

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

<b>Series:</b>	<b>Galatians</b>		Pastor/Teacher
<b>Number:</b>	<b>19</b>		Gary L.W. Johnson
<b>Text:</b>	<b>Galatians 3:22; Acts 13:38-41; Romans 8:1</b>		
<b>Date:</b>	<b>June 28, 2026 (a.m.)</b>		

### RIGHTEOUS BEFORE GOD: NOW AND FOREVER?

The sad development surrounding John Piper continues to snowball. Piper boldly announced that “we should not speak of getting to heaven by faith alone in the same way we are justified by faith alone.”<sup>1</sup> This is not a new development. For decades Piper has taught that Christians should believe that we *attain heaven* by more than faith alone – we must, he strongly insists, see faith as a link in a chain of cooperation with grace. So we are justified by grace alone (*sola gratia*), through faith alone (*sola fide*), but Piper claims that salvation, because it is a broader category, includes sanctification, and this includes our ongoing faithfulness, i.e., good works, and this involves virtuous affection for Christ. More recently, Piper has published *What Is Saving Faith: Reflections on Receiving Christ as a Treasure* (Crossway, 2022), where he categorically declares: “Specifically, I want to know if there is in the very nature of saving faith some kind of *affectional* element. That is, does saving faith include any element of love for Christ, or admiration, or adoration, or treasuring, or cherishing, or delighting, or satisfaction, or thankfulness, or revering? All these words are affectional. They represent experiences in the human soul that I am calling *affections*. And I will argue in this book that saving faith does indeed have in its very nature affectional elements, dimensions, or aspects.”<sup>2</sup> Guy Waters, in his review of Piper’s book, states, “Critical to Piper’s definition of saving faith (and to the thesis of *WSF*) is the word *element*. Piper is *not asking whether affections ... accompany saving faith*, nor if *such affections are the result of saving faith*, whether as fruits, evidences, or good works produced by saving faith. Piper is asking, rather, whether *affections like love for Christ, or delight in his glory, or satisfaction in his perfections, or treasuring his worth are part of the nature of faith, are so integral to saving faith that, if they were not there, we would not have saving faith*. Piper is aware of the three-fold anatomy of saving faith that Reformed theologians routinely and approvingly cite – *notitia* (knowledge), *assensus* (assent), and *fiducia* (trust). Piper does not so much reject this description of saving faith as pronounce it insufficient. There are *more than three elements of saving faith*, and that additional element is affectional.”<sup>3</sup>

What is at stake here? Brad Mason, in his survey of the issues, makes the following observations:

“I agree that Salvation is a broader term than just Justification. As we discussed last time, the benefits of Union with Christ are two-fold, Justification and Regeneration – the latter to be taken in its widest sense to include all that answers to our corruption of nature (illumination, the death of the old man and resurrection of the new, sanctification, and ultimately glorification); the former answering to our guilt. To be sure, the Scripture speaks of Salvation itself as having a past referent, a present referent, and a future referent. We read the following uses throughout:

“**Past tense:** *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:8-10).*

“**Present tense:** *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (1 Cor. 1:18).*

**“Future tense:** *Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him (Rom. 5:9).*

“It is common in systematics to divide these tenses into differing benefits, past tense being Justification, present tense being Sanctification, and future tense being Glorification. Piper’s breakdown is a bit different in his article:

- In *justification*, faith receives a finished work of Christ performed *outside* of us and counted as ours – imputed to us.
- In *sanctification*, faith receives an ongoing power of Christ that works *inside* us for practical holiness.
- In *final salvation* at the last judgment, faith is confirmed by the sanctifying fruit it has borne, and we are saved through that fruit and that faith. As Paul says in 2 Thessalonians 2:13, God chose you as the first fruits to be saved, *through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.*

“It seems to me that Piper speaks comfortably in both ways, but here is pointing up the judicial or forensic aspect of Salvation relative to both the past and the future. But no matter. I presume we all agree that each of these benefits do in fact flesh out the more holistic meaning of *salvation*, beyond just justification. But a major problem, as I see it, is that these inseparable benefits of Union with Christ by faith are often unduly disjointed. They are treated as though one is initially justified – right with God, as Piper puts it – and then one begins the next phase on that basis, i.e., Sanctification; then at the end of the lifelong work of Sanctification, one comes to the Last Judgment, passing through to the final and consummate stage of Glorification. Particularly for Piper, the future aspect of Salvation follows a judgment *based upon all of what has gone before*. Thus, fruits are brought forward as confirmations of living faith in the Last Judgment such that one cannot properly say that this future aspect of Salvation is *by means of faith alone*.

“But this multi-step progress of Salvation, passing from one state to the next in order, seems to obscure the meaning of Justification itself. Justification is a judicial declaration of *not guilty* and *perfectly righteous* in Christ. As many have pointed out (including [*gasp*] N. T. Wright), the law-court imagery of Justification, viz., the Judge declaring one innocent and righteous from the Seat of Judgment is properly *in view of the Final Judgment*. When will the books be opened and the judicial sentence passed by God seated on His throne? When will the verdict be read? At the end of the ages, Justification itself is the present declaration that one is, and will duly be pronounced *not guilty* when the actual Judgment occurs. Sentence has not yet been passed. But by Union with Christ, the declaration of future salvation is already sealed. Thus we read (as quoted above), *Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him (Rom. 5:9)*. Having been Justified, we have been saved and *will* be saved. By the Holy Spirit we *were sealed for the day of redemption* upon our conversion, *were saved in this hope* of the final redemption, and by faith wait for *Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come* (Eph. 4:30; Rom. 8:23-25; 1 Thess. 1:8-10).

“This is what is truly precious about the doctrine of Justification: it is not just the first step from which one moves on into the rest of the benefits of saving Union with Christ. It is the declaration at the beginning of what will be at the end. Justification is the definitive, present, juridical, and authoritative pronouncement on the whole of the believers walk to Glory; that is, a pronouncement on the whole of what constitutes Salvation in its broadest sense. Justification answers our guilt in Adam, both now and at the Last Judgment. This declaration is true and unchanging from the moment of faith and Union, through the entire course of Regeneration, Sanctification, and Glorification. It pronounces the end at the beginning and all along the way. And how are we Justified – how do we receive this holistic declaration of *not guilty* and *perfectly righteous*? *By faith alone. Sola Fide.*”<sup>4</sup>

The late G. C. Berkouwer, in addressing the historical context in the struggle over the *sola fide*, duly noted the role the Reformed confessions played. “Needless to say, this does not mean that the confessions are

absolutely decisive. They themselves arise from the conviction that we can and may speak only as we put ourselves under the yoke of Scripture. Our reflection, too, and for the same reason, must proceed in the train of Scripture. But we can hardly circumvent that bitterest of all struggles for a pure understanding of the gospel, the Reformation of the sixteenth century. It was then as at no other time that justification through faith was trumpeted as the article with which the Church stands or falls. *Sola fide* was not presented as a discrete aspect or section of the confession. It embraced the whole gospel. And this conviction is reflected in a number of Reformed and Lutheran confessions. Faith is NOT a work. On the contrary, faith does nothing but accept, or come to rest in the sovereignty of His benefit. Further, to ward off any misunderstanding, Lord's Day 23 declares with a touch of emphasis, that we are not acceptable to God because of the worthiness of our faith. Grace is exclusively and totally God's; therefore, says the Catechism, we can do nothing else but accept it through faith (Q. 61). To walk the way of faith is simply to admit that Christ is the Way. These are the accents of the Reformation."<sup>5</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** Listen to Calvin's comments on Acts 13:38-39: "Thus it is said in Paul's sermon in the thirteenth chapter of The Acts: Through Christ is forgiveness of sins announced to you, and everyone who believes in him is justified of all things from which the law of Moses could not justify him (Acts 13:38-39). You see that, after forgiveness of sins, this justification is set down, as it were, by way of interpretation. You see that it is plainly understood as absolution, you see that it is separated from the works of the law. You see it as the mere benefit of Christ, and you see that it is received by faith. You see finally that a satisfaction is introduced where he says that we are justified from our sins through Christ. Thus, when the publican is said to have gone down from the Temple justified (Luke 18:14), we cannot say that he achieved righteousness by any merit of works. This, therefore, is what is said: after pardon of sins has been obtained, the sinner is considered as a just man in God's sight. Therefore, he was righteous not by approval of works but by God's free absolution. Ambrose has, accordingly, fitly expressed it when he calls the confession of sins a lawful justification. He writes: "And to avoid contention over a word, if we look upon the thing itself as described to us, no misgiving will remain. For Paul surely refers to justification by the word *acceptance* when in Eph. 1:5-6 he says: *We are destined for adoption through Christ according to God's good pleasure, to the praise of his glorious grace by which he has accounted us acceptable and beloved* (Eph. 1:5-6). That means the very thing that he commonly says elsewhere that *God justifies us freely* (Rom. 3:24). Moreover, in the fourth chapter of Romans he first calls justification *imputation of righteousness*. And he does not hesitate to include it within forgiveness of sins. Paul says *That man is declared blessed by David whom God renders acceptable or to whom he imputes righteousness apart from works, as it is written: Blessed are they whose transgressions have been forgiven*. (Rom. 4:6-7; Ps. 32:1). There he is obviously discussing not a part of justification but the whole of it. Further, he approves the definition of it set forth by David when he declares those men blessed to whom free pardon of sins is given (Ps. 32:1-2). From this it is clear that the righteousness of which he speaks is simply set in opposition to guilt. But the best passage of all on this matter is the one in which he teaches that the sum of the gospel embassy is to reconcile us to God, since God is willing to receive us into grace through Christ, not counting our sins against us (2 Cor. 5:18-20). Let my readers carefully ponder the whole passage. For a little later Paul adds by way of explanation: *Christ, who was without sin, was made sin for us* (2 Cor. 5:21), to designate the means of reconciliation (cf. vs. 18-19). Doubtless, he means by the word *reconciled* nothing but *justified*. And surely, what he teaches elsewhere – that *we are made righteous by Christ's obedience* (Rom. 5:19) – could not stand unless we are reckoned righteous before God in Christ and apart from ourselves."<sup>6</sup> And this surely means that our good works or character have absolutely no role in our right to eternal life. "In true holiness it is not hard to understand that our works cannot even be a part of our righteousness, since they are polluted and imperfect. When the Catechism speaks of the imperfection of our good works, it intends to express our guilt; it complains humbly in the obedience of faith that we are still so far removed not from some moral ideal but from the Lord."<sup>7</sup> Finally, if as Piper claims saving faith must have the virtuous element of affection, then why does Peter tell us in 2 Peter 1:5 "For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge . . ." Scott Clark helpfully points out that the English noun "virtue" is derived from the Latin noun *virtus*, the root sense of which is *strength* or *power*. To speak of faith *as a virtue* tends to cause folk to locate the power of faith in faith itself. The WCF uses the word *virtue* with the sense of *power* or *strength* in 8.6: Although the work of redemption

was not actually wrought by Christ till after his incarnation, yet the virtue, efficacy, and benefits thereof were communicated unto the elect. . . . WCF 13.1 speaks of the *virtue of Christ's death*. 14.2 uses the expression *by virtue of the covenant of grace*. 30.1 speaks of the *virtue* of the keys of the kingdom. Of the Reformed confessions, the Second Helvetic Confession (1561/1566) uses the noun *virtue* in the same way. Chapter 10 explicitly denies that we were called or elected because of any virtue inherent in us (2 Tim. 1:9). In chapters 14 and 16 we are exhorted to strive toward virtue as a consequence of our redemption. Given this sense of *virtue*, as *strength* or *moral excellence*, neither the Three Forms nor the Westminster Standards speak of faith as a *virtue*. In contrast to the medieval and Roman Church, Protestants think that Christ is the virtue of faith (WCF 13.1). It was the Remonstrant/Arminian move back to toward the medieval conception of faith as virtue with intrinsic qualities that concerned the Reformed Churches. Notice how WCF 14.1 characterizes of saving faith: The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts, and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word, by which also, and by the administration of the sacraments and prayer, it is increased and strengthened. We may speak of the virtue of faith but only if we finish it by saying *is Christ*. He must be the virtue of faith because he is the object of faith. There is nothing intrinsic to faith that makes it powerful. The mystery of faith is that it is, in itself, empty. It is a sign of our perversity that we continually try to fill faith with something other than *Christ for us*. We want to make the power of faith to be faith itself or Spirit-wrought sanctity or something else beside Christ. The Westminster Divines (with all the Reformed Churches) were acutely aware of this tendency. Thus they defined faith, in the act of justification, very carefully in order to preclude this very thing: Those whom God effectually calleth, he also freely justifieth: not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; *nor by imputing faith itself*, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness; but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness, by faith; which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God.

Faith does not justify because it is *formed by love* i.e., made powerful by Spirit-wrought sanctity and/or cooperation with grace. It is *ever accompanied* (11.2) by other *saving graces* but these other saving graces do not make faith what it is. Contra the rationalists and moralists faith is made powerful by being intrinsically powerless. I highlighted in the quotation from 11.1 above the expression, *nor by imputing faith itself*. . . . That is the Remonstrant error. It is not faith itself that is imputed. It is Christ's active and passive obedience that is imputed to us. Faith, as the divines remind, rests and receives. As the Belgic says, it *leans*. It isn't even the act of believing itself. Christ and nothing else is the virtue of faith."<sup>8</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cf. his 9/25/17 post, "Does God really save us by faith alone?" (<https://desiringgod.org/articles/does-god-really-save-us-by-faith-alone>).

<sup>2</sup> *What is Saving Faith?* (p. 13). Sadly, a number of prominent Evangelical theologians have endorsed this book.

<sup>3</sup> Guy Waters, *Faith and Treasuring Christ: A Review Article*, <https://journal.rts.edu/article/faith-and-treasuring-christ-a-review-article/>. John Fesko, our most recent Lloyd-Jackson speaker, has written: *A Historical-Theological Response to John Piper's What is Saving Faith?* <https://journal.rts.edu/article/a-historical-theological-response-to-john-pipers-what-is-saving-faith/>

<sup>4</sup> B. Mason, "Rachel Miller Contra Mundum? The 5 Solas and John Piper, Part I & II (<http://www.heartandmouth.org>).

<sup>5</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Faith and Justification* (Eerdmans, 1954), pp. 40-43.

<sup>6</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Book III, ch. XI, sec. 3, 4).

<sup>7</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies In Dogmatics: Faith and Sanctification* (Eerdmans, 1954), p. 130.

<sup>8</sup> R. Scott Clark, "Is Faith a Virtue?" <https://heidelblog.net/2014/06/is-faith-a-virtue-2/>