

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Justification *Coram Deo*

Lancelot Andrewes (1555 – 1626), was a noted Bishop in the Anglican Church. Along with fellow Anglican, Richard Hooper, Andrewes conducted an ongoing debate with Roman Catholics (particularly the well-known Cardinal Robert Bellarmine) over the doctrine of justification. There was agreement among Anglicans that there is indeed a righteousness in the justified, but it is not in this life adequate, *coram Deo* (face to face with God). Lancelot Andrewes was especially insistent that Bellarmine and the Schoolmen were “nipping at the name of Christ” when they claimed that the formal cause of justification is our inherent righteousness. “Nothing ‘he wrote’, will adequately serve us in the final judgment but righteousness of Christ imputed to us. But let us once be brought and arraigned *coram Rege justo sedente in solio*, let us set ourselves there, we shall then see that all our former conceit will vanish straight, and righteousness in that sense (inherent) will not abide the trial.”¹ The Latin word *CORAM* is usually translated “in the presence of.” A more literalistic translation would be “in the eyes of.” This is actually underscored in Hebrews 4:13 which reads: “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare *before the eyes* of him to whom we must give account” (NIV). This is the exact point Andrewes is making—an imperfect righteousness—one that is of our own making, will fail when we are *CORAM DEO*. R. L. Dabney that stalwart Southern Presbyterian theologian of the 19th century reminded us that each generation needs to examine and reaffirm for itself the principal doctrines. One would have thought that the Reformation’s doctrine of justification (*sola fides*) was secure, but the traditional statement of the doctrine of justification by faith alone is under attack from a number of directions. Today, that doctrine is being assailed even within Reformed circles. What is so surprising is that the people leading this assault claim to be “Reformed.” Chief among them are N. T. Wright and Norman Shepherd both of whom have exercised tremendous influence on the likes of John Armstrong and the group that goes by the name “The Federal Vision.”² John Armstrong, who once edited the *Reformation & Revival Journal* in response to the question *What differs in your view of justification from the more traditional Protestant view?* Answered this way: “In my view the vindication of God occurs twice, according to Paul’s language. It plainly describes a future vindication based on a judgment ‘*according to works*’ (cf. Romans 2:12 - 13; Philippians 1:9 - 11).”³ Likewise, Rich Lusk of The Federal Vision emphatically states that “eschatological justification or final judgment is according to deeds.”⁴ Both Armstrong and Lusk are quick to say that our *works* or *deeds* are strictly speaking “non-meritorious.” They are forced to resort to this kind of sophism because the Apostle Paul categorically states that we cannot be justified by our works in any sense (Romans 3:20; 4:5). Notice that Armstrong appealed to Romans 2:12, 13 to support his case. The question that naturally rises is the obvious one: if people are saved by grace through faith alone, why should they be judged by their works? How does this judgment relate to salvation by grace? The Reformers argued with their Roman Catholic opponents that good works are possible only *after* God has justified the sinner, not before. Furthermore this justification cannot be lost. It is *not* subject to being increased or decreased (you cannot be *more* justified or be *less* justified once you are justified). The position of Wright, Shepherd, Armstrong and The Federal Vision bears a striking resemblance to the Reformers opponents.⁵

I. INTERPRETING THE PASSAGE

A number of proposals have been put forth.⁶

A. Direct Contradiction

Some hold that Paul is setting forth two completely incompatible ideas. It is not easy to think that he would lose sight of a central tenet in the middle of his argument. In any case the view has not commended itself widely; it so obviously does not fit the passage.

B. Purely Hypothetical

Others think that Paul is not speaking of the way things are, but setting out in forthright terms the way things would be apart from grace. But Paul says God “will render,” not “would render.” His words point to a fact, not a hypothesis. However, this interpretation does have some validity, as Shedd observes, “That any man will actually appear before this tribunal with such an obedience, is neither affirmed nor denied, in the mere statement of the principle. The solution of this question must be sought for elsewhere in the Epistle.”⁷

C. Law, Not Gospel

Paul is expounding the law, not the gospel. To be sure there is, Paul affirms, even for Christians, a final judgment to pass through (II Corinthians 5:10). But the works that are taken into account in that judgment are the *product* of justifying faith and not the *basis* for justification itself. In addition, the fact that this verse is introduced to confirm and explain the reason for the Jew’s condemnation in v.12b also indicates that its purpose is not to show how people can be justified but to set forth the standard that must be met if a person is to be justified. And this standard, as Paul

indicates in Romans (3:31; 8:4), is not a “doing” of the law, however great the number of works and few the number of failures, but a “fulfilling” of the law that is possible only “in Christ” and through the work of God’s Spirit (cf. 2:28 - 29). As Calvin paraphrases, “If righteousness be sought from the law, the law must be fulfilled; for the righteousness of the law consists in the perfection of works.”⁸

D. The Entrance and the Life

The Swiss commentator Godet puts it this way: “justification by faith alone applies to the time of *entrance* into salvation through the free pardon of sin, but not to the time of judgment... God demands from [the sinner], as the recipient of grace, the fruits of grace,” (he further says, “faith is not the dismal prerogative of being able to sin with impunity”).⁹ A variant of this position sees the reference to goodness of life, not however as meriting God’s favour but as the expression of faith.

E. Justification Does have to do with Works

The “doing of the law” refers to a faith-oriented obedience (covenantal nomism). But as Moo observes, “But there is insufficient evidence that Paul uses this phrase to mean anything different from doing ‘the works of the law’ or ‘the works’ to which he denies the power to justify (3:20, 28; 4:2). Moreover, while there may be NT precedent for applying *DIKAIOS* to vindication at the final judgment, in which works indicate the presence of faith (cf. James 2:20 - 26), Paul does not usually use the verb this way. For him, *DIKAIOS* denotes the verdict of acquittal pronounced by God, a verdict that rests, on the human side, on faith alone.”¹⁰

II. JUSTIFICATION BY WHAT?

Covenantal nomism subsumes obedience into faith, thus making obedience a condition of maintaining justification. How does obedience relate to Faith?

A. Faith and Repentance

Both of these elements have their own New Testament vocabulary. The key word-groups are, respectively, *METANOEO* (repent) and *PISTEUO* (believe). Repentance and belief go hand in hand—we cannot believe without repenting, and we repent in order to believe. Nord captures all that becoming a Christian means, so it is not surprising that the various New Testament authors use an array of terms. Paul seldom uses *METANOIA*, and John employs it only in Revelation. Paul often uses *PISTIS* (faith), and John employs the verb *PISTEUO* (believe). The news about the Thessalonians’ conversion from idols “to serve a living and true God” (I Thessalonians 1:9) is summarized in the preceding verse as “your faith in God” (cf. Romans 1:8 for a similar use). The members of Paul’s churches are described simply as “those who believe” (I Corinthians 1:21; cf. Romans 1:16), and Paul describes their coming to Christ as the time when: “you believed” (I Corinthians 15:2, 11). John uses the same verb to describe the “conversion” of the Samaritans (John 4:39) and those Jews who became adherents of Jesus (e.g., 11:45, 48; 12:11, 42). He employs “believe in his name” as a virtual synonym for “receive Jesus” (1:12). Only those who “believe” will receive the blessings of salvation (e.g., 3:16; 11:25ff.).¹¹ Are faith and repentance two different things? When Peter told his listeners on Pentecost what they must do to be saved from God’s judgment, he said, “You [plural] repent for the remission of your [plural] sins...” (Acts 2:38, my translation). He did not mention faith. Why not? Because repentance is faith, and faith is repentance. When Paul and Silas told the Philippian jailer what he must do to be saved, they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved...” (Acts 16:31). They did not mention repentance. Why not? Because faith implies repentance. Let me explain.

B. Obedience

Repentance itself is a mental act (*METANOIA*), unobservable to men except indirectly through its fruit in outward profession or action but directly observable to God. The deeds are the *consequence* of this mental act. Faith (which includes repentance) is included in the obligations of the new covenant *as a condition of justification*; *obedience* is included in the obligations of the new covenant not as the condition of justification but *as the inevitable fruit of faith*.¹² Scripture explicitly denies merit to faith (which includes repentance); it explicitly attaches merit to obedience (works). As Paul wrote in Romans 4:3 - 5: “For what does the Scripture say? ‘And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.’ Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness...” A reward for obedience is reckoned of *debt*, not of *grace*. Further, “if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace” (Romans 11:6). If by grace, then not by works; if by works, then of debt, not of grace. But it is certain that by *works* in these passages Paul denotes obedience to the law. If obedience, therefore, is a condition of justification, then it is by definition (because it equals works) a meritorious condition. It does not cease to be meritorious simply because Wright, Shepherd, Armstrong and The Federal Vision say it is not. It is meritorious because Scripture says it is.

CONCLUSION: Millard Erickson, one of our senior Evangelical theologians has wisely said “it is important that evangelicals ask not only for the formulas of belief but for the actual content of those formulas or expressions. Sometimes lay persons are so conditioned to respond to particular expressions to which an emotional conditioning has been attached that they fail to determine the real meaning. In a day in which meaning is thought by some to reside, not objectively in the words, and expressions themselves, but in the person who receives them so that it meaning is what it means to the recipient, this concern is especially appropriate.”¹³ Norman Shepherd and the Federal Vision all use the language of *sola fide* but then impregnate the word *faith* with things like *faithfulness* or *covenantal obedience* thus making justification contingent on perseverance. One of the reasons they resort to this sleight of hand is due to the kind of *easy believism* that characterizes so-much of contemporary Evangelicalism, but as Joey Pipa records “while seeking to solve one set of genuine problems they have created another set of insoluble problems that, in my opinion, not only denies the evangelical faith (in the Reformation sense)

but also puts the very Gospel itself at stake. They are reading the sixteenth-and seventeenth-century reformers through glasses of presuppositions that are deadly.”¹⁴ The only way to avoid the conclusion that justification is the merited effect of works is by denying that works (obedience) are a condition of justification. Despite the fact that these people emphatically affirm *sola fides*, they deviate dangerously from that doctrine by making obedient, meritorious works a part of faith rather than the fruit of faith and a condition of justification rather than a concomitant consequence with it of faith. Beisner warns, “That is not good news; it is bad news, because it means that our justification depends not solely on what Christ has done for us on the cross but also on what we must do in obedience to the law. That way lies the undoing of the Reformation—and with it, the undoing of the peace with God that comes only from knowing that we have been justified by faith, not by the works of the law (Romans 5:1; 3:28).”¹⁵ The followers of Norman Shepherd in the Federal Vision want to make justification a process “we are *being* justified.” NO! Justification is not a process. It is a definitive/punctiliar event. Paul says, “having been justified.” He doesn’t say “we are being justified” or “we shall eventually be justified if we are found to have a sufficient degree of sanctity associated with our faith” or some such. Luther was right. If we lose the Reformation doctrine of *Sola Fide*—we lose everything. But this is what will happen if these well-meaning, but deluded “Reformed” types in the Federal Vision get their way. Recently Carl Trueman made this pointed observation. “A lack of confidence among evangelicals in the traditional Reformation formulations of justification by grace through faith specifically in terms of imputation. The impact in evangelical Protestantism of the New Perspective on Paul and the failure of churches to deal decisively with the challenge of Federal Vision theology both witness to this weakness. Yet Protestantism is built on justification by grace through faith and the necessary reconstruction of ecclesiology which it brings with it. Using P. T. Forsyth’s two generation rule, it will be interesting to see where Federal Vision churches are in forty years time, indeed, it will be interesting to see whether some of its advocates in this generation ultimately receive Final Unction.”¹⁶

ENDNOTES

¹ As cited by C. Fitzsimons Allison, *The Pastoral and Political Implications of Trent on Justification: A Response To The ARCIC Agreed Statement ‘Salvation and The Church’*, SLJT, June 1988 Vol. XXXI No. 3, p. 11.

² Cf. *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros & Cons: Debating The Federal Vision* ed. Calvin Beisner for individuals involved and their positions (Knox Seminary, 2004).

³ J. Armstrong, *Reformation & Revival: The Weekly Messenger* (April 5, 2004), p. 6. Armstrong’s citing Philippians 1:9 - 11 is a classic example of proof-texting. The text does not address the question of justification. To suggest otherwise is to introduce a contradictory pattern in the Apostle’s theology. Mark Seifrid properly notes “Paul regards our present justification as an accomplished reality, a real and full vindication, not as a gradual transformation which has begun within us.” *Christ, Our Righteousness: Paul’s Theology of Justification* (IVP, 2000), p. 148. Sadly Armstrong has moved even further from his Reformational roots. He now embraces an understanding of justification that parallels that of Roman Catholicism.

⁴ R. Lusk, in *The Auburn Avenue Theology*, p. 146.

⁵ The Roman Catholic position was officially stated at the Council of Trent (1545-63). Regarding the Reformers and good works it stated: *Canon 24*. If anyone says that the justice received is not preserved and also not increased before God through good works but that those works are merely the fruits and signs of justification obtained, but not the cause of the increase, let him be anathema. *Canon 32*. If anyone says that the good works of the one justified are in such manner the gifts of God that they are not also the good merits of him justified; or that the one justified by the good works that he performs by the grace of God and the merit of Jesus Christ...does not truly merit an increase of grace and eternal life...let him be anathema. Cf. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* II (rpt. Baker, 1983), pp. 115, 117.

⁶ I have summarized these from L. Morris, *The Epistle to The Romans* (IVP, 1988), p. 148.

⁷ W. G. T. Shedd, *A Critical and Doctrinal Commentary on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1978), p. 45.

⁸ As cited by D. Moo, *Romans: The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary* (Moody, 1991), p. 144. Calvin goes on to say: “The sense of this verse, therefore, is that if righteousness is sought by the law, the law must be fulfilled, for the righteousness of the law consists in the perfection of works. Those who misinterpret this passage for the purpose of building up justification by works deserve universal contempt. It is, therefore, improper and irrelevant to introduce here lengthy discussions on justification to solve so futile an argument. The apostle urges here on the Jews only the judgment of the law, which he had mentioned, which is that they cannot be justified by the law unless they fulfill it, and that if they transgress it, a curse is instantly pronounced upon them. We do not deny that absolute righteousness is prescribed in the law, but since all men are convicted of offence, we assert the necessity of seeking for another righteousness. Indeed, we can prove from this passage that no one is justified by works. If only those who fulfill the law are justified by the law, it follows that no one is justified, for no one can be found who can boast of having fulfilled the law.” *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries* VIII (rpt. Eerdmans, 1973), p. 47.

⁹ F. Godet, *Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (rpt. Zondervan, 1970), p. 96.

¹⁰ D. Moo, op. cit.

¹¹ I am indebted to David Wells for this section on the terms of conversion. Cf. his *Turning to God: Biblical Conversion in the Modern World* (Baker, 1989), p. 33.

¹² Norman Shepherd, in an article published in John Armstrong’s *Reformation & Revival Journal* claims that this is the Lutheran position and that the real Reformed position (his) has been corrupted by Calvinists who have unwittingly assimilated Lutheranism! (Vol. 11, No. 2, Spring 2002), p. 81. If that is the case then Calvin was a Lutheran because that is exactly the way he describes it!

Cf. *Institute of the Christian Religion* Bk. 3, Ch. 3, sec. 14-20. The *Belgic Confession* echoes Calvin's position (Art. XXIV) and, contrary to Shepherd's claim, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* explicitly affirms the same (XVI/ii). In fact the position that Shepherd labels as "Lutheran" is held by such great Reformed theologians as John Owen, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield, Herman Bavinck, Charles Spurgeon, M. Lloyd-Jones, J. I. Packer, R. C. Sproul and this list could go on. In other words, Shepherd's position is the one that is the exception in the Reformed tradition. You would be hard pressed to find *any* one of significance since the Reformation who represents Shepherd's aberration (except contemporary sympathizers like Armstrong and P. Andrew Sandlin who wrote a article in the same issue titled "Lutheranized Calvinism" in which he endorses Shepherd and Wright and their understanding of justification). As it turns out Shepherd and company are historically following in the path of Arminianism.

¹³ M. Erickson, *The Evangelical Left* (Baker, 1997), p. 16.

¹⁴ Joey Pipa in *The Auburn Avenue Theology*, p. 10.

¹⁵ C. Beisner, "What is the Faith That Justifies?", *The Knox Pulpit: A Collection of Sermons From the Faculty of Knox Theological Seminary* (Knox 2004) p. 58.

¹⁶ <http://www.reformation21.org/blog/2011/04/reasons-for-moving-romeward.php>