condemnation” (John 5:24).
- D. Fourth, the justification of a sinner is an all comprehending act of God. All the sins of a believer—past, present, and future—are pardoned when he is justified. The sum total of his sin, all of which is before the divine eye at the instant when God pronounces him a justified person, is blotted out or covered over by one act of God. Consequently, there is no repetition in the divine mind of the act of justification, as there is no repetition of the atoning death of Christ upon which it rests: “Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, that he should offer himself often; for then must he often have suffered since the foundation of the

world; but now once in the end of the world has he appeared, to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself; and as he was once offered to bear the sins of many, unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time, without sin unto salvation. For by one offering he has perfected forever them that are sanctified” (Heb. 9:24-28; 10:14).

- E. Fifth, the justification of a sinner includes a title to eternal life, as well as deliverance from condemnation. This is denoted by the clause *accepting as righteous* in the Westminster definition. Eternal life, as a reward, rests upon perfect obedience of the law. Had man rendered this obedience, he could claim the reward. He has not rendered it and hence cannot claim it. Yet he must get a title to it, or he can never enjoy it. The rewards of eternity must rest upon some good basis and reason. They cannot be bestowed groundlessly. Christ the God-man has perfectly obeyed the law; God gratuitously imputes this obedience to the believer; and the believer now has a right and title to the eternal life and blessedness founded upon Christ’s theanthropic obedience. This is the *second* part of justification, the *first* part being the right and title to exemption from the penalty of the law, founded upon Christ’s atoning sacrifice. Justification thus includes the imputation of Christ’s obedience as well as of his suffering, of both his active and his passive righteousness.
- F. Sixth, the imputation of Christ’s righteousness (both active and passive obedience) constitutes the believer’s acceptance with God. Today many professed Evangelicals categorically deny this doctrine. Some, like Norman Shepherd reject the imputation of Christ’s active obedience, contending that justification is “pardon” alone, without “acceptance,” of a title to life. They maintain that after the pardon of the believer’s sin, on the ground of Christ’s passive obedience, sanctification by the Holy Spirit ensues, and our final justification is due to our *covenantal faithfulness*. The objections to this theory are the following: (a) The obedience of the believer is imperfect, but eternal life is the recompense of perfect obedience. The believer cannot claim such an immense reward for such an inferior service. (b) Even if after his regeneration the believer’s obedience were perfect and sinless, he has been disobedient previously; but eternal life is promised only to a perfect obedience from the beginning of man’s existence to the end of it. For these two reasons, the believer cannot establish a valid title to an infinite and eternal reward upon the ground of his imperfect and halting service of God here in this life. He must therefore found it upon the perfect obedience of his Redeemer and expect entrance into heaven because his substitute has obeyed for him, even as he expects to escape retribution because his substitute has suffered for him. The reason why the believer must press forward after perfect sanctification is that he may be fit for heaven, not that he may merit heaven. Sinless perfection in the next life is not the ground and reason of the believer’s future reward, but the necessary condition of his future blessedness. If there be remaining sin, there must be, so far, unhappiness. Passages of Scripture that prove the imputation of Christ’s active obedience are the following: “Through the obedience of one shall many be made righteous” (Rom. 5:19); “Christ is made unto us wisdom and righteousness and sanctification” (I Cor. 1:30); ‘he made him to be sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (2 Cor. 5:21). This “righteousness” is complete and therefore includes a title to the reward of righteousness: “You are complete in him” (Col. 2:10); “he has made us accepted in the beloved” (Eph. 1:6); “in whom we have boldness, and access with confidence” (3:12). The boldness and confidence imply that there is no deficiency in the justification effected for the believer by Christ. But if he were resting his title to eternal life upon his own character and works, he could be neither bold nor confident in the day of judgment (1 John 4:17): “Whosoever believes shall not perish [this is pardon], but shall have eternal life [this is acceptance as righteous]” (John 3:16).

CONCLUSION: “The doctrine of justification,” wrote J. V. Fesko, “has always been a point of contention for the covenant community, which is especially evident in Paul’s letter to the Galatian church. If a church planted by the apostle Paul could quickly depart from the gospel, which has at its root the doctrine of justification, then it is no wonder that the church has witnessed no small uproar over this doctrine throughout the years.”⁶ Today we are confronted not only with an aggressive counter-reformation from ‘Evangelical’ converts to Rome like Francis Beckwith, but, perhaps even more threatening are the

efforts of the likes of N. T. Wright, Norman Shepherd and their zealous disciples in the Federal Vision, who end up advocating the notion that there will be a final justification which will be ultimately based on works. The believer transformed moral condition will be the grounds of his justification. This simply echoes the position of the Roman Catholic Church which makes sanctification the condition of justification. Like Roman Catholicism, Wright and Shepherd both deny the critical important doctrine of the imputation of Christ's active Obedience. The end result, as Warfield long ago noted, is that when the imputed righteousness of Christ is denied, then with it, of course, goes the vicarious obedience of Christ, the result being that the righteousness by which we are made acceptable to God turns out to be our own righteousness.⁷ This is a denial of what the Reformers mean by *Sola Fide*.

ENDNOTES

¹ What Luther Says: An Anthology II ed. Ewald M. Plass (Concordia, 1959) p. 715.

² Cf. "Not All Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Protestant Debate on justification is reigniting questions about Rome" by Colin Hausen. Available at http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/article_print.html?id=85385

³ Beckwith has become extremely antagonistic towards the Reformation and their doctrine of *Sola fide*. Among his many snide public remarks, he declared "Is it just me, but why is that there has never been a great Calvinist saint on par with Augustine, Aquinas, or John Paul II? When I think of Reformed theology, holiness and love do not jump out at me." <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2009/10/barqueing-up=wrong-tree.html>. Beckwith, it should be pointed out, was not trained as theologian or in Biblical studies. He is a philosopher by training and his knowledge of Protestant theology is all too typical of most Evangelicals. He has little appreciation for individuals like John Owen, John Bunyan, Jonathan Edwards or B. B. Warfield – if he did he would not make stupid statements like that.

⁴ Cf. <http://michaelbrown.wquarespace.com/> Mike is a graduate of Westminster seminary, California and Senior pastor of the United Reformed Church in Santee, Calif.

⁵ This outline is adopted, with modification from W. G. T. Shedd, Dogmatic Theology, third edition (P & R, 2001) pp. 796-798.

⁶ J. V. Fesko, Justification: Understanding The Classic Reformed Doctrine (P & R, 2008) p. 1.

⁷ The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield VIII (rpt. Baker, 1981) p. 149.