

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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<b>Series:</b>	<b>Galatians</b>		Pastor/Teacher
<b>Number:</b>	<b>10</b>		Gary L.W. Johnson
<b>Text:</b>	<b>Galatians 2:15-21</b>		
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### SOLA FIDE: WHAT'S AT STAKE

“True theology,” declared the Puritan giant John Owen, “is, in a sense, gospel theology.”<sup>1</sup> This is the same emphasis that the Protestant Reformation sought to capture by the language *Sola Fide* (salvation is through faith *only* and is not something we earn or merit); *Solo Christo* (salvation is by *only* Christ, the God-man, and there is no need or room for *any* other mediatorial agent, e.g., priest, saints, the Virgin Mary); *Sola Scriptura* (the Scriptures and *only* Scriptures possess divine authority; and unbiblical doctrines like purgatory, indulgences, and the papacy, which are the products of tradition, have no divine credit given to us). Where Rome had taught (and *still* teaches) a piecemeal salvation, to be *gained* by stages through working a sacramental treadmill, the Reformers, in the words of J. I. Packer, “proclaimed a unitary salvation, to be received in its entirety here and now by self-abandoning faith in God’s promise, and in the God and the Christ of the promise, as set forth in the pages of the Bible.”<sup>2</sup> Recently, Mark Thompson, in a chapter entitled *The Theology of Justification by Faith*, wrote: “The deep ground of the doctrine of justification only by faith is the person, character, and purpose of the triune God, and its focus is the death of Jesus Christ for sinners. In the body of Christian teaching, this doctrine has a special place, guarding and securing the priority of grace and the entire sufficiency of the atonement effected by Christ. In shorthand, justification is only by faith because salvation is only by Christ, and salvation only by Christ is the outworking of God’s eternal gracious purpose anchored in the immeasurable depth of his triune life. That is why Martin Luther spoke of this doctrine as the article by which the church stands or falls. If the Christian confession fails at this point, it compromises our utter dependence on Christ and the sheer gratuity of grace, and as a result, the Christian life, corporately as well as individually, begins to unravel. Ultimately, the doctrine of God begins to be redrawn to accommodate notions of human merit and divine obligation. Luther’s fierce determination to concede nothing when it comes to this doctrine finds its true explanation here rather than in his personal psychology or polemical context: he understood just what was at stake.”<sup>3</sup> John Wesley, the father of the Methodist Church, is considered to be one of the great Evangelical preachers of the eighteenth century. He affirmed all the objective facts concerning salvation, such as substitutionary atonement and the bodily resurrection of Christ, but as Lee Gatiss pointed out, “But he wasn’t just mistaken about *small* or *difficult* things like predestination; he was also confused about Christian perfection, which he taught as being attainable in this life, and he even wobbled on the doctrine of justification by faith alone. So if we go forward to Wesley’s Methodist Conference in 1770, we find Wesley had been losing patience with the Evangelical Calvinists. He chose this moment, the year when George Whitefield died, to return to the Arminian distinctives, but particularly to justification and its relationship to holiness with which he had been wrestling. The Minutes of the Conference were, Jim Packer says, *so drafted as to appear to teach, Roman-style, that a man’s works are the ground of his acceptance with God*. For example, as well as rebuking the Methodists for leaning *too much towards Calvinism* (a poisonous plague which was worse than all the devices of Satan), Wesley told them this: *[E]very believer, till he comes to glory, works for, as well as from, life . . . We have received it as a maxim that a man is to do nothing in order to justification. Nothing can be more false . . . Is not this salvation by works? Not by the merit of works, but by works as a condition . . . we are every hour and every moment pleasing or displeasing to God, according to our works*. Read that again, slowly: we do good works *for* eternal life, not just spurred on

by a new birth; it is false to say that we contribute nothing to our salvation (i.e., it is not by faith alone); good works are a condition of our salvation. Wesley is not simply saying here that God has prepared good works for us to walk in (Ephesians 2:10). These sorts of assertions are rightly shocking to those taught to value our Reformation heritage.”<sup>4</sup>

**SUMMARY:** Paul has narrated his confrontation with the Apostle Peter in order to show why he had to withstand Peter to his face in public. The nature of the grace of the gospel was at stake. Chapter 2:15-21 is to be seen as a continuation of Paul’s confrontation with Peter. The argument is an appeal to Peter directly. In the passage before us, we meet for the first time in this epistle the word *to justify* (it appears three times in verse 16 and again in verse 17). The noun form (righteousness) occurs in verse 21. Due to the central importance of this doctrine, we will spend the next few weeks with this passage.

I. ***THE DECLARATION: JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ONLY.*** “The Christian faith,” writes Donald Guthrie, “is an intelligent faith, and there are certain fundamental facets which must be known by all believers. The content of knowledge here is Paul’s theme not only through most of this epistle, but also in the Epistle to the Romans.”<sup>5</sup>

A. ***The Proposition (2:15-16b).*** The word *to justify*, *dikaioō*, does *not* mean “to make righteous,” but “to declare righteous.” On what grounds? Upon the basis of the merits of Christ’s death. The sinner’s debts to God have been fully discharged by Christ’s satisfaction on the cross. He *assumes* liability for the sins of His people. Their sins are *reckoned* or imputed to Him, and His righteousness is reckoned or imputed to them. Justification is the opposite of condemnation and is a legal term taken from the law courts. To be condemned is to be declared guilty (cf. Deuteronomy 25:1; Proverbs 17:15). To be justified is to be declared righteous (Romans 2:13; 3:4). Note the language of Romans 8:33: *Who is he that shall condemn? It is God that justifies.* “Justification and condemnation are opposites; every one is under condemnation that is not justified; and every justified man is freed from condemnation.”<sup>6</sup>

B. ***The Proof (2:16c).*** If Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith only is true, then in the eyes of his Jewish opponents, he has put himself effectively on a level with those lawless and sinful Gentiles.

II. ***THE INTERROGATION: DOES THIS MAKE CHRIST THE MINISTER OF SIN?***

A. ***The Problem (2:17a-c).*** If Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith only is true, then in the eyes of his Jewish opponents, he has put himself effectively on a level with those lawless and sinful Gentiles.

B. ***The Rebuttal (2:27d-18).*** *Absolutely not!* (literally, may it not come to be) is Paul’s quick response. A person, he argues, does not sin by seeking justification in Christ. Remember, this line of reasoning is taking place with *Peter*. Paul is saying to Peter that, if by your example in refusing to eat with Gentile Christians you give them the impression that the law is necessary for salvation (which when you trusted Christ you rejected), then you confess that it was wrong to set aside the Law and that Christ, who led you to set aside the Law, was actually your helper in the matter! The point Paul is making is this: I do not commit sin by seeking justification in Christ. Just the opposite is true. If I actually build up again those statutes of the Law, the very ones which have been done away with by Christ’s death, then by doing so, I show myself to be a transgressor. That is what Peter was doing by his vacillating conduct in the Church in Antioch.

III. ***THE EXPOSITION: JUSTIFICATION AND PAUL’S OWN EXPERIENCE.*** In verse 19 the argument is continued. Paul draws upon his own experience to rebut the accusation that justification by faith in Christ alone cannot be a ministering of sin.

- A. *The Mosaic Law and Life* (2:19). To go back to the Law (as Peter was apparently doing) is to be *alive* to the Law. Paul, on the other hand, declares that he is done with the Law and is therefore dead to it. The Law has not died, but Paul has died to it in the death of his substitute. No master can give orders to a dead slave!
- B. *The Law, the Cross, and Life* (2:20). The thought of *participation* with Christ, his representative, is now accented. The language points *back* to the redemptive act of Christ. He bore the penalty of God's Law in our place. His death becomes Paul's death, and His life becomes Paul's life. Paul is reaffirming here what he had stated in 1:4. In the voluntary, penal substitutionary atoning sacrifice by Jesus Christ believers are united with the Son of God. He died our death, and we share in His death and life.
- C. *The Mosaic Law and Grace* (2:21). If the possibility of salvation could be attained by law, then the cross is rendered needless. Listen to Luther: "Either Christ died in vain, or else the Law justifieth not. But Christ died not in vain, therefore the Law justifieth not."<sup>7</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** If we say that salvation comes by character, or by our love for God, or by making Christ the Lord and Master of our life, or that salvation comes by making a complete surrender – these are, as Machen saw so clearly, “just differing forms of the one central error which seeks salvation in human merit, and they all alike come under the condemnation of Paul’s tremendous polemic in the Epistle to the Galatians.”<sup>8</sup> Richard Baxter (1615-1691) was a highly-influential Puritan Pastor who is best known for his two books, *The Saint’s Everlasting Rest* (1650) and *The Reformed Pastor* (1650), both considered to be devotional classics. But Baxter was not a theologian by training, and he often strayed when he attempted to write on issues like justification. J. I. Packer, who wrote his Ph.D dissertation on Baxter at Oxford, wrote: “Baxter’s gospel presents Christ’s death as an act of universal redemption, penal and vicarious though not strictly substitutionary, in virtue of which God has made a new law offering amnesty to penitent breakers of the old law. As obedience to the new law, repentance and faith are one’s personal saving righteousness, which effectual calling induces and preserving grace sustains. Called *Neonomianism*, this scheme is substantially Amyraldian, with Arminian *new law* teaching added. Its obvious legalistic tendency, unrecognized by Baxter, was much criticized in his own day.”<sup>9</sup> William Orms, Baxter’s biographer, likewise admitted, “He speaks about the Gospel being *new law, the conditions of which are easier than those of the old; of faith as the righteousness of a Christian*. He defines this faith as *the condition of the new covenant* and includes in it the whole of religion. He represents the death of Christ as not *affecting any sins against the Gospel*; speaks of *works as part of the condition on which Christ’s righteousness becomes ours*, and maintains that *we are justified by sincere obedience*. To this language, no man who understands aright the gratuitous justification, which is through faith in the blood of Christ, will ever subscribe. These were some of the expressions or sentiments which involved Baxter in most of the doctrinal altercations that occupied so large a portion of his future life, and on account of which his name has been placed at the head of a peculiar creed. While he explained, modified, and retracted, many things in this first, and perhaps most objectionable of his works, he adhered to the substance of its sentiments to the last.”<sup>10</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> John Owen, *Biblical Theology* (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria Publication, 1994), p. 593.

<sup>2</sup> J. I. Packer, “The Reformed Doctrine of Justification” in *Soli Deo Gloria: Essays in Reformed Theology, A Festschrift for John H. Gerstner*, ed. R. C. Sproul (Presbyterians & Reformed, 1976), p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> This chapter is in *the Doctrine On Which the Church Stands or Falls*, ed. Matthew Barrett (Crossway, 2019), p. 419.

<sup>4</sup> Lee Gatiss, *Cornerstones of Salvation* (E P Books, 2017), p. 210.

<sup>5</sup> D. Guthrie, *Galatians: The New Century Bible Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1973), p. 87. “Justification does not proceed from faith any more than works, but it is appropriated by faith.”

<sup>6</sup> *The Works of Robert Traill*, IV (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), p. 162.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther, *A Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians* (rpt. James Clark, 1972), p. 183.

<sup>8</sup> *Machen’s Notes on Galatians*, ed. J. Skilton (Presbyterian & Reformed, 1973), p. 156.

<sup>9</sup> *New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. S. B. Ferguson, D. F. Wright, J. I. Packer (IVP, 1988), p. 83.

<sup>10</sup> Williams Orme, *The Life and Times of Richard Baxter II*, p. 41-42.