

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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

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THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL

Five times the Apostle Paul refers to the truth of the gospel in his epistle to the Galatians (2:5; 2:14; 3:1; 4:16; 5:7). Speaking the truth first involves *knowing* it. We read in John 8:32, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” A. K. Moulton, in his extremely helpful book *The Challenge of The Concordance* points out that: “God Himself is true (Jn. 3:33; 8:26; Rom. 3:4). That is the axiom with which we begin. If it were not so, then the New Testament and anything written about it would be valueless. God is Reality, self-consistent, truthful in all that He says and does. And this truth is manifested in the revelation of His Son, coming among us full of grace and truth (Jn. 1:14, 17). In fact, He too *is* Truth (Jn. 14:6). Truth is in Him (2 Cor. 11:10); Eph. 4:21). He speaks Truth (Jn. 8:40, 45, 46; 16:7). The Spirit also *is* the Truth (1 Jn. 5:6; in some Bibles 5:7) and is the Spirit of Truth (Jn. 14:17; 15:26; 16:13; 1 Jn. 4:6). God’s word is truth (Jn. 17:17). His judgment is according to truth (Rom. 2:2). The Gospel too is truth (Gal. 2:5, 14; Eph. 1:13; Col. 1:5). On the other hand, one of the descriptions of the devil is that there is no truth in him (Jn. 8:44); and people who go wrong *hold down the truth in unrighteousness* (Rom. 1:18), exchange the truth for a lie (1:25), disobey the truth (Rom. 2:8; Gal. 5:7), are bereft of the truth (1 Tim. 6:5), miss the mark of the truth (2 Tim. 2:18), withstand the truth (3:8), turn away from the truth (Tit. 2:18), withstand the truth (3:8), turn away from the truth (Tit. 1:14), lie against the truth (Jas. 3:14), wander from the truth (5:19). Being linked with the devil automatically means turning one’s back on truth. The truth of God, however (to use the phrase of Rom. 3:7; 15:8), makes men free (Jn. 8:32). It is that into which the Spirit guides us (16:13). It is that in which God sanctifies us (17:17, 19). It is one of the fruits of His light (Eph. 5:9). It is that which is *with us and in us* (2 Pet. 1:12; 2 Jn. 2).”¹

- I. **THE PERILS OF TELLING THE TRUTH.** In Galatians 4:16 the Apostle asks the Galatians, “Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?” Note how this question is framed in light of Paul’s emphasis in 3:10-13. “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, *Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them*. Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for *The righteous shall live by faith*. But the law is not of faith, rather *The one who does them shall live by them*. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, *Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree*, and 2:21, *I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose*. The Judaizers insisted that they likewise are celebrating the grace of God as did the Roman Catholic Church in opposition to the Reformers’ emphasis on *sola fide* – but Paul, and later the Reformers, declared otherwise. Sinclair Ferguson, in the most recent issue of *TableTalk*, saw two problems with Roman Catholicism, “The first was that this *grace* was in fact *grace plus my cooperation* and therefore *no longer . . . grace*. The second was that this way of salvation made it practically impossible for anyone to know that he had cooperated *enough* to qualify for justification (by *grace*). Exceptions might be made for the *saints* and those whose salvation was vouchsafed to them by supernatural means (such as an appearance of Mary). Thus, *ordinary* believers (like you and me) were denied the birthright of enjoying assurance *without extraordinary revelation, in the right use of ordinary means* (WCF 18.3). Such teaching turned the biblical gospel upside down, for justification takes place not at the end of an elongated cooperative process but

at the very beginning of the Christian life. The life of the Christian is an *already-having-been-justified life*. We are justified through faith in union with the risen Christ in His perfect, indestructible, irreversible righteousness. Since He has risen, He can never die again (see Rom. 4:23-25; 6:9). A Latin tag summarized this *grace cooperative*: *Facere quod in se est – Do what you can*. It perhaps remains the most ordinary form of gospel distortion: *God helps those who help themselves*. The need for grace is not denied, but the explanation of how this *grace* saves is, in effect, destructive of gospel grace and assurance. The need for the Reformers to un-distort this teaching was perhaps most clearly expressed by the formidable Roman Catholic theologian-apologist Cardinal Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621) when he stated that the greatest of all Protestant heresies was *assurance*. He said this, of course, because the medieval system of sacramental *grace* neither offered nor encouraged assurance. Indeed, it was incapable of doing so. This medieval distortion continues to have a Protestant form. Yes, *grace* is necessary for salvation. But while God contributes most of what is needed, we must play our part and cooperate with our own contribution. But that always produces the curse of *Have I done enough to be sure?* By contrast, the gospel tells us that we can never do enough. But its good news is that Jesus Christ has done enough for us in our place. In fact, *Jesus paid it all*. **That** is grace. Anything other, anything less, anything more – and *grace is no longer grace*.² Ask the average person whether he thinks he will go to heaven or not and he will most likely answer that he is doing the best he can, and that he is as good as the next person. There was a country song a few years back, “Where I came From,” that has a line that expresses this concept, namely, that all are “working hard to get to heaven.” R. C. Sproul pointed out in his video series on *The Cross of Christ* that most people believe in “justification by death,” i.e., people go to heaven when they die. This was stated rather directly by President Clinton (a self-proclaimed Southern Baptist) several years ago regarding those who died in the Oklahoma City bombing. Likewise, another high-profile Southern Baptist, President Jimmy Carter, repudiated the Southern Baptist historical position on the gospel when he denounced the denomination’s leaders for declaring the Mormons to be a non-Christian cult (a position that historic Christianity, be it Roman Catholic or Protestant, has always held). Carter reveals another attitude that is widespread in many of our evangelical churches – distaste for decidedly precise doctrinal statements, i.e., creeds and confessions. Of course, the mind shaped by post-modernism will abhor such things. The kind of popular evangelicalism embraced by Clinton and Carter bears little, if any, resemblance to the kind of faith that characterized evangelicals in generations past. R. L. Dabney, that stalwart Southern Presbyterian theologian of the 19th century reminded us that each generation needs to examine and reaffirm for itself the principal doctrines. 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.”³ 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).⁴ Likewise, Rich Lusk of The Federal Vision emphatically states that “eschatological justification or final judgment is according to deeds.” 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 (Rom. 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."

II. **INTERPRETING THE PASSAGE.** A number of proposals have been put forth.⁷

- 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."⁸
- 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 Cor. 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."⁹
- 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."¹⁰ 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."¹¹

III. **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. No one word 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 Thess.

1:9), is summarized in the preceding verse as “your faith in God (cf. Rom. 1:8 for a similar use). The members of Paul’s churches are described simply as “those who believe” (1 Cor. 1:21; cf. Rom. 1:16), and Paul describes their coming to Christ as the time when “you believed” (1 Cor. 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). 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. Let me explain.

- 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*.¹³ 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; 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: Most of those advocating this type of covenantal nomism are *not* deliberately seeking to jeopardize *sola fide*. John Armstrong and Doug Wilson are two of these men who I know personally. They sincerely believe that they are *still* operating within the boundaries of the Reformed Faith. I am sympathetic to some of their concerns (the rampant antinomianism that characterizes so much of modern 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.”¹⁴ 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 fides*, they deviate dangerously from that 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 the works of the law (Rom. 5:1; 3:28).”¹⁴ The followers of Norman Chepherd and 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. 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.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ H. K. Moulton, *The Challenge of The Concordance: Some New Testament Words Studied in Depth* (Bagster & Sons, 1977), p. 165.
- ² Sinclair Ferguson, "Assurance Distortion," *TableTalk* (September, 2026), p. 22.
- ³ Cf. *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros & Cons: Debating The Federal Vision*, ed. Calvin Beisner for individuals involved and their positions (Knox Seminary, 2004).
- ⁴ J. Armstrong, *Reformation & Revival: The Weekly Messenger* (April 5, 2004), p. 6. Armstrong's citing Phil. 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 within us." *Christ, Our Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Justification* (IVP, 2000), p. 148.
- ⁵ R. Lusk, in *The Auburn Avenue Theology*, p. 146.
- ⁶ The Roman Catholic position was officially stated at the Council of Trent (1545-63). Regarding the Reformers and good works it stated: *Canon 24*. If anyone says that the justice received is not preserved and also not increased before God through good works but that those works are merely the fruits and signs of justification obtained, but not the cause of the increase, let him be anathema. *Canon 32*. If anyone says that the good works of the one justified are in such manner the gifts of God that they are not also the good merits of him justified; or that the one justified by the good works that he performs by the grace of God and the merit of Jesus Christ . . . does not truly merit an increase of grace and eternal life . . . let him be anathema. Cf. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom II* (rpt. Baker, 1983), pp. 115, 117.
- ⁷ I have summarized these from L. Morris, *The Epistle to The Romans* (IVP, 1988), p. 148.
- ⁸ W. G. T. Shedd, *A Critical and Doctrinal Commentary on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1978), p. 45.
- ⁹ 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.
- ¹⁰ F. Godet, *Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (rpt. Zondervan, 1970), p. 96.
- ¹¹ D. Moo, op. cit.
- ¹² 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.
- ¹³ 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 Owens, 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 issue titled "Lutheranized Calvinism" in which he endorses Shepherd and Wright and their understanding of justification).
- ¹⁴ Joey Pippa in *The Auburn Avenue Theology*, p. 10.
- ¹⁵ 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.