

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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FALLEN FROM GRACE (Part II)

The Reformation's doctrine of justification by faith alone (*sola fide*) is quickly becoming *passé* in much of contemporary Evangelicalism. A number of factors have contributed to this sad development. The ever-widening impact of what is called *The New Perspective on Paul*, is spearheaded by men like N. T. Wright and James Dunn. Coupled with this is an aggressive campaign of former Evangelicals who decided to swim the Tiber and convert to Roman Catholicism, men like Francis Beckwith, Peter Kreeft, Scott Hahn and Robert Sunginis (who came under the influence of Norman Shepherd at Westminster Theological Seminary and in the process concluded that Shepherd's understanding of justification was in fact a confirmation of the Council of Trent). All of this stands in sharp contrast to how the Reformers and their heirs understand and prized this doctrine. Note the following.

Herman Witsius (1636-1708, Holland), *The Economy of the Covenants*, 2.8.1: "The pious Picardians, as they were called in Bohemia and Moravia, valued this article at its true price when in their confession of faith, Art, vi. speaking of justification, they thus write: *this sixth article is accounted with us the most principal of all, as being the sum of all Christianity and piety. Wherefore our divines teach and handle it with all diligence and application, and endeavor to instill it into all.*"

Thomas Watson (1620-1686, England), *A Body of Divinity*, 226: "Justification is the very hinge and pillar of Christianity. An error about justification is dangerous, like a defect in a foundation. Justification by Christ is a spring of the water of life. To have the poison of corrupt doctrine cast into this spring is damnable."

Leiden Synopsis (written by four professors of theology from Leiden, 1625): "The topic of justification in theology is easily foremost and most saving. If it be obscured, adulterated, or overturned, it is impossible for purity of doctrine to be retained in other loci or for the true Church to exist."

Francis Turretin (1623-1687, Switzerland), *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*: "This must be handled with the greater care and accuracy as this saving doctrine is of the greatest importance in religion. It is called by Luther *the article of a standing and a falling church*. By other Christians, it is termed the characteristic and basis of Christianity – not without reason – the principal rampart of the Christian religion. This being adulterated or subverted, it is impossible to retain purity of doctrine in other places. Hence Satan in every way has endeavored to corrupt this doctrine in all ages, as has been done especially by the papacy."

Wilhelmus á Brakel (1635-1711, Holland), *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 2.341: "Justification . . . is the soul of Christianity and the fountainhead of all true comfort and sanctification. He who errs in this doctrine errs to his eternal destruction. The devil is therefore continually engaged in denying, perverting, and obscuring the truth expressed in this chapter and, if he does not accomplish this, to prevent exercise concerning this truth . . . One must therefore be all the more earnest to properly understand, defend, and meditate upon this doctrine."

Antonius Walacus (1573-1639, Holland), *Loci Communes*, 746: “This article is of such high moment that Luther himself, Chemnitz, and all the writers of the Reformed Church were always of the opinion that it is the foundation of the whole Reformation and the source of all our true consolation and gratitude.”

Johannes Vanderkemp (1664-1718, Holland), *Sermons on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 1.479-480: “What think ye, hearers, have not we reason to boast, that we alone possess the pure doctrine according to the word of God, when we teach that the sinner is justified before God by faith only, on account of the perfect righteousness of Christ, through the free grace of God? Is not this doctrine the only foundation, and the principal article of the whole Gospel? . . . But what will this boasting avail us, if we ourselves do not make a profitable, comfortable, and sanctifying use of our doctrine?”

Archibald Alexander (1772-1851, America), *Treatise on Justification*: “But a sound view of this point is intimately connected with correct opinions on all other articles of primary importance; and an error here, cannot but vitiate the whole system of theology, of which it forms a part. This is a central and a cardinal point in theoretical, as well as practical religion; and the degree of error on other articles, may be inferred, from the degree of departure from the truth, in regard to this.”

Zacharias Ursinus (1534-1583 Germany), *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 324-325): “The doctrine of justification, which now follows, is one of the chief articles of our faith, not only because it treats of those things which are fundamental, but also because it is most frequently called in question by heretics . . . And such is the importance of these doctrines that if either one of them be overthrown, the other parts of our faith easily fall to pieces. Hence it becomes necessary for us to fortify and establish ourselves, especially in these doctrines, against all the assaults of heretics.”

John Calvin (15-9-1564, Switzerland), *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.1 1.1: “The method of justification has been but slightly touched, because it was necessary, first to understand that the faith, by which alone we attain gratuitous justification through the Divine mercy, is not unattended with good works, and what if the nature of the good works of the saints, in which part of this question consists. The subject of justification, therefore, must now be fully discussed, and discussed with the recollection that it is the principal hinge by which religion is supported, in order that we may apply to it with the greater attention and care. For unless we first of all apprehend in what situation we stand with respect to God, and what his judgment is concerning us, we have no foundation either for a certainty of salvation, or for the exercise of piety towards God. But the necessity of knowing this subject will be more evident from the knowledge itself.”

Finally, here is a quote from Calvin’s reply to a letter from Cardinal Joseph Sadolet (1539): “You, in the first place, touch upon justification by faith, the first and keenest subject of controversy between us. Is this a knotty and useless question? Wherever the knowledge of it is taken away, the glory of Christ is extinguished, religion abolished, the Church destroyed, and the hope of salvation utterly overthrown. That doctrine, then, though of the highest moment, we maintain that you have nefariously effaced from the memory of men. Our books are filled with convincing proofs of this fact, and the gross ignorance of this doctrine, which even still continues in all your churches, declares that our complaint is by no means ill founded.”

- I. **THE APOSTLE’S LANGUAGE.** Note the immediate context. “You are severed from Christ.” Severed is how A. T. Robertson translated the Greek word *katērhēte* – to make null and void as in Romans 7:2, 6.¹ Why is this happening? “Who would be justified by the law.” The late Robert Reymond correctly pointed out the Apostle Paul insisted, “(1) that there is only one gospel – justification by faith alone in Christ’s work alone (Rom. 3:27, 28; 4:5; 10:4; Gal. 2:16; 3:10-11, 26; Phil. 3:8-9), (2) that any other *gospel* is not the gospel, (3) that those who teach any other *gospel* stand under the anathema of God (Gal. 1:8-9), and (4) that those who rely to any degree on their own works for their salvation nullify the grace of God (Rom. 11:5-6), make void the

cross work of Christ (Gal. 2:21; 5:2), become debtors to keep the entire law (Gal. 5:3), and in becoming such *fall from grace* (Gal. 5:4), that is, place themselves again under the curse of the law.”²

A. **Fallen From Grace.** Again, the great A. T. Robertson translates it this way, *You fallen away from Grace.*³ The Greek word *ekpito* means to lose one’s grip or hold. The Galatians, by heeding the teachings of the Judaizers, had left the sphere of grace and taken their stand in the sphere of the Mosaic law. They were in effect substituting the law in the place of Christ. Kenneth Wuest writes, “Justification is a judicial act of God done once for all. Sanctification is a process which goes on all through the Christian’s life. *Just because the process of sanctification is temporarily retarded in a believer’s life, does not say that his justification is taken away. If that were the case, then the retention of salvation would depend upon the believer’s works, and then salvation would not depend upon grace anymore. And we find ourselves in the camp of the Judaizers, ancient and modern.*”⁴

CONCLUSION: By seeking to have their justification completed by means of law keeping, the Galatians were in fact abandoning Christ! Robert Letham highlights what’s at stake here: “Justification does not merely mean *just as if I had never sinned*; that is a half-truth. In fact, modern English usage has also eroded the meaning of forgiveness. At stake are three intertwined elements. First, the penalty of sin is death and all it entails, including condemnation. Christ has removed the penalty by his death and resurrection (Rom. 4:25). *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus* (Rom. 8:1). Second, behind the penalty is the guilt incurred by sin, owing to our actual sins and the sin of Adam. By his atonement, Christ has deleted entirely the guilt we incurred by bearing it himself. Third, this guilt rests on the existence of sin which, as a juridical factor, has been buried in the depths of the sea (Mic. 7:19).”⁵

ENDNOTES

¹ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures In The New Testament* IV (Broadman, 1931), p. 309.

² R. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of The Christian Faith* (Thomas Nelson, 1998), p. 754.

³ Robertson, op. cit.

⁴ K. Wuest, *Galatians In The Greek New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1944), p. 141.

⁵ R. Letham, *Systematic Theology* (Crossway, 2019), p. 700.