

WEAKNESSES IN THE MODERN EVANGELICAL CONCEPT OF JUSTIFICATION

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The doctrine of justification is essential to a good understanding of the gospel. Job's question requires careful consideration and a sound, biblical answer: "How should a man be just with God?" (Job 9:2). This question arises out of man's dilemma: he is separated from God by his sin and he must be reconciled to that holy God. The answer to the question is the gospel itself: "being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom 3:24) and "being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 5:1). Justification is a free gift of God's grace received by faith alone; it is an imputed righteousness apart from works (Rom 4:6-8). What greater comfort and joy could a sinner receive than the sure knowledge that in salvation Christ's righteousness has been imputed to him! And then, having realized that comfort, what horror he feels when someone tries to take it away.

This is one of the major reasons that the Reformers found themselves at odds with the Roman Catholic Church. When they came to understand, from their own study of the Scriptures, that they were saved apart from their own works, they immediately found themselves in conflict with the prevailing position of the priests and professors of their day, which taught that man cooperates with God in salvation. But they clung tenaciously to what the Bible taught, not only because they understood it to be scriptural, but also because it brought great comfort to their souls to know that salvation depended, not upon themselves, but upon the accepted and finished work of their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Followers of Christ continue to stand firmly against anyone who tries to rob them of this solace. When a group of Roman Catholics headed by John Neuhaus and a group of Evangelicals headed by Chuck Colson got together to write and to publish a consensus document entitled *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium* (referred to as ECT), many Christians responded with alarm. One of the chief criticisms was that these men had not spoken to the doctrine of justification, which was the source of major conflicts between Catholics and Evangelicals. Undaunted, they went back to the drawing board and emerged with a statement called *The Gift of Salvation* (commonly referred to as ECT II). Here they addressed the doctrine of justification with bold statements such as

Justification is central to the scriptural account of salvation, and its meaning has been much debated between Protestants and Catholics. We agree that justification is not earned by any good works or merits of our own; it is entirely God's gift, conferred through the Father's sheer graciousness, out of the love that he bears us in his Son, who suffered on our behalf and rose from the dead for our justification. Jesus was "put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (Rom 4:25). In justification, God,

on the basis of Christ's righteousness alone, declares us to be no longer his rebellious enemies but his forgiven friends, and by virtue of his declaration it is so.¹

They went on to declare that "We understand that what we here affirm is in agreement with what the Reformation traditions have meant by justification by faith alone (*sola fide*)."²

Is this really what it appears to be? Can Roman Catholics really believe that they are in agreement with the Reformation meaning of justification by faith? This seems too good to be true. And so it is, for the very next paragraph begins, "In justification we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, through whom the love of God is poured forth into our hearts (Rom 5:5)." Robert Reymond comments on this statement:

Now if they had written: "In regeneration we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit ..." we would take no umbrage; if they had written: "In *conjunction with* justification we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit..." we would not quibble. But when the framers state: "*In justification* we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit..." they fall into the Roman Catholic error of confusing justification and sanctification and thereby endorse the Roman Catholic view of justification.³

This is a distinction that reformed doctrine is always careful to make. For instance, the Westminster Larger Catechism #77 answers the question, "Wherein do justification and sanctification differ?" with these words:

Although sanctification be inseparably joined with justification, yet they differ, in that God in justification imputeth the righteousness of Christ; in sanctification his Spirit infuseth grace, and enableth to the exercise thereof; in the former, sin is pardoned; in the other, it is subdued; the one doth equally free all believers from the revenging wrath of God, and that perfectly in this life, that they never fall into condemnation; the other is neither equal in all, nor in this life perfect in any, but growing up to perfection.

This distinction is implicit in the answers to Shorter Catechism questions 33 and 35. On the one hand "justification is an **act** of God's free grace..." but "sanctification is the **work** of God's free grace..." The former speaks of a completed act, the latter of an ongoing work.

James Buchanan, writing in the 19th century, warns of the danger of confusing these two doctrines:

It is affirmed, secondly, that the righteousness of Christ, to be available for the benefit of His people, must become theirs by imputation and not by infusion. Most of the leading errors on the subject of Justification may be traced to obscure or defective views in regard to the nature or import of imputation, and have arisen from supposing either that it consists in the infusion of moral qualities, in which case Justification is

¹<http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft9801/articles/gift.html>

²Ibid.

³Reymond, Robert L. *The Reformation's Conflict with Rome* (Geanies House: Christian Focus Publications, 2001).

confounded with Sanctification; or that, in so far as imputation may be distinguished from such infusion, it is founded, at least, on the moral qualities which thus become inherent, in which case Justification has for its immediate ground a personal and not a vicarious righteousness.⁴

This error must continually be guarded against in our own day. It is not confined to the ecumenical efforts of evangelicalism. Consider Rick Warren, author of the very popular *Purpose Driven Life* and a very influential man among evangelicals. He advocates that the church of today must embrace a new “reformation.” In a recent interview he made a strange distinction when he said that

500 years ago, the first Reformation with Luther and then Calvin, was about beliefs. I think a new reformation is going to be about behavior. The first Reformation was about creeds; I think this one will be about deeds. I think the first one was about what the church believes; I think this one will be about what the church does.⁵

Warren betrays his ignorance of sound, biblical teaching as well as his knowledge of the Reformation by suggesting that the church needs to undo the Reformation by returning to an emphasis on works. But far from producing a new reformation, this will result in a reversion to the teaching of Rome set forth in the Sixth Session of the Council of Trent (1545-1563). In order to be able to express a doctrine of justification that includes faith and grace as well as works and which still sounds scriptural, the Roman Catholic Church asserts that justification actually increases in justice:

Having, therefore, been thus justified, and made the friends and domestics of God, advancing from virtue to virtue, they are renewed, as the Apostle says, day by day; that is, by mortifying the members of their own flesh, and by presenting them as instruments of justice unto sanctification, they, through the observance of the commandments of God and of the Church, faith co-operating with good works, increase in that justice which they have received through the grace of Christ, and are still further justified, as it is written; He that is just, let him be justified still; and again, Be not afraid to be justified even to death; and also, Do you see that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only. And this increase of justification holy Church begs, when she prays, “Give unto us, O Lord, increase of faith, hope, and charity.”⁶

But can justification be increased? By definition, it must be either present or absent. For instance, the biblical description of the work of judges says that “If there be a controversy between men, and they come unto judgment, that the judges may judge them; then they shall justify the righteous, and condemn the wicked” (Deut 25:1). After looking at the evidence of the case before them, judges are to declare a verdict. A man is either justified or condemned. Job does not ask, “How should a man be *more* just in the sight of God?” He simply desires to be freed from condemnation. When the Council of Trent applies a different definition to

⁴<http://www.apuritansmind.com/Justification/BuchananJamesGroundOfJustification.htm>

⁵<http://pewforum.org/events/index.php?EventID=80>

⁶<http://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/ct06.html> – Council of Trent, Session Six, Chapter X. *Of the increase of Justification received.*

justification, confusion results. This confusion is compounded when the word “justification” is used in the same way that Protestants use “sanctification.” The result is a religion that maintains an emphasis on works, no matter how often the words “grace” or “faith” are used.

The failure to distinguish between justification and sanctification results in many other errors. A few are briefly noted below.

Partially Separate

It is popular in some systems of doctrine to separate them in a way that teaches that a person can be justified, but not sanctified. Some of the “Holiness” or “Wesleyan” churches teach the doctrine of a “second blessing” or a “second work of grace,” that a man can be saved, and yet not possess the Holy Ghost. This is contrary to Rom 8:9—“If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his”—and shows another error that can result from a failure to distinguish between these two important doctrines.

Completely Separate

The social gospel of the liberals teaches that a man can and must do good works, especially to his fellow man in need. Doing good works **is** justification and salvation. This is no gospel at all, for it is directed only at the external works of man and takes no thought for the spiritual welfare of the sinner; indeed, it teaches that there is no sin and that a man is fully capable of attaining salvation by his works of righteousness, such as feeding the poor and caring for the dying. Good works are never absent from any Christian church, but they are the result of faith, not the basis of salvation.

Although this position is clearly un-biblical, it can creep into the church very subtly whenever works are given a stronger emphasis than faith. How clearly it is seen in evangelical churches that are more eager to show how “busy” they are for Christ than to tell of who Christ is, and what He has done. The biblical response to the weakness of the church today is not to be busy with more works, but to pray for greater faith in Christ.

Separate, but Inseparable

Although we insist on a clear distinction between justification and sanctification, we also acknowledge that sanctification is inseparably joined with justification (Larger Catechism 77). The distinction is made so as to give Christ all the honor and glory for our justification and leave absolutely none for the one justified. Thus we often speak of an alien righteousness which is completely separate from our own selves. But a justified man cannot be hidden for long because he is also in the process of becoming more holy (called sanctification).

The important battles of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ are really the same old battles maintained and fought constantly. If the churches entering this twenty-first century will not take care to know their doctrine well, they will fail to represent their King faithfully and will thus be poor ambassadors. But the faithful church recognizes that she cannot but bring all glory and honor unto her blessed Master (1 Cor 1:23-31; Jer 9:23-24). A sound understanding of

justification will exalt an omnipotent but merciful God to show his grace to dead and helpless sinners.

It is crucial to know the answer to Job's question!