

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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JUSTIFICATION *CORAM DEO* (Part 1)

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*. The late R. C. Sproul wrote: “The doctrine of justification is the most controversial issue in the history of Christendom. It was the material cause of the Protestant Reformation, the issue that led to the most serious fragmentation of the Christian church in its history. The debates it raised in the sixteenth century were not over minor details of theology. Both the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Reformers understood that what was at stake in the controversy was nothing less than the gospel itself. When, at the Council of Trent in the middle of the sixteenth century, the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church condemned the Reformed doctrine of justification by faith alone and placed their anathema upon it, it was not their intention to place an anathema on the gospel. But if the Reformers were right, then that is exactly what they did, and they thereby anathematized themselves.”² Here is what the Council of Trent declared:

If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone, let him be anathema.

If anyone says that men are justified either by the sole imputation of the righteousness of Christ, or by the sole remission of their sins, let him be anathema.

If anyone says that justifying faith is nothing other than confidence in divine mercy, which remits sins for Christ’s sake alone, or that it is this confidence alone that justifies us, let him be anathema.

If anyone says that the justice or righteousness received is not preserved and also not increased before God through the merit of our good works, but that those works are merely the fruits and signs of justification obtained, but not the cause of the increase of their merits, let them be anathema.³

The heirs of the Reformation clearly understood the importance of this particular doctrine:

Herman Witsius (1636-1708), Holland). *The Economy of the Covenants*, 2.8.1: “The pious Picardians, as they were called to Bohemia and Moravia, valued this article at its true price when in their confession of faith,

Art. vi., speaking of justification, they thus write: *this sixth article is accounted with us the most principal of all, as being the sum of all Christianity and piety. Wherefore our divines teach and handle it with all diligence and application, and endeavor to instill it into all.*”

Thomas Watson (1620-1686, England), *A Body of Divinity*, 226: “Justification is the very hinge and pillar of Christianity. An error about justification is dangerous, like a defect in a foundation. Justification by Christ is a spring of the water of life. To have the poison of corrupt doctrine cast into this spring is damnable.” He believed that justification “is the very Hinge and Pillar of Christianity; and an Error about *Justification* is dangerous, like a Crake in the Foundation, or an Errour in the first Concoction.” Watson invokes the saying of Luther that after his death the doctrine would be corrupted; and so he notes, “As it hath been in these latter Times, the *Arminians* and *Socinians* have cast a dead Fly into this Box of precious Oyntment.”

Leiden Synopsis (written by four professors of theology from Leiden, 1625): “The topic of justification in theology is easily foremost and most saving. If it be obscured, adulterated, or overturned, it is impossible for purity of doctrine to be retained in other loci or for the true Church to exist.”

Francis Turretin (1623-1687, Switzerland), *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*: “This must be handled with the greater care and accuracy as this saving doctrine is of the greatest importance in religion. It is called by Luther *the article of a standing and a falling church*. By other Christians, it is termed the characteristic and basis of Christianity – not without reason – the principal rampart of the Christian religion. This being adulterated or subverted, it is impossible to retain purity of doctrine in other places. Hence Satan in every way has endeavored to corrupt this doctrine in all ages, as has been done especially by the papacy.”

Wilhemus á Brakel (1635-1711, Holland), *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, Justification . . . is the soul of Christianity and the fountainhead of all true comfort and sanctification. He who errs in this doctrine errs to his eternal destruction. The devil is therefore continually engaged in denying, perverting, and obscuring the truth expressed in this chapter and, if he does not accomplish this, to prevent exercise concerning this truth . . . One must therefore be all the more earnest to properly understand, defend, and meditate upon this doctrine.”

Antonius Walaeus (1573-1639, Holland), *Loci Communes*, 746: “This article is of such high moment, that Luther himself, Chemnitz, and all the writers of the Reformed Church were always of the opinion that it is the foundation of the whole Reformation and the source of all our true consolation and gratitude.”

Johannes Vanderkemp (1664-1718, Holland), *Sermons on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 1.479-480: “What think ye, hearers, have not we reason to boast, that we alone possess the pure doctrine according to the word of God, when we teach that the sinner is justified before God by faith only, on account of the perfect righteousness of Christ, through the free grace of God? Is not this doctrine the only foundation, and the principal article of the whole Gospel? . . . But what will this boasting avail us, if we ourselves do not make a profitable, comfortable, and sanctifying use of our doctrine?”

Archibald Alexander (1772-1851, America), *Treatise on Justification*: “But a sound view of this point is intimately connected with correct opinions on all other articles of primary importance; and an error here, cannot but vitiate the whole system of theology, of which it forms a part. This is a central and a cardinal point in theoretical, as well as practical religion; and the degree of error on other articles may be inferred from the degree of departure from the truth in regard to this.”

Zacharias Ursinus (1534-1583, Germany), *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, (324-325): “The doctrine of justification, which now follows, is one of the chief articles of our faith, not only because it treats of those things which are fundamental, but also because it is most frequently called in question by heretics

. . . And such is the importance of these doctrines that if either one of them be overthrown, the other parts of our faith easily fall to pieces. Hence it becomes necessary for us to fortify and establish ourselves, especially in these doctrines, against all the assaults of heretics.”

John Calvin (1509-1564), *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.1 1.1: “The method of justification has been but slightly touched, because it was necessary, first to understand that the faith, by which alone we attain gratuitous justification through the Divine mercy, is not unattended with good works, and what if the nature of the good works of the saints, in which part of this question consists. The subject of justification, therefore, must now be fully discussed, and discussed with the recollection that it is the principal hinge by which religion is supported, in order that we may apply to it with the greater attention and care. For unless we first of all apprehend in what situation we stand with respect to God, and what his judgment is concerning us, we have no foundation either for a certainty of salvation, or for the exercise of piety towards God. But the necessity of knowing this subject will be more evident from the knowledge itself.”

Finally, here is a quote from Calvin’s reply to a letter from Cardinal Joseph Sadolet (1539): “You, in the first place, touch upon justification by faith, the first and keenest subject of controversy between us. Is this a knotty and useless question? Wherever the knowledge of it is taken away, the glory of Christ is extinguished, religion abolished, the Church destroyed, and the hope of salvation utterly overthrown. That doctrine, then, though of the highest moment, we maintain that you have nefariously effaced from the memory of men. Our books are filled with convincing proofs of this fact, and the gross ignorance of this doctrine, which even still continues in all your churches, declares that our complaint is by no means ill founded.”

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.”⁴ 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).”⁵ Likewise, Rick Lusk of The Federal Vision emphatically states that “eschatological justification or final judgment is according to deeds.”⁶ 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. Horton has pointed out, “In the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church didn’t deny that salvation was by grace, nor did they deny that salvation was by Christ or that salvation was through faith. The Reformation conflagration was over whether we are saved by grace *alone* through faith *alone*. John Calvin said, ‘True, in our day he [Christ] is called a redeemer, but he’s a redeemer in a manner which implies that men do also, by their own free will, redeem themselves from the bondage of sin and death. True, he is called righteousness and salvation, but so that man still pursues salvation by his own obedience. Nay, Jesus was not sent to help us to attain righteousness, says the Apostle, but to be our Righteousness.’”⁷

Finally, listen to the words of John Owen: “If the truth concerning evangelical justification be once disbelieved among us, or obliterated by any artifices out of the minds of men, unto these things, at one time or other, they must and will betake themselves. As for the new schemes and projections of justification, which some at present would supply us withal, they are no way suited nor able to give relief or satisfaction unto a conscience really troubled for sin, and seriously inquiring how it may have rest and peace with God. I shall take the boldness, therefore, to say, whoever be offended at it, that *if we lose the ancient doctrine of justification through faith in the blood of Christ*, and the imputation of his righteousness unto us, public profession of religion will quickly issue in *Popery* or *Atheism*, or at least in what is the next door unto it.”⁸

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 R. C. Sproul, *Truths We Confess: A Systematic Exposition of The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Reformation Trust, 2019), p. 257.

³ Twelfth Session, Canons 9, 11-12, and 24, in *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent: Original Text with English Translation*, trans. H. J. Schroeder, OP (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1960), 43, 45-46.

⁴ Cf. *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros & Cons: Debating The Federal Vision* ed. Calvin Beisner for individuals involved and their positions (Knox Seminary, 2004).

⁵ 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 with 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.

⁶ R. Lusk, in *The Auburn Avenue Theology*, p. 146.

⁷ M. S. Horton, *The Reformation Then and Now* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2017), p. 286.

⁸ *The Works of John Owen* V (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1976), p. 206.