

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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SOLA FIDE: THE ONLY WAY OF JUSTIFICATION

Allein church den glauben; this is how Luther translated that key phrase in our text in his German Bible. His Roman Catholic opponents accused him of grossly perverting the Scripture by inserting the word *allein* (alone) into the text. Charles Hodge points out that Catholic translations, long before Luther, had rendered the passage the same way. *The Nuremberg Bible* of 1483 reads *Nur* (only) *church den glauben*, and even more surprising is the *Italian Bibles* of Geneva (1476) and Venice (1538) read *per sola fide*.¹ Luther responded to his critics by saying, “Note, then, whether Paul does not assert more vehemently that faith alone justifies than I do, although he does not use the word *alone* (*sola*), which I have used. For he who says: Works do not justify, but faith justifies, certainly affirms more strongly that faith justifies than does he who says: Faith alone justifies. . . . It is ridiculous enough to argue in this sophistical manner: Faith alone justifies; therefore the Holy Spirit does not justify. Or: The Spirit justifies; therefore not faith alone. For this is not what the dispute is about at this place. Rather the question is only about the relation of faith and works, whether anything is to be ascribed to works in justification. Since the apostle does not ascribe anything to them, he without a doubt ascribes faith all to faith alone.”² The Bible uses the term “justify” to identify and focus on God’s act in declaring sinners to be acquitted of the punishment due their sin. Justification has relation to the law of God. Failure to obey God’s law brings condemnation. The penalty which results from a failure to keep the law of God must be satisfied in order for God to acquit (justify) a sinner. Sin is lawlessness. The penalty of sin is death. Breaking God’s law always brings the penalty of death. For the verdict of death to be overturned, one must be justified. The Bible teaches that God has willed to save sinners through the death of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, on the cross. Christ came to seek and to save the lost. Salvation is the outcome of those who have been declared acquitted from the penalty due their sins. To be justified by God is to be declared free to enter Heaven. To be justified does not mean to be not guilty. It means to be declared not liable for the penalty of one’s guilt! This is biblical justification: to be declared by God that there is no need for you to suffer personally for your sins. The basis of this justification is the finished work of Jesus Christ. He paid the penalty so others could go free. God, as the judge, has declared sinners to be justified or acquitted from the punishment due their sin. God does so on the basis of what Christ has done. The reason all men have a need of this justification is because all are sinners.³

- I. **FAITH NOT WORKS.** From Romans 3:27 to 4:25, Paul expounds the truth of justification by faith alone. Before this can be considered there is a preliminary matter that needs to be settled. It is this: does Paul teach justification by works in Romans 2:15-16? Paul, however, is not dealing with salvation or the subject of justification at this point. It is the grim, dark

picture of the day of wrath and condemnation, when God will judge every single person by his Son Jesus Christ that is in view. He is not talking of justification but of judgment. On that day of judgment justice will be scrupulously fair for both Jew and Gentile. The mere possession of the law of God by the Jew will not put them in an advantageous position, “it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous” (Romans 2:13). That is the only reason for mentioning justification. He is not making any further point from the reference. It may well be possible in theory for a person to achieve justification by doing God’s revealed will. In our Lord’s case, theory turned to actuality for he was justified on account of his righteous life (1 Timothy 3:16). But as far as the whole human race “in Adam” is concerned, it is impossible. Paul’s further point is that God judges according to standards of which, whether Jew or Gentile, we are all aware. The standard will either be the revealed law of God or the consciousness of right and wrong felt by humanity generally. By those standards all are condemned. No one has ever lived up to their own standards, let alone the perfect standard of God himself revealed in his law and in the life of Jesus. Jew and Gentile are therefore in the same position. All are condemned, all are under the wrath of God and all are in need of salvation. We are all sinners by nature and by practice. It follows from this that keeping the law of God will not put a human being right before God (Romans 3:27-4:25). Even to belong to the nation specially chosen by God, to be a member of God’s covenant people, carrying out the duties and requirements of the law, does not mean one is necessarily righteous in God’s sight. Seeking to obey the law and, in the case of sinful lapses, religiously observing the provisions of the law to obtain ritual purification and atonement, is not good enough. Doing all these works of the law to the best of one’s ability does not put a person right with God. No one was ever justified by that means.⁴ Doug Moo correctly concluded that, “Paul’s concern to meet Jewish views is evident in his addition *apart from works of the law*. As in 3:20, what is meant is not certain kinds of works, or works viewed in a certain light, but anything a person does in obedience to the law and, by extrapolation, anything a person does. This being the case, Luther’s famous addition of *sola* (alone) to *fide* (faith) – in which he was preceded by others, including Thomas Aquinas – brings out the true sense intended by Paul. A serious erosion of the full significance of Paul’s gospel occurs if we take his antithesis as anything less than these stark alternatives; no works, no matter what kind, or of what motivation, can play any part in making a sinner right with God.”⁵

A. ***A Disjunctive Syllogism.*** This is a formal category of logic that refers to a sentence of either of the forms such as $A \vee B$, $A + B$ (or a proposition expressed by such a sentence). The Puritan William Pemble drew this form of argumentation in light of the Scriptural testimony. “From these places, not to name more, expressly touching this point of our justification, we argue thus: A man is justified either by the works of the law or by faith in Christ. But he is not justified by the works of the law. Ergo, he is justified only by faith in Christ. In this disjunctive syllogism, they cannot find fault with us for adding the word *only* in the conclusion, which was not in the premises. For reason will teach them that the two terms are immediately opposite; if one is taken away, the other remains alone. So in every disjunctive syllogism whose major proposition stands upon two terms immediately opposite, if one term is removed in the proposition, the conclusion is plainly equivalent to an exclusive proposition. For example, we argue thus: either the wicked are saved or the godly. But the wicked are not saved. Thence it follows in exclusive terms that the godly only are saved. Similarly, in this case, our adversaries cannot deny that the proposition (a

man is justified either by works or by faith) consists of terms immediately opposite. For otherwise they accuse the Apostle Paul of a lack of logic who should conclude falsely that *a man is justified by faith without works* (Romans 3:28) if he is justified either by both together, or else by neither. Seeing that he opposes faith and works as being incompatible, and excludes works from justification, we conclude infallibly by the Scriptures that a man is justified by faith alone. This argument is not avoidable by any sound answer, and puts our adversaries to the shifts. Yet rather than yield unto the truth, they fall unto their distinctions, whereby, if it were possible, they would shift off the force of this argument. Therefore the Scriptures oppose works and faith, the law of works and the law of faith, our own righteousness, which is of the law, and the righteousness of God by faith. This manifestly tells us that we are justified not by works, by the law of works, nor by our own righteousness of God by faith.”⁶

II. ***FAITH IN CHRIST OR THE FAITHFULNESS OF CHRIST.*** A very heated debate in Biblical studies has centered around how to understand Paul’s use of the words *pistis Christou*, “faith in Christ” (found in Romans 3:22, 26). Is this a subjective genitive (the faith of Christ) or an objective genitive (faith in Christ)? Michael Horton has an extended discussion on this issue and rightly concludes that “The *pistis Christou* debate turns out to be a tempest in a teapot. Even if all of the four or five verses in question intend a subjective genitive, we are still left with a massive number of verses (including clauses within some of those disputed verses!) that teach what, according to Hays, *verges on blasphemous self-absorption in our own religious subjectivity*. In contrast, the traditional Protestant interpretation warmly embraces every passage, affirming both Christ’s faithfulness as the basis and the believer’s act of faith as the instrument of receiving the former. Jesus’s faithfulness even unto death on a cross is precisely why he is the *object* of faith. The act of faith is directed outside of ourselves, to Christ Jesus as the one who has saved us by his faithfulness. As with other false choices that we have encountered, I suggest that the subjective view is to be faulted not in what it affirms but in what it rejects. Reformed theologian Michael Allen explores in detail the many passages in Scripture that highlight the saving import of Christ’s faithfulness, and he does so without embracing the subjective-genitive interpretation of the passages we considered. As James Dunn points out, *The Pauline emphasis on the gracious self-sacrifice of the cross is more clearly and more powerfully drawn in passages like Romans 5:6-11, 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 and Philippians 2:6-11, where again I find myself wondering why Paul did not include reference to Christ’s faithfulness in such passages if it was indeed such an important motif in Paul.*”⁷

CONCLUSION: According to the Council of Trent, one “got in” by baptism, which could hardly be regarded as a human work of the infant. This is the “first justification.” But one’s subsequent status (“second justification”) depended on cooperation with infused grace. “Final justification” referred to the last judgment, which involves a divine weighing of good works against transgressions. The reformers challenged this entire paradigm by insisting that one not only gets in but stays in by grace *alone*. They realized that the law, which we could *not* fulfill, nevertheless *had* to be fulfilled. Clearly, this involves some notion of merit: either Christ’s or our own personal obedience. Paul’s contrast between “the righteousness which is by the law” and “the righteousness which is by faith” (Romans 10:5-6, *passim*) is that of the reformers as well. Of course, there is a final vindication of God’s elect on Judgment Day, but the point of the doctrine of justification is to say that this eschatological verdict has already been rendered

in the present. There are not two verdicts: one dependent on Christ's obedience, the other on ours – getting in by grace, staying in by obedience.⁸

ENDNOTES

¹ Charles Hodge, *A Commentary On Romans* (rpt. 1972, Banner of Truth), p. 100.

² *What Luther Says: An Anthology II* compiled by E. M. Plass (Concordia, 1959), p. 707. M. S. Horton notes: “Luther was not the first to insert *alone* in Romans 3:28. It is there even in Origen, as a manifest implication of Paul’s argument, and my quotations in chapters 1-2 demonstrate the repeated affirmations of justification through *faith alone* across a wide spectrum of patristic sources. But the *sola* was even included in New Testament *translations* before Luther. Michael Schmaus notes, ‘The translation of the Bible that appeared in 1483 had rendered Galatians 2:16: *justified only by faith*. Three Italian editions of Scripture (Genoa, 1476; Venice, 1583 and 1546) offered a similar translation. In a gloss to 1 Timothy 1:8, Thomas Aquinas had explained that justification is not the result of fulfilling the law, but is received through faith alone.’ ‘In his work *On Justification* [*De justification* 1.25, in *De controversiis*, vol. 4], Cardinal Bellarmine cited a series of Fathers and Church documents as witnesses to the formula *by faith alone*. And yet, in line with Trent, Schmaus adds, ‘In the light of this usage it is clear that the formula should not be taken literally, without adverting to its full sense.’” *Justification: New Studies in Dogmatics I* (Zondervan, 2018), p. 279.

³ R. M. Zins, *Romanism: The Relentless Roman Catholic Assault on The Gospel of Jesus Christ* (CWRC, 2010), p. 178.

⁴ I have condensed this section from Philip Everson, *The Great Exchange: Justification By Faith Alone in the Light of Recent Thought* (Day One, 1996), pp. 22-23.

⁵ D. Moo, *Romans: The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary I* (Moody, 1991), p. 254.

⁶ W. Pemble, *The Justification of a Sinner: A Treatise On Justification By Faith Alone* (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 2002), p. 58.

⁷ Horton, *Justification: New Studies in Dogmatics II*, p. 443.

⁸ M. S. Horton, “Déjà vu All over Again,” *Modern Reformation* (July/August 2004), p. 28.