

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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<b>Series:</b>	<b>Reformation Studies</b>		Pastor/Teacher
<b>Number:</b>	<b>11</b>		Gary L.W. Johnson
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### JUSTIFICATION *CORAM DEO* (Part 2)

Michael Horton points out that, “the distinction often drawn by the older Reformed theologians between justification apart from works, which is *declarative*, and the judgment according to works, which is *demonstrative*. This distinction is useful for distinguishing between the different senses of justification in Paul and James. Nothing can be clearer in Paul than that Christ alone is the basis (i.e., meritorious cause) of salvation and that faith is the instrument, with love and good works as the fruit. To say that the believer’s works are the *basis* of justification in any sense is to go even beyond the traditional Roman Catholic view. While, in the Reformation perspective, faith alone unites us to Christ – for justification, sanctification, and glorification – the fruit of new obedience begins immediately to blossom. Therefore, those who are justified now will also be able to show themselves in truth to be children of their heavenly Father, even though, unlike the *goats*, they seem unaware of their good works. But this is not justification – first, middle, or final. In addition to justification, God will adorn his work of grace within the godly with rewards.”<sup>1</sup> Romans 2:12-13 is often cited by the opponents of the Reformation understanding of *sola fide* to prove that justification must include the concept of works.

- I. ***INTERPRETING THE PASSAGE.*** A number of proposals have been put forth.<sup>2</sup>
  - 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.”<sup>3</sup>
  - 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 (2 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.”<sup>4</sup>

- 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”).<sup>5</sup> 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 *dikaioo* 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, *dikaioo* denotes the verdict of acquittal pronounced by God, a verdict that rests, on the human side, on faith alone.”<sup>6</sup>

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” (1 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” (1 Corinthians 1:21; cf. Romans 1:16), and Paul describes their coming to Christ as the time when: “you believed” (1 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.).<sup>7</sup> 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. The late Anthony Hoekema summed it up beautifully, “But, praise God, we are not saved by the perfection of our repentance. We are saved not by our meritorious acts but only by the merits of Jesus Christ: *By grace you have been saved through faith . . . not by works, so that no one can boast* (Eph. 2:8). Repentance is indeed necessary for salvation, but it does not need to be perfect repentance. If it did, who could be saved?”<sup>8</sup>
- 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.*<sup>9</sup> 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 formula 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 its meaning is what it means to the recipient, this concern is especially appropriate.”<sup>10</sup> 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.”<sup>11</sup> 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 fide*, they deviate dangerously from the 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 works of the law (Romans 5:1; 3:28).”<sup>12</sup> 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. Heed the words of John Owen on this matter, “There is hereon nothing to *be laid unto the charge* of them that are so justified; for *he that believeth hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation, but is passed from death unto life*, John v. 24. And *who shall lay any thing to the charge of God’s elect? It is God that justifieth; it is Christ that died*, Rom. viii. 33, 34. And *there is no condemnation unto them that are in Christ Jesus*, verse 1; for, *being justified by faith, we have peace with God*, chap. v. 1. And, *We have that blessedness hereon whereof in this life we are capable*, chap. iv. 5, 6. From all which it appears that our justification is at *once complete*. And, it must be so, or no man can be justified in this world. For no time can be assigned, nor measure of obedience be limited, whereon it may be supposed that any one comes to be justified before God, who is not so on his first believing; for the Scripture doth nowhere assign any such time or measure. And to say that *no man is completely justified* in the sight of God in this life, is at once to overthrow all that is taught in the Scriptures concerning justification, and therewithal all peace with God and comfort of believers. But a man acquitted upon his legal trial is at *once discharged* of all that the law

hath against him.”<sup>13</sup> 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 Junction.”<sup>14</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> M. S. Horton, *Justification: New Studies In Dogmatics II* (Zondervan, 2018), p. 394.

<sup>2</sup> I have summarized these from L. Morris, *The Epistle to The Romans* (IVP, 1988), p. 148.

<sup>3</sup> W. G. T. Shedd, *A Critical and Doctrinal Commentary on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> F. Godet, *Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (rpt. Zondervan, 1970), p. 96.

<sup>6</sup> D. Moo, op. cit.

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> A. A. Hoekema, *Saved By Grace* (Eerdmans, 1989), p. 131.

<sup>9</sup> 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 an article in the same issued 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.

<sup>10</sup> M. Erickson, *The Evangelical Left* (Baker, 1997), p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Joey Pipa in *The Auburn Avenue Theology*, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> *The Works of John Owen V* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1976), p. 145.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.reformation21.org/blog/2011/04/reasons-for-moving-romeward.php>