

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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### Excursus: Justification Revisited (Part IV)

Contrary to popular opinion, exegesis does not take place in a theological vacuum. No one does purely “objective” or value-neutral interpretation of the Biblical text. We all bring our own presuppositions with us when we read the Bible. For example, if we assume that human nature is basically good or inclined to be so, we will interpret the Biblical text with Pelagian presuppositions. In other words, our particular take doctrinally, will affect our exegesis. In today’s message, I am going to examine the way justification is understood by virtue of the kind of theological lenses it is seen through. Cal Beisner made this helpful observation about “The Federal Vision” and its proponents (Douglas Wilson, Rich Lusk, Steve Wilkens, Steve Schlissel et. al.) “After nearly three years of reading and listening widely and carefully to the Federal Vision’s proponents, including voluminous correspondence with many of them, I am convinced that what the Federal Vision offers is not a renewal or improvement of the historic Reformed faith but a wholesale replacement of it with a curious hybrid affecting soteriology, sacramentology, and ecclesiology, closely similar to and heavily influenced by the New Perspective on Paul associated with James D. G. Dunn, E. P. Sanders, and N. T. Wright. In soteriology, by redefining the traditional terms of the Reformed *ordo salutis* and viewing them all ‘through the lense of the covenant’ rather than ‘through the lense of the decree,’ the Federal Visionists offer a hybrid of three components. The first is a modified Amyraldianism. Original Amyraldianism posited a hypothetically universal atonement; the Federal Visionists hold that the atonement is hypothetically for all in the historical-objective covenant but effective only to the ‘elect,’ who equal those ‘justified’ by faith who don’t apostatize and wind up condemned by works. The second is a modified Arminianism. Original Arminianism affirmed that Christ died as substitute to pay the penalty for the sins of all people. The Federal Visionists will affirm that Christ died to pay the penalty for the sins of all in ‘the covenant,’ including some who wind up in hell. One’s ‘election’ ultimately depends on whether he is ‘faithful’ to ‘the covenant,’ and one can be ‘justified’ and wind up in hell through apostasy. The third is a modified Roman infusionism. We are ‘justified’ at first by grace through faith but at last by the merit (despite how much some proponents of that view hate the word *merit*) of the works produced in and through us by God.”<sup>1</sup>

The Reformer’s doctrine of justification, as J. I. Packer writes, can be summed up in the following seven points: (1) Every man faces the judgment-seat of God, and must answer to God there for himself; nothing can shield him from this. (2) Every man is a sinner by nature and practice, a nonconformist so far as God’s law is concerned, and therefore all he can expect is God’s wrath and rejection. Thus far the bad news; now the good news. (3) Justification is God’s judicial act of pardoning a guilty sinner, accepting him as righteous, and receiving him as a son and heir. (4) The sole source of justification is God’s grace, not man’s effort or initiative. (5) The sole ground of justification is Christ’s vicarious righteousness and bloodshedding, not our own merit; nor do supposed works of supererogation, purchase of indulgences, or multiplication of masses make any contribution to it; nor do the purgatorial pains of medieval imagination have any significance, or indeed reality, in relation to it. Justification is not the prize to work for, but a gift to be received through Christ. (6) The means of justification, here and now is faith in Christ, understood as a pacifying and energizing trust that Christ’s sacrificial death atoned for all one’s sins. (7) The fruit of faith, the evidence of its reality and therefore the proof that a man is a Christian as he claims to be, is a

manifested repentance and life of good works. The Council of Trent met the Reformers' doctrine by defining justification as inner renewal plus pardon and acceptance and affirming that the "sole formal cause" (*unica formalis causa*) of justification, in both its aspects, was God's righteousness (*iustitia*) imparted through baptism as its instrumental cause. "Formal cause," in the language of the schools, denoted that which gave a thing its quality (thus, heat was the formal cause of a thing being hot, or having the quality of hotness). The Tridentine thesis thus was that the ground of our being pardoned was the quality of actual divine righteousness infused into us: God declares us righteous, not liable to punishment for our sins, because we have been made genuinely righteous in ourselves. In the more biblical terminology of Protestantism, this was to make regeneration, or the start of sanctification, the ground of justification.<sup>2</sup> The great Southern Presbyterian Theologian John Girardeau provides this helpful analysis, The Calvinistic doctrine may be stated under three heads: first, the Ground of Justification; secondly its Constituent Elements, or Nature; thirdly, its human Condition or Instrument.<sup>3</sup>

- I. The Ground of Justification, or, what is the same, its Matter or Material Cause, is the vicarious righteousness of Christ imputed to the believer. This is the obedience of Christ, as the appointed Substitute of the sinner, to the precept and the penalty of the Moral Law: what Paul denominates the righteousness of God, which is revealed from faith to faith. It is fitly termed the righteousness of God, not only because it was provided and accepted by God, but because it was wrought out by God himself in the person of his Incarnate Son. It is God's righteousness because God *produced* it. This is judicially imputed by God the Father to the believing sinner, who had no share at all in its conscious production. In that sense, it is not his, but another's, righteousness – *justitia aliena*. But as Christ was his Surety and Representative and Christ's righteousness was imputed to him, it becomes, in this sense, his righteousness. It is his in law, before the divine tribunal, not the act which apprehends Christ's righteousness *unto* justification. All it does is to take what God gives—Christ and his righteousness: Christ as the justifying Saviour and Christ's righteousness as the only justifying righteousness.
  
- II. The Condition on man's part, or the Instrument, of justification is Faith, and faith alone. In receiving Christ, as a justifying Saviour, it receives and rests upon Christ's righteousness, as the ground of justification. God imputes this righteousness and the sinner embraces it by faith. In describing faith as the condition of justification, an indispensable distinction is to be noted. The only meritorious condition of justification was performed by Christ. As the Representative of his people he undertook to furnish that perfect obedience to the precept of the Law which, under the Covenant of Works, was required of Adam as the representative of his seed and which he failed to render, and, in addition, to furnish a perfect obedience to the penalty of the violated law. Upon the fulfillment of this condition the justification of his seed was suspended. This condition he completely fulfilled in his life and in his death, and thus meritoriously secured justification for his seed. But in the application of redemption to the sinner, he is required to exercise faith in Christ and his righteousness, in order to his conscious union with Christ as a Federal Head, and his actual justification. In this sense, faith is to him the condition of his justification. It is simply an indispensable duty on his part—a *conditio sine qua non*. He cannot be consciously and actually justified without faith; but his faith has no particle of merit. All merit is in Christ alone. Faith involves the absolute renunciation of merit, and absolute reliance upon the meritorious obedience of Christ. Faith, then, is simply the instrument by which Christ and his righteousness are received in order to justification. It is emptiness filled with Christ's fullness, impotence lying down upon Christ's strength. It is no righteousness; it is not a substitute for righteousness; it is not imputed as righteousness. It is counted to us simply as the act which apprehends Christ's righteousness unto justification. All it does is to take what God gives—Christ and his righteousness: Christ as the justifying Saviour and Christ's righteousness as the only justifying righteousness.
  
- III. In discharging this instrumental office faith is entirely alone. It is followed, and in accordance with the provisions of the covenant of grace it is inevitably followed, by the other graces of the Spirit, and

by good, that is, holy works; but they do not co-operate with it in the act by which Christ and his righteousness are received in order to justification. They are not concurring causes, but the certain results of justification. In a word, faith, while not the sole cause for the act of the Spirit uniting the sinner to Christ in regeneration is also a cause, is the sole *instrumental* cause on man's part of justification. Other graces, the existence of which is conditioned by faith may be superior to it in point of intrinsic excellence, love for example; faith has none. All the excellence it possesses is derived from its relation to Christ. Itself it confesses to be nothing, Christ to be everything. It is an exhausted receiver prepared by its very emptiness to be filled with the merit of Christ's righteousness. Hence, it is precisely suited to be the instrument, and the sole instrument, of justification. As all human works whatsoever are excluded from it, justification is seen to be altogether of grace.

#### CONCLUSION:

The doctrine is stated in the Westminster Confession this way: "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, they receiving and resting on Him and His righteousness by faith: which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God." The Larger Catechism puts it this way: "Justification is an act of God's free grace unto sinners, in which he pardoneth all their sin, accepteth and accounteth their persons righteous in His sight; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed to them, and received by faith alone." Charles Hodge in his Systematic Theology writes, "It is frequently said, that justification consists in the pardon of sin and the imputation of righteousness. This mode of statement is commonly adopted by Lutheran theologians. This exhibition of the doctrine is founded upon the sharp distinction made in the 'Form of Concord' between the passive and active obedience of Christ. To the former is referred the remission of the penalty due to us for sin, to the latter our title to eternal life. The Scriptures, however, do not make this distinction so prominent. Our justification as a whole is sometimes referred to the blood of Christ, and sometimes to his obedience. This is intelligible, because the crowning act of his obedience, and that without which all else had been unavailing, was his laying down his life for us. It is, perhaps, more correct to say that the righteousness of Christ, including all he did and suffered in our stead, is imputed to the believer as the ground of his justification, and that the consequences of this imputation are, first, the remission of sin, and secondly, the acceptance of the believer as righteous. And if righteous, then he is entitled to be so regarded and treated."<sup>4</sup> James Henley Thornwell, another of the noted Presbyterian Theologians of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, echoes Hodge by stating, "To justify is to pronounce righteous. A holy God cannot, of course, declare that any one is righteous unless he is so. There are no fictions of law in the tribunal of Heaven—all its judgments are according to truth. A man may be righteous because he has done righteousness, and then he is justified by law; or he may be righteous because he has received righteousness as a gift, and then he is justified by grace. He may be righteous in himself, and this is the righteousness of works; or he may be righteous in another, and this is the righteousness of faith. Hence, to deny imputed righteousness is either to deny the possibility of justification at all, or to make it consist in the deeds of the law—both hypotheses involving a rejection of the grace of the gospel. There are plainly but three possible suppositions in the case: either, there is no righteousness in which a sinner is accepted, and justification is simply pardon; or, it must be the righteousness of God, without the law; or, the righteousness of personal obedience; it must either be none, inherent, or imputed."<sup>5</sup> The Constituent Elements of justification are, *first*, the pardon, or non-imputation, of guilt; *secondly*, the acceptance of the sinner's person as righteous, involving his investiture with a right and title to eternal life. Any system which denies either of these is not only out of harmony with the Reformed Confessions, but is equally at odds with the Scriptures. Both the New Perspective on Paul as advocated by N. T. Wright as well as the views of Norman Shepherd and their disciples in what is called the Federal Vision – all proposed a doctrine of justification which mirrors that of Arminianism.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup>In the foreword of G. P. Waters. The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis (P & R, 2006). Cornelis Vanema, along similar lines, notes, "Just as the new perspective reduces the weight and narrows the meaning of Paul's language of 'justification,' so it offers an unsatisfying account of the 'righteousness of God' that is revealed in the gospel. One of the more troubling features of the new perspective is its failure to offer a clear explanation of the connection between the justification of believers and Christ's work of atonement. In the Reformation perspective on Paul, there is a close and intimate connection between Christ's obedience, satisfaction and righteousness, and the benefit of free justification that derives from the union of believers with him. Christ's objective work on behalf of believers, his death for their sins and his resurrection for their justification (Rom. 4:25) constitutes the basis for the verdict that justification declares. However, in the new perspective, no comparable account is provided of the intimate conjunction between Christ's saving work and the believer's justification. The new perspective offers no satisfactory account of Paul's emphasis that believers are justified by the blood of Christ (Rom. 5:9) or through the redemption and propitiation he provided (Rom. 3:23). Nor does the new perspective's explanation of the righteousness of God explain why Paul insists that, were righteousness to come through the law, Christ would have died in vain (Gal. 2:21). Justification is not only a soteriological theme. It is first and foremost a Christological theme. Any contemporary restatement of the doctrine of justification, therefore, will have to explain the intimate connections between the obedience, sacrifice and righteousness of Jesus Christ, and the justification of believers who are joined to him by faith." In Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology, ed. A. T. B. McGowan (IVP, 2006) p. 322.

<sup>2</sup> J. I. Packer, "Arminianism" in Through Christ's Word: A Festschrift For Dr. Philip E. Hughes, eds. W. Robert Godfrey and Jesse L. Boyd III (P & R, 1985) p. 131.

<sup>3</sup> This entire section is adopted from John Girardeau Calvinism and Evangelical Arminianism (rpt. Sprinkle Publication, 1984) pp. 416-422.

<sup>4</sup> As cited by Girardeau, p. 420.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 421.