

Justification by Faith

As I say, too often we believers – I am speaking of evangelicals and the Reformed – have adopted a view of justification which does less than justice to the weight of scriptural teaching on the subject. And this has had very serious consequences. Let me spell out what I am referring to.

Despite what I said in closing the previous chapter, Justification, according to the Bible, *is* God's legal pronouncement about his believing people. In Christ he does declare them righteous, he does account them beyond condemnation, and he does it by imputing to them the perfect obedience of the Lord Jesus Christ. The scene really is the law courts. This is how the Bible pictures it for us. God the judge pronounces the guilty justified on the basis of the finished work of Christ. So says Scripture. Of that, there is no doubt whatsoever.

Moreover, because we have been rightly determined to preserve this biblical truth, we have especially wanted to distance ourselves from the Roman Catholic notion of justification. And to say so! Quite right too! Romanists claim that justification involves much more than a legal declaration by God that the believer is righteous in Christ. Those who are justified, they claim, are actually and inherently in themselves made righteous. In other words, it is not only a question of imputed righteousness, but it is a matter of imparted, inherent righteousness. So says Rome. In saying this, Rome is grievously mistaken. Scripture is decidedly against her. The Roman notion is not only false, however. Although I will not expand on it here, the Roman doctrine brings many fearful consequences in its wake.

The point I am driving at is this: in light of all the importance of justification by faith, we have been right to confront Rome over the issue. Even so, in properly reacting against Rome, we have tended to lay so much weight on God's legal verdict in justification, that we have forgotten – or at least played down – the glorious truth that as justified believers we really are righteous, really are sinlessly perfect before God in Christ, utterly and irrevocably beyond condemnation. Not, I hasten to add, that we as

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believers are sinless in ourselves. But, in truth, we as believers *are* completely washed free of all sin in the Redeemer's blood, and *are* fully clothed in the perfection of Christ's righteousness. This is what justification by faith means. It is a legal truth, a forensic declaration by God about us as believers, yes, but we, through faith, truly are 'made righteous' in Christ (Rom. 5:19). This is a reality. It is not a figment. It is the biblical truth about us as believers. We, as believers, can say with confidence that God made Christ 'who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in him' (2 Cor. 5:21). We can say with assurance that God in Christ did this so that we, 'not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing... should be holy and without blemish' (Eph. 5:27). And all of it hinges on the fact that 'by one offering he [God in Christ] has perfected [us] for ever' (Heb. 10:14). Oh yes, these things are true, these things are real, these things are actual, for all of us who are in Christ by faith. The blood and righteousness of Christ accomplishes all this for us. In ourselves, we are sinners; in Christ, we are for ever beyond condemnation.

This is not the place for me to develop the doctrine of justification; a few scriptures (including repeats of the brief citations just given) must suffice:

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God... For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly... God demonstrates his own love towards us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation... For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one man's obedience many will be made righteous (Rom. 5:1-19).

[God] made [Christ] who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in him (2 Cor. 5:21).

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Christ... loved the church and gave himself for her, that he might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word,⁵ that he might present her to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish (Eph. 5:25-27).

By [the] will [of God] we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all... This man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God, from that time waiting till his enemies are made his footstool. For by one offering he has perfected for ever those who are being sanctified (Heb. 10:10-14).

That, I say, is just a sample. And the bulk is every bit as good as the sample.

Now, what are the consequences of this free justification in Christ? What can we say about *that*? The consequences are immense. In short, justification by faith makes the believer rich beyond words to describe. The benefits of free justification include his glorious liberty in Christ, his inexpressible joy, and his irrepressible zeal for his sanctification out of gratitude for the love and grace God has shown him in his Son. And more; much more. Yet again, the merest sample of scriptures must suffice:

If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed (John 8:36).

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death?⁶ Therefore we were buried with him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of his death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of his resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him... Reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in

⁵ This has nothing to do with water baptism; see my *Baptist Sacramentalism*.

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Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace (Rom. 6:1-14).

Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another – to him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God. For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death. But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter (Rom. 7:4-6).

There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: he condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:1-4).

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free (Gal. 5:1, NIV).

The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for himself his own special people, zealous for good works... When the kindness and the love of God our Saviour towards man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit,⁷ whom he poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, that having been justified by his grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. This is a faithful saying, and these things I want you to affirm constantly, that those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works (Tit. 2:11 – 3:8).

⁷ This has nothing to do with water baptism.

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Though now you do not see him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith – the salvation of your souls (1 Pet. 1:8-9).

Once again, the bulk is as good as the sample.

In light of these and many other passages of the New Testament, I have no hesitation in saying that we evangelicals and Reformed need to take a higher view of justification than we commonly do. Justification, I say again, *is* a forensic declaration about believers by God, yes, but justification is more than a legal nicety; much more. God really does see his people as in Christ – and, therefore, he sees us as sinless, as perfect, as Christ. And this, it surely goes without saying, ought to give us an exuberance, an exhilarating sense of joy, a transforming sense of liberty in the presence and service of God. Sadly, our view of justification is often stunted – with a corresponding diminishing of our sense of confidence and our joy and liberty in Christ. Too often we live as spiritual paupers when in truth we possess wealth beyond measure. Alas, we have become far too dry, too shrunken, in our view of our free and full justification by God’s grace in Christ.

And one of the casualties of our low view of justification is a low view of conversion. In fact, the drier our sense of justification, the more inclined we are to Sandemanianism – which, as I have said, is one of the great curses of the church today, and is having a withering effect on conversion.

Let Augustus Toplady remind us of our wealth:

*How vast the benefits divine
Which we in Christ possess!
We’re saved from guilt and every sin
And called to holiness.*

*’Tis not for works which we have done,
Or shall hereafter do,
But he of his abounding love
Salvation does bestow.*

‘How vast the benefits divine/ Which we in Christ possess!’ Quite! Isaac Watts had already used the word ‘vast’ when thinking about the same theme:

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*How vast the treasure we possess!
How rich thy bounty, King of grace!
This world is ours, and worlds to come;
Earth is our lodge, and heav'n our home.*

*All things are ours: the gifts of God;
The purchase of a Saviour's blood;
While the good Spirit shows us how
To use, and to improve them too.*

Vast, vast benefits, vast treasure, and all in Christ – for all who believe! No wonder Watts went on to sing:

*I would not change my blest estate
For all the world calls good or great;
And while my faith can keep her hold,
I envy not the sinner's gold.*

Watts got it, of course, from Paul:

All things are yours: whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or things present or things to come – all are yours. And you are Christ's, and Christ is God's (1 Cor. 3:21-23).

We believers need to reclaim this sense of our treasure in Christ, and do so as a matter of urgency.

Nevertheless, real though it is, as I have explained, the diminished view of justification by faith, so prevalent today among us evangelicals, is not my main concern here. Rather, I wish to take up that attack upon justification which comes from the teaching of the advocates of the New Perspective, and the consequent effect it has upon the doctrine of conversion.

Before I get to that, however, a word or two on 'conversion'. That will be the topic of the following chapter.