

## IS THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION BY “FAITH ALONE” BIBLICALLY SUPPORTED AND CORRECT?

### **Issue**

Some theologians who claim to be heirs of the Reformation are challenging and modifying the classical Reformed doctrine of justification by faith alone; therefore, there is a need to speak as clearly as possible about the *articulus stantis vel cadentis ecclesiae* in the present day. While the doctrines of “merit,” the covenants, union with Christ, the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, perseverance, and eschatological reward are all closely related to this question, the issue that will be addressed here is that of the justifying function of faith in distinction from the good works that are ever and always present with it. More precisely, the question is whether “faith alone” grasps and appropriates Christ, the cross, and His righteousness, or whether good works along with faith are antecedently necessary to be connected or to remain connected to this gracious ground of our salvation.

### **Positions**

Over the past decades, the cancer of “easy believism” has spread at an alarming rate within western Christianity. This disturbing trend has motivated theologians within the Reformed tradition to react against the error, but in so doing, some theologians have replaced an imbalance with another imbalance that threatens the very heart of the gospel of free justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. So, while Roman Catholicism, Arminianism, Liberalism, Calvinism, Lutheranism, and classical Dispensationalism represent the spectrum of positions on justification

by faith alone, the focus in this paper will be the main distinctions between two positions articulated by theologians who arise from within the broader Reformed and Baptist tradition.

Scott Hafemann, and Don Garlington articulate a distinct “works justification” position.<sup>1</sup> According to Don Garlington, “In brief, it is the righteous person who is *recognized in his or her true character* and thus vindicated against all charges.”<sup>2</sup> “[God’s] loyalty to His people consists in His conforming them to Himself, *so that* He and they may live in uninterrupted covenant fellowship.”<sup>3</sup> “By the work of the Spirit we are united with Christ and *become God’s righteousness* in Him; and on *that basis* God the judge pronounces us righteous.”<sup>4</sup> Garlington believes that the redeemed remain covenantally united to Christ by their “covenant faithfulness” (trusting obedience) and are justified because they actually *are* righteous. Additionally, in his system, faith and good works are necessary for “forgiveness,” and he makes no mention of the imputed righteousness of Christ.

Scott Hafemann’s views are similar to those of Garlington, but Hafemann places greater emphasis on the “already/not yet” and an eschatological dimension of justification. Hafemann collapses faith and works into a single “trust” that encompasses both faith and faithful works. He calls this human response to grace “faith-obedience” and refers to the need to “trust-obey” Christ, thereby eliminating any meaningful distinction between faith and good works.<sup>5</sup> He says that faith-obedience “is an essential expression of what it means to trust Christ.”<sup>6</sup> “There is only one thing,

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There are differences between these men, but with regard to the function of “obedience” in justification, they seem basically united. Also, some of what they say is not easy to understand, but they bear significant responsibility for any misunderstandings because they refuse to speak in terms of traditional and orthodox systematic theology, which has the effect of “clogging religion with new language” and inevitably creates confusion.

<sup>2</sup>

Don Garlington, “A Study of Justification by Faith,” *Reformation and Revival Journal* 11 (2002): 59.

<sup>3</sup>

*Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>4</sup>

*Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>5</sup> Scott Hafemann, *The God of Promise and the Life of Faith* (Crossway: Wheaton, 2001), 103.

<sup>6</sup>

*Ibid.*, 188.

not two, that we must do to be saved: *trust* God with the needs of our lives.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, according to Hafemann, the “faith-obedience complex” is necessary for justification, which is principally an eschatological event, but which is rendered here and now as a prolepsis. When people who trustingly obey Christ sin, there is forgiveness for them by means of the cross, which forgiveness is necessary because God’s justice demands that He reward only those who are obedient.<sup>8</sup> Hafemann makes no mention at all of imputed righteousness, and thus there is no “faith alone” instrument to appropriate it. In fact, imputed righteousness would seem to be redundant to and inconsistent with his theological outlook since he evidently believes God may only declare righteous those who themselves are actually righteous in the end.

Contrary to Garlington and Hafemann, John Calvin articulates the second position, which is the classical Reformed position. Calvin regarded the doctrine of justification to be “the main hinge on which religion turns.”<sup>9</sup> He said, “For we dream neither of a faith devoid of good works, nor of a justification that stands without them. This alone is of importance: having admitted that faith and good works must cleave together, we still lodge justification in faith, not in works.”<sup>10</sup> He then goes on to say, “Why then are we justified by faith? Because by faith we grasp Christ’s righteousness, by which alone we are reconciled to God.”<sup>11</sup> Calvin saw that faith, not good works, is the instrument by which sinners receive and rest in the righteousness of Christ. When Reformed theologians argue for justification by “faith alone,” they mean that faith, and not the obedience of faith, connects the believing sinner to Christ and His righteousness.

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<sup>7</sup>

Hafemann, *The God of Promise*, 192.

<sup>8</sup>

*Ibid.*, 204-205.

<sup>9</sup>

John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.11.1 (726).

<sup>10</sup>

*Ibid.*, 3.16.1, 798.

<sup>11</sup>

*Ibid.*, 3.16.1, 798.

## Support

The classical Reformed position, which sees faith as the sole instrument of receiving the righteousness of Christ accords more with the teaching of the Bible than do the positions of Scott Hafemann and Don Garlington. First, Scripture teaches that the justifying aspect of faith is not identical with love or good works, but is “extraspersive,” resting in the righteousness of another. Second, Paul teaches that faith, and not good works, is the sole appropriating organ of Christ and His righteousness so that salvation may be by grace alone.

Much of the confusion surrounding this issue relates to the definition of saving faith. Don Garlington and Scott Hafemann make little or no distinction between faith and good works, but insist that faith and good works are organically related to the extent that they are aspects of one another. However, the Bible is clear that faith and works are different and distinct. “And to the one who *does not work, but trusts* him who justifies the ungodly, *his faith* is counted as righteousness” (Rom 4:5). To be justified, one must purpose not to work, but only to trust.

Some might respond by saying that Paul is not affirming any sharp distinction between faith and obedience, per se, but is merely denying that “legalistic works,” or “ceremonial works” contribute anything to justification. However, Paul does not merely exclude legalistic or ceremonial works from justification; rather, he excludes “the works of the law” (Rom 3:28). According to Romans, “the works of the law” are the works that condemn both Jews and Gentiles (Rom 3:9). They include both moral works and ceremonial works (Rom 2:21-25). Paul teaches that this “law,” speaks to the whole world (Rom 2:15), not just to those who have the Torah, “so that *every* mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by the works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight since through the law comes knowledge of sin” (Rom 3:19-20). This “law” shuts up both Jews and Gentiles under sin and includes both the moral and ceremonial laws of the Old Testament.

Thus, it is clear that when Paul denies that justification is by the “works of the law,” he means that “no works of any kind” justify in the sense in which Paul is using the term “justify.” Therefore, in light of the above evidence, two things are abundantly clear. First, there is an absolute distinction between faith and works, and the two are not to be confused or mingled together in the matter of justification. Second, no works of any kind play any role in the Pauline meaning of justification.<sup>12</sup>

So, what sort of faith justifies? The Reformers spoke of “faith” in three dimensions: *notitia*, *assensus*, and *fiducia*. That is, faith knows about the gospel of Christ (mind), assents to that gospel (heart), and trusts personally in Jesus Christ (will).<sup>13</sup> But, what does it mean to trust personally in Jesus Christ? Scripture says that it means “looking to Christ” (Isa 45:22; Mic 7:7), “coming to Him” (Isa 55:1; Matt 11:28; Jn 6:37, 44, 45, 65), “fleeing to Him, laying hold of Him” (Heb 6:18), “eating of Him, drinking of Him” (Jn 6:51-58), and “receiving Him” (Col 2:6).<sup>14</sup> Such faith is a self-despairing trust that willfully rests in Jesus Christ apart from any and all works as the only way to be saved from the righteous wrath of a holy God. Justifying faith believes “upon” (Acts 9:42) or “into” (Jn 1:12; 2:11) Jesus Christ and is the only grace of salvation that looks away from self and rests entirely in another for acceptance in the sight of God. Justifying faith is properly compared to an open mouth, ready to take in the “gift of righteousness.”

When Paul speaks of justification by faith, what he means is that faith is the only instrument that can appropriate the righteousness of Christ. Unlike other authors of Scripture,

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One might ask whether or Romans 2:13 contradicts this assertion since Paul says, “the doers of the law will be justified.” However, in Romans 2:13, Paul is talking about the ultimate basis of justification, which is perfect obedience to the law of God. So, yes, “the doers of the law will be justified;” however, there is no one who does the law (Rom 3:9); therefore, “none is just” (Rom 3:10) by the law. Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 147-149.

<sup>13</sup>

Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nelson: Nashville, 1998) 726-729.

<sup>14</sup> James P. Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (1887; reprint, den Dulk: Pompano Beach), 388-389, (page citations are to the reprint edition).

when Paul refers to justification, he has the “ground” of justification foremost in his mind. Paul understands that only perfect and perpetual obedience can satisfy the just requirement of God (Rom 10:5; Gal 3:10-12); therefore, no fallen human being can justify himself. Paul’s point in Romans 1-5 is that only Christ’s atoning death and obedience to the law can procure justification for the ungodly. So when Paul writes of justification by faith, he is thinking mostly of Christ to whom that faith connects the one who is justified. This is made sufficiently plain in Romans 3 and 4.

Romans 3:22 states that “the righteousness of God” comes “through faith in Jesus Christ.”<sup>15</sup> Just two verses later, Paul says that redemption in Christ and propitiation by His blood is “to be received by faith” (Rom 3:24). At the end of Romans 3 Paul argues that boasting is excluded because justification rests on the ground of Christ’s work, which is appropriated by the “law of faith” and not by the “law of works” (Rom 3:27-28).

In Romans 4, Paul speaks of “the righteousness of faith,” and says, “faith is counted as righteousness,” (Rom 4:3, 5, 9, 13). The meaning of this construction is debated. There are at least two ways to interpret these words.

First, Paul may be saying that imperfect “faithfulness” instead of “perfect obedience” counts for righteousness. This is apparently what Don Garlington and Scott Hafemann think Paul means. According to this view, God regards a pattern of imperfect obedience as sufficient for justification because forgiveness of sins is available through the death of Christ when the believer fails to be obedient. But, if this were the true interpretation, then why does Paul consistently refer to what Christ has done as the true basis of justification (Rom 3:24-26; 4:25; 5:9)? Why would

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Some object that because “faith in Jesus Christ” is a genitive construction, “*pi/stewj I)hsou= Xristou=*” that it should read as a subjective genitive, “faithfulness of Jesus Christ.” Tom Schreiner concludes that “Paul often refers to the faith of believers” and that “he never refers to the faith of Christ.” Furthermore, Paul is explicit when he “writes specifically of Christ as being the object of believers’ faith,” and according to Schreiner, “the flow of thought in Romans 3-4 and Galatians 2-3 supports the idea of faith in Christ.” Due to all of these considerations, “*I)hsou= Xristou=*” should be read as an objective genitive, rendering the phrase “*pi/stewj I)hsou= Xristou=*,” “faith in Jesus Christ.” Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul: An Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001), 216.

Paul so carefully and consistently distinguish faith from works if in fact faith is not an instrument, but merely a certain kind of work (Rom 4:5)? Why would Paul say that God justifies the “ungodly” if “faith” is equivalent to “godliness?”

A second explanation seems to fit the text better. On the Reformed view, Paul is saying that faith, in distinction from works, is the way men and women receive the righteousness of Christ. That is, “faith is counted as righteousness” because only faith, not works, joins the believer to the righteousness of Jesus Christ. So, according to this interpretation, it is not really faith itself that “counts as righteousness,” but it is Christ’s work that counts as righteousness. Paul speaks metaphorically and says that “faith is counted as righteousness” because faith joins the believing sinner to Jesus. This is the instrumental function of “faith alone.” Romans 4:6 says, “God counts righteousness apart from works.” For Abraham, circumcision was a “seal of the righteousness he had by faith” (Rom 4:11). That is, faith was the means by which Abraham received righteousness. Furthermore, Abraham was “the father of all who believe without being circumcised so that righteousness would be counted to them as well” (Rom 4:11). So, not only was Abraham righteous by faith (and not the work of circumcision), but everyone who believes and does not work will have righteousness counted to him as well. The same is confirmed in numerous passages. Another clear example is found in Philippians 3:9, “not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which *comes through faith* in Christ, the *righteousness from God that depends on faith.*”

Therefore, in light of the above biblical data, I conclude that faith is a distinct aspect of Christian obedience, not to be identified with “love” or “works,” and that it is extraspective and dependent on Christ and His righteousness. I further conclude that its unique function in justification is “instrumental” because it receives the gift of Christ’s righteousness, which alone is the ground of justification.

## Objections

A first objection to the doctrine of justification by the instrumentality of faith alone is that James explicitly teaches that justification is “not” by faith alone. However, sometimes in Scripture the term “justify” simply refers to “declaration” or “proof” and not to how a person is “constituted” righteous. When used in this sense, the terms “justification” or “justify” refer not to the “ground” of righteousness but to the “evidence” of righteousness. In this usage someone or something demonstrates itself to be genuine or right. For example, scripture says that wisdom is vindicated (justified) by her deeds (Matt 11:19). Surely this doesn’t mean that wisdom becomes righteous on the basis of her works. It is simpler to understand the passage to mean that a person “proves” he has wisdom by what he does. Likewise, 1 Timothy 3:15 says that Jesus “was manifested in the flesh vindicated (justified) by the Spirit, seen by the angels, proclaimed among the nations.” Surely the point is not that the Spirit constituted Jesus righteous, but that by the Spirit, Jesus “demonstrated and proved to the nations” that He is the Christ.

It is in this demonstrative sense that James uses the word. He says, “You *see* that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (Jas 2:24). The point of the whole passage is demonstration. He writes about “showing” and “seeing,” “Show me your faith,” “I will show you my faith by my works” (2:18). “You see that faith was active along with his works” (2:22). James’ point is that our works are evidence of our faith and that the divine declaration of “not guilty” takes these works into account as evidence and proof of righteousness, but James never says that our works make us righteous. Actually, he seems to say that the works of sinners can never do that. “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it” (Jas 2:10).

A second objection to the doctrine of justification by faith alone is that Scripture makes



judgment day and the reward of heaven dependent on good works. Matthew 25:31-46 shows that Christ will sort the “goats” from the “sheep” by instructing the “goats” to stand on His left hand and the “sheep” to stand on His right hand. He will judge and distinguish between them according to whether or not they did works of love: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, and caring for prisoners. Only those who did such works will be allowed into heaven (Matt 25:34), but those who had no such works will be told, “depart from me you cursed into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt 25:41). A great many other passages declare that obedience is necessary to get through the judgment and to get into heaven (Matt 5:20; 6:14-15; 7:21; 10:22; 12:36-37; 13:41-42, 49-50; 16:27; 18:35; 24:13; John 3:36; 15:8; 2 Cor 5:10; Eph 6:8; Heb 3:14; 4:11; Heb 5:9; 12:14; Jas 2:24; 1 Pet 1:17; 1 Jn 2:3-6; Jude 21; Rev 19:8; 20:11-15). Some argue that these texts make “good works” a meritorious requirement of salvation, and others seem to make obedience an antecedent condition of continuing in union with Christ. However, neither explanation of these passages is correct. The obedience that comes from faith is evidence of union with Christ and it is the means of future reward.

First, works are the fruit of discipleship not the foundation. “By this my Father is glorified that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples” (Jn 15:8). On judgment day, the fruit of faith will make clear those for whom the kingdom of heaven was “prepared . . . from the foundation of the world” (Matt 25:34). So, on that day, evangelical obedience will be evidence of a believer’s union with Christ.

Second, obedience will be an evidential means of entering into heavenly reward. Christ and His righteousness are the judicial ground of heavenly reward. He purchased heaven solely by what He did in history, but He purchased that end in conjunction with the means He ordained to it, which are good works. So, good works are the non-meritorious and gracious means of the future grace of heaven itself. Calvin said, “Those whom the Lord has destined by his good mercy for the

inheritance of eternal life he leads into possession of it, according to his ordinary dispensation, *by means of good works*"<sup>16</sup>

In conclusion, there is a very significant difference between the “justification” of judgment day and the believer’s initial justification. The “justification” that is according to works on judgment day is not about the basis of justification. The basis of justification is the righteousness of Christ alone, which is freely imputed to all who believe in Him. That gift of righteousness was already irrevocably given when the believer first believed. Rather, the judgment of judgment day will simply be a vindication by good works of the believer’s past union with Christ and grasping of His righteousness by faith alone in distinction from the works that ever and always accompany it.

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Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.14.21, 787.