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# KEYNOTE

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## WEAKNESSES IN THE MODERN EVANGELICAL CONCEPT OF JUSTIFICATION

JOHN T. DYCK

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 co-operates 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.

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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.<sup>1</sup>

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*)."<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

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.

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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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 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.<sup>4</sup>

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

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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.<sup>5</sup>

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.”<sup>6</sup>

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 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 unbiblical, 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 justi-

fied. 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! 📖

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

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

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

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

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

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

# EXEGESIS

## FAITH AND RIGHTEOUSNESS IN TWO KEY OLD TESTAMENT TEXTS: GENESIS 15:6 AND HABAKKUK 2:4

CHRISTOPHER K. LENSCH

The scholars of the Reformation rightly understood both the nature and the importance of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. Martin Luther found this truth life-changing, and the world was never the same after his personal discovery. John Calvin called it the “hinge of the Reformation,” implying that all biblical doctrine grows out of justification by grace, and that the life and direction of the church depend upon a proper understanding of this doctrine.

Since the biblical doctrine of justification by grace is so critical, we may rightly assume that it finds a central place in the message of Scripture—not just through the New Testament, but also in the Old Testament. That is, in fact, the truth of the matter.

The early indication of God's act of justifying the guilty is found in his covering a couple of dying sinners with animal skins. God takes the initiative, he covers their shamefulness, and he sets the pattern of substitutionary sacrifice for how sinners may stand before him. A legal imputation is implicit in the sacrifice.

Justification deals with the satisfaction of God's justice in the redemption of fallen man. It has a negative and positive

aspect: to approach God on his terms, a sinner's sinfulness must be covered, plus his less than perfect life must at once be presentably perfect. These two divine conditions are not attainable through mortal effort, but God, who "does the impossible," grants salvation in justification that comes through faith.

#### GENESIS 15:6

The earliest statement of this doctrine is in *Genesis 15:6*. Abraham already has been called out of paganism to follow God in the land of promise. He believes in the living God,<sup>1</sup> but after the recent crisis expedition to rescue Lot and after having received divine promises of the land and progeny that now seem distant to him, he wonders if his head servant, Eliezer, will inherit his divine destiny.

God graciously reaffirms his promise to make a great nation of Abraham's own family,<sup>2</sup> a family he had not been able to start yet, despite the fact that he already was an octogenarian! Not staggered by God's renewed promises that must have seemed incredibly fantastic, Abraham laid aside his own ideas to rest in God's reassurances. "*He believed in the LORD, and he accounted it to him for righteousness*" (Gen 15:6).

This sublime statement is a watershed message of sacred revelation. It reveals that God is interested in personal righteousness, and it makes plain that God's kind of righteousness comes by trusting the Almighty and believing his promises.

The Hebrew word for "believe" in this text is *he'amin*. We are much more familiar with its noun form, *amen*. The word carries the idea of firmness and faithfulness. As an "amen" to prayer, we are con-

firming the prayer with "I believe it... may it be established." The verb form in Gen 15:6 generally means throughout the Bible "to believe, to believe in or trust."<sup>3</sup> Its variant forms mean "to verify,<sup>4</sup> to make firm, to establish."

The verb form for "to believe" is used throughout sacred history and is found noticeably in the establishment of the Mosaic covenant and throughout the Psalms and gospel portions of Isaiah. The verb for "believe" is used one time in the book of Habakkuk. Its noun form, however, comes at a pivotal point in this book and in biblical theology.

**While faith does encompass the concept of faithfulness, the emphasis in Hab 2:4 is upon faith that trusts God even through the valley of the shadow of death. This interpretation comports well with God's unchanging means for justifying sinners. Those who believe God are counted as righteous.**

#### HABAKKUK 2:4

The noun is found in Hab 2:4: "*Behold the proud, his soul is not upright in him; but the just shall live by his faith.*" In this context, "the proud" one is the uncouth Babylonian invader who is about to besiege and pillage Judah with a lusty appetite that is as insatiable as hell itself!<sup>5</sup> The prophet of tender conscience, who admits that his own nation is sinful,<sup>6</sup> que-

ries why God will send the worst of peoples to punish God's wayward people.<sup>7</sup> The Babylonians, after all, are the historic archetype of everything that is anti-Christian! God's answer is that the wicked conquerors too will be punished according to their deserts.

Who, then, can stand if the just are persecuted one year by the unjust, and the next year are vanquished by those more unjust? Habakkuk 2:4 gives the simple, though somewhat cryptic answer: "*the just shall live by his faith.*" Keep in mind that the familiar word for the "just" is the same Hebrew word as the persecuted "righteous" of chapter 1:4, 13.

Another important bridge to the first chapter of Habakkuk is a reference to "believing" God who says: "Look among the nations and watch—be utterly astounded! For I will work a work in your days which you would not believe, though it were told you" (1:5). God expects to be believed. When people do respond in faith to his revelation instead of trusting their own judgment, God counts that as true righteousness. Therefore, God answers Habakkuk that there is a future for the righteous: the just *shall* live, and he will do so by his believing God who secures his people's future through life and death.

There is a subtly different interpretation of Hab 2:4 that understands the word "faith" as "faithfulness." While the idea of faithfulness must be considered in the light of this passage's use in Heb 10,<sup>8</sup> the argument of Habakkuk and the more immediate context indicate that righteousness in God's eyes comes by believing God, rather than by being faithful to God

or to His law. Here are the contextual considerations from the book of Habakkuk:

1. The "just" of 2:4 is set in contrast to the "proud" who worships power as his god (1:11). The "proud" one in Habakkuk is depicted not so much as "faithless" as he is arrogant, unbelieving, and with a rival god.
2. Habakkuk himself is one of the "just." In response to the prophet's concerns over theodicy, God introduces the principle of justification with the promise of a coming vision (2:2-3). The prophet must be patient to wait for the realization of the vision. While many commentators are agnostic in attempts to identify the vision, some have made a reasonable connection to the vision of chapter 3.<sup>9</sup>
3. There God is viewed as on the march, coming from Sinai again, but this time in judgment at the end of the age. The prophet and the rest of the righteous must believe that God will keep his word and that he will come in judgment against the wicked and in ultimate deliverance of the just. This believing will mean their life as they trust only the living God for justice.

Finally, there is God's warning to Habakkuk and his audience that they may not believe what he is about to do. By bringing the wicked Babylonians, God's people will be tempted to give up on God in the face of immediate judgment by the hands of these infidels. Simple trust in

God's ways is what is called for when we are tempted to question God.

While faith does encompass the concept of faithfulness, the emphasis in Hab 2:4 seems to be upon faith that trusts God even through the valley of the shadow of death. This interpretation comports well with God's unchanging means for justifying sinners. Those who believe God are counted as righteous.

#### PAUL'S USE OF HABAKKUK 2:4

The Talmud teaches that all "613 precepts" of God given to Moses are summarized in Habakkuk's key verse.<sup>10</sup> Much like the young Martin Luther, the Talmudic rabbis grasped the importance of the message but missed the heart of it in terms of personal justification.

From the preceding study of Habakkuk there already has been a hint of an implied connection between Hab 2:4 and Gen 15:6, the first clear revelation of justification through faith. Paul, the exponent of Jesus' teaching on justification, draws the connection very plainly. In fact, his two key texts in Romans for developing the doctrine of justification are Hab 2:4 and Gen 15:6.

The "just shall live by faith" launches Paul's opening salvo and general theme for his treatise. After placing Jew and Gentile under condemnation for rebellion against God and his law, Paul argues for justification by faith apart from works. In a running exposition of Gen 15:6, he takes no less than a whole chapter of Romans (ch. 4) to prove that righteousness cannot come through the keeping of the law. Observance of the ceremonial law,<sup>11</sup> even in the case of Father Abraham, has no merit since Abraham was justified by faith well

before his circumcision (4:9-12). And if that is the case, then even uncircumcised Gentiles may be justified by faith, too, so that the covenant promises to Abraham may be fulfilled (4:11, 12; 3:30) and so that God's purposes may be established by grace (4:16).

The faith that is reckoned as righteousness is defined by Paul as faith in Jesus (Rom 3:22, 26). This is the Pauline message to the Galatians also: "knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law" (Gal 2:16).

Not surprisingly, the citations of both Hab 2:4 and Gen 15:6 are found within close proximity to each other in Gal 3. These references not only buttress the Pauline doctrine of justification—they also qualify and clarify the meaning of the corresponding OT reference. The parallels of each OT citation are the ideas of (1) "the just; righteousness," and (2) "faith, believed." The context of Galatians is clear that being just (having righteousness) comes apart from the law. How so? Not through personal faithfulness, but rather through faith in Jesus.

Paul will confess that he wants nothing except to gain Christ. That is possible only if he finds a righteousness not his own, "but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith," apart from the law.<sup>12</sup> Before true faith Paul had no righteousness, no saving faith, nor even life itself. That is the implication of Hab 2:4. After he believed Jesus, Paul could say, "it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me;

and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God.”<sup>13</sup>

#### THE USE OF HABAKKUK 2 IN HEBREWS 10

The Book of Hebrews’ citation of the Habakkuk theme, “the just shall live by faith,” shows the popularity, if not the centrality, of this OT text in the apostolic church. Hebrews 9:38 is the third mention of Hab 2:4 in the NT canon.

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While Paul’s purpose in Romans and Galatians is to hammer home the importance of coming to God on his terms through faith (justification), the context of Heb 10 does emphasize the aspect of persevering in the faith till the end. Persevering in Christ and in the New Covenant is the theme of Hebrews.

The Book of Hebrews quotes from the Septuagint Greek OT that diverges in several ways from the Hebrew text,<sup>14</sup> and it cites a lengthier section of Hab 2 than does Paul:

“For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of

God you may receive what is promised. For, ‘Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.’ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.”<sup>15</sup>

The collection of “those who have faith and preserve their souls,” is illustrated immediately in the next chapter of Hebrews. “By faith Abel . . . obtained witness that he was righteous” (11:4); Noah “became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith” (11:7); and there were untold others who embraced God’s promises by faith (11:13). When these people of faith died without having received the promises (11:39-40), they were translated “to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven”; there the just are recognized as “perfect” (“completed”) in righteousness (12:23).

#### CONCLUSION

Anyone without saving faith cannot please God. In fact, according to Heb 11:6 it is impossible to please God without faith. God leaves the “puffed up” soul of Hab 2:4 to save himself, and he promises no grace to the timorous soul of Heb 10:38 who “draws back”<sup>16</sup> instead of venturing his life on the assurances of God Almighty.

Pleasing God requires believing God.<sup>17</sup> Believing God means coming to God on his terms. In his eyes it is more than the “right” thing to do. For Abraham and his children by faith, believing God is counted for “righteousness.” 

<sup>1</sup> Gen 12:8.

<sup>2</sup> Gen 12:2; 13:16.

<sup>3</sup> Wicked King Sihon did not “trust” Israel’s assurances (Judg 11:20).

<sup>4</sup> Gen 42:20.

<sup>5</sup> Hab 2:5.

<sup>6</sup> Hab 1:2-4.

<sup>7</sup> Hab 1:13. This verse is the prophet’s second reference to the righteous. The first reference (1:4) is to the helplessness of the righteous in the face of persecution by ruthless Jews. The 1:13 reference casts righteousness in relative terms in contrast to the ultimately wicked Babylonians. The next reference to the righteous will be “the just” of 2:4.

<sup>8</sup> Heb 10:38. On the other hand, chapters 1 and 4 of Romans, as well as Gal 3, use Hab 2:4 in the sense of “the just shall live by *believing/trusting*” rather than by being faithful.

<sup>9</sup> F. F. Bruce in *An Exegetical and Expository Commentary of the Minor Prophets* suggests the promised vision of Hab 2:2-3 is the vision of the theophany that Habakkuk receives in chapter 3. This interpretation, contrary to the critics who say chapter 3 is a later addition, argues incidentally for the unity of the Book of Habakkuk.

<sup>10</sup> *Makkot* 23b, “Moses gave Israel 613 commandments, David reduced them to 10, Isaiah to 2, but Habakkuk to 1: the righteous shall live by his faith.”

<sup>11</sup> This Scriptural argument seems to have relevance for refuting modern reconstructions of justification that want to define ritual baptism as the beginning of one’s journey in covenant faithfulness so that their covenant initiation is almost vested with salvific value. To the contrary, Abraham was recognized by God for his believing faith rather than for his moral or ceremonial faithfulness. Thus runs the

argument of Rom 4:9-12.

<sup>12</sup> Phil 3:8-9.

<sup>13</sup> Gal 2:20.

<sup>14</sup> There are at least three key differences in Hab 2:3-4 between the LXX and the MT of the OT Scriptures:

1. The LXX understands God’s admonition for patience (2:3) to wait, not just for the realization of the promised vision, but for him who is the focus of the vision. Thus does the LXX and the Book of Hebrews read, “He who is coming will come.” Rabbinic literature also finds a messianic interpretation for Hab 2:3.

2. Notice the addition of the possessive pronoun “my” in Heb 10:38: “My righteous one will live by faith.” While there is no possessive “my” in the Hebrew of Hab 2:4, there is one in the LXX version that reads, “the just out of my faith will live.” F. F. Bruce says that the transposition of the “my” by the author of Hebrews does not change essentially the force of the statement from the LXX.

3. Finally, the LXX of Hab 2:4 does have oblique reference to the “puffed up soul” of the unrighteous Babylonian invader who thinks he can save himself. The LXX translates and the author of Hebrews follows in inverted order: “and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.”

<sup>15</sup> Heb 10:36-39 (ESV).

<sup>16</sup> This Greek word has the idea of striking a sail or of tucking tail in order to run away.

<sup>17</sup> Heb 11:6.

**“JUSTIFIED BY FAITH” . . .  
“JUSTIFIED BY WORKS”;  
ABRAHAM’S JUSTIFICA-  
TION, AS VIEWED  
BY PAUL AND BY JAMES**

**JOHN A. BATTLE**

A NEW DEBATE, AND AN OLD DEBATE

There is a new debate in Reformed churches: What does it mean to be justified? And how is it accomplished? From the time of Luther and Calvin until about twenty or thirty years ago Reformed people agreed on the answers: To be justified is to be declared righteous by God, to have our sins forgiven. We obtain this justification through faith (belief) alone. Once a person is justified he never can lose that justification. Reformed churches taught that good works are the natural result of faith and the evidence of justification, but that they do not contribute in any way to our justification.

But now new voices have arisen in Reformed circles. While we achieve justification by faith alone, it is faith defined as faithfulness to God’s covenant requirements. Thus it is possible to fall out of justification. Paul’s statements that we are justified apart from the law are interpreted to be referring not to the whole law of God, but rather to the specifically Jewish laws of Moses. In this view we must maintain our justification by being faithful to the continuing law of God, to Christ and the fellowship of his church. The concept of “faith” is expanded to include these good works, and often is defined as “covenant faithfulness.”

These new voices are described and describe themselves with various terms, as the New Perspective on Paul, the Auburn Avenue Theology, or the Federal Vision. Prominent early popularizers of this movement were Norman Shepherd, former professor of theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia and now a minister in the Christian Reformed Church; and N. T. Wright, formerly lecturer of New Testament at Worcester College, Oxford, and now bishop of Durham in the Church of England. Two scholars providing material to support this view have been E. P. Sanders of Duke University in North Carolina (he also taught at Trinity College, Dublin, and at Cambridge University), and James D. G. Dunn of the University of Durham. Currently many popularizers and spokesmen have arisen

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in conservative Reformed circles in America.<sup>1</sup> Of course, these many spokesmen do not agree among themselves on all points, but a general position is clear.

As we would expect, many Reformed believers strongly criticize and oppose this new understanding of faith and justi-

fication. Therefore, a new debate is raging in conservative Reformed churches.

However new this debate may be among Reformed people, similar debates are not new in the church at large. Protestants and Roman Catholics have warred over the concept of justification by faith for centuries. Martin Luther discovered that he could never be justified by his good works, but only by faith. He found joy in Paul's declaration, "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith'" (Rom 1:17). He knew his good works never could earn acceptance with God: "However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness" (Rom 4:5). He applied to himself what Paul told Peter: "We know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified" (Gal 2:16).

Protestant theologians since Luther's time have defended this view of faith and justification. John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards immediately come to mind. As well, the Protestant creeds uniformly affirmed this belief.

On the other hand, the Roman Catholic Church condemned the Protestant view of faith and justification in the strongest terms. In the Sixth Session of the Council of Trent, held in the sixteenth century, the church made the following declarations:

If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone meaning that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification, and that it is not in any way necessary that he be prepared and disposed by the action of his own will, let him be anathema. (Canon 9)

If anyone says that men are justified either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and the charity which is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost, and remains in them, or also that the grace by which we are justified is only the good will of God, let him be anathema. (Canon 11)

These anathemas were directed against the Protestant teaching that we are justified by God through faith alone, solely on the merit of the righteousness and atonement of Christ. The Roman Catholic Church today still looks to Trent's formulations when it defines what it means by faith and justification.<sup>2</sup>

So the debate continues. It is a new debate, and it is an old debate.

#### PAUL, JAMES, AND ABRAHAM

Three central Bible passages in this debate are found in Romans 4, Galatians 3, and James 2.<sup>3</sup> In Romans and Galatians Paul teaches that justification can come only through faith, exclusive of good works. He uses Abraham as an example to prove his point:

If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. What does the Scripture say? "Abraham

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believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” (Rom 4:2-3, quoting Gen 15:6)

Consider Abraham: “He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: “All nations will be blessed through you.” So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.” Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, “The righteous will live by faith.” He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit. (Gal 3:6-11, 14, quoting Gen 15:6; 12:3; Deut 21:23; Hab 2:4)

So Paul insists that Abraham was justified by God apart from legal obedience. Rather, he was justified when he believed God’s promise to him, a promise that Paul calls “the gospel in advance” (Gal 3:8). In both these passages Paul confirms his point by quoting the same statement from Genesis: “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6).

So far the passages quoted favor the traditional Protestant understanding that, to be justified, we need only faith, belief in the gospel truths. However, Roman Catholic polemicists, along with the new

movement in Reformed churches, are quick to cite James, who seems to contradict what Paul says, teaching that works are required as well:

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? . . . You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. (Jas 2:14, 20-24, quoting Gen 15:6 again)

**Both Paul and James take Abraham as an example. But they seem to take opposite sides. Paul says Abraham was “justified by faith,” whereas James says Abraham was “justified by works.”**

In the Greek text of verse 14 the contrast may be even stronger. Most modern Protestant translations have supplied an adjective before the word “faith” that de-

scribes the faith as one without works, one that is expressed in words only.<sup>4</sup> The Greek simply says, “Is *the faith* able to save him?”<sup>5</sup> The wording shows that James is expecting a negative answer: “No, the faith is not able to save him.”<sup>6</sup> The expression “the faith” could possibly be translated simply as “faith” in the abstract sense, or as the faith just described in that particular context, “the faith that has no works.” It is this second understanding that the English translators have sought to convey by the use of such adjectives as “that,” “his,” or “such.”

Both Paul and James take Abraham as an example. But they seem to take opposite sides. Paul says Abraham was “justified by faith,”<sup>7</sup> whereas James says Abraham was “justified by works.”<sup>8</sup> In fact, James concludes his discussion of Abraham by saying, “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (Jas 2:24).

We should not be surprised that Martin Luther, in the midst of his struggle with the prevailing Catholic theology, much preferred Romans and Galatians to the book of James. In his typically unguarded manner he once said of James that he would just as soon “cast it into the Tiber.” He believed that it contradicted Paul’s teaching and had virtually no “teaching of Christ” in it. The most detailed of his statements are found in his German translation of the Bible, in his preface to James (1522) and the preface to the New Testament (1524). Here he called James “a right strawy epistle compared to them [John’s Gospel, Paul’s epistles, especially Romans, and 1 Peter].” He stated that he “admired” the epistle, since it “lays down no teaching of man, and presses home the law of God,” but he denied its

being “apostolic,” since it contradicts Paul “in giving righteousness to works” and does not “notice the Passion, the Resurrection, and the spirit of Christ.”<sup>9</sup> When Luther republished his translation in 1545, he deleted these negative remarks about James.

Unlike Luther, Calvin and later Reformed writers had no problem accepting James as authoritative, and did not see a contradiction between James and Paul. For example, Calvin in the “Argument” to his commentary on James makes this clear:

It appears from the writings of Jerome and Eusebius, that this epistle was not formerly received by many churches without opposition. There are also at this day some who do not think it entitled to authority. I, however, am inclined to receive it without controversy, because I see no just cause for rejecting it. For what seems in the second chapter to be inconsistent with the doctrine of free justification, we shall easily explain in its own place. Though he seems more sparing in proclaiming the grace of Christ than it behooved an apostle to be, it is not surely required of all to handle the same arguments.<sup>10</sup>

In the text of his commentary Calvin took the common Protestant position that James is speaking of works as the evidence or the demonstration of faith.<sup>11</sup> He understood “a man is justified by works” in James 2:24 as employing a different meaning for the word “justified” than that used by Paul:

That we may not then fall into that false reasoning which has deceived the Sophists, we must take

notice of the two-fold meaning of the word justified. Paul means by it the gratuitous imputation of righteousness before the tribunal of God; and James, the manifestation of righteousness by the conduct, and that before men, as we may gather from the preceding words, "Show to me your faith."<sup>12</sup>

Calvin saw the text of James as speaking of a sort of secondary justification, a justification before men. Thereby he subordinated James to Paul in terms of our justification before God, and solved the apparent contradiction. Is this the proper approach? A closer look at James is called for.

#### JAMES' VIEW OF FAITH AND WORKS

The passage before us (Jas 2:14-26) deals with faith and good works. James emphasizes the importance of good works, as a necessary accompaniment to faith.

#### *The principle stated*

James begins by describing a faith that someone says he has, but that has no works with it. Such a faith, James says, is dead—it has no life, no value.

**Unlike Luther, Calvin and later Reformed writers had no problem accepting James as authoritative, and did not see a contradiction between James and Paul.**

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. (Jas 2:14-17)

The following verse is more difficult to interpret. But I believe it simply confirms and makes definite the statement James has just made.

But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do (Jas 2:18).<sup>13</sup>

Notice that James is quoting some unidentified speaker. There are a couple of variables in this verse. The first variable is the translation of the first word, *alla*, usually translated "but."<sup>14</sup> In most places in the New Testament this word is a strong adversative, showing a strong contrast. For this reason many understand the speaker to be an objector, someone who disagrees with James. A major problem with this interpretation is that the speaker seems to sympathize with James. For this reason some have taken a different sense for *alla*, one also allowed by Greek usage, though rarely. *Alla* may also mean a strengthening of the preceding clause—" (not only this), but rather," or "indeed."<sup>15</sup> In this case Jas 2:18 would be understood as follows:

Someone could even put it this way, "You have faith; I have works. Show

me your faith without works, and I will show you my faith by my works.”

The reason that James does not just say this himself is authorial modesty—he does not want to say he himself is doing good works, only that the Christian should be able to say that.

The second variable is the extent of the quotation. The Greek text does not include quotation marks; these must be supplied by the editor of the English translation. The older translations did not use quotation marks either, and thus avoided the difficulty of making a decision.<sup>16</sup> Many modern translations, assuming that the speaker is some sort of objector and that, therefore, the second half of the verse must be part of James’ reply, stop the quotation after the first clause: “You have faith; I have works.”<sup>17</sup> It seems best, however, to include the rest of the verse in the quotation of the unidentified speaker, since it completes the thought expressed in the first clause. The NASB translates the verse this way:

But someone may *well* say, “You have faith, and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.”

This appears to be the best modern rendering of the verse, except that the first word could more clearly be translated “indeed.”

#### *Challenge to his reader*

In the next two verses James confronts the reader, who may be a person who thinks he can have faith but does not need works to back it up.

You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? (Jas 2:19-20)

To demonstrate his point James uses the demons as examples. They believe in God’s existence, and that he is one God. They know that there are not many gods, as the pagans believed. Yet this is not saving faith. Unitarians, Jews, and Muslims also believe there is one God. The demons as spirit beings observe God and are accountable to him, even though they rebel against him. They also tremble, knowing God’s power and ability to judge them. They even know that Jesus is God’s Son, and that he has authority over them, and they recognized his apostles.<sup>18</sup> However, they do not have saving faith. They do not believe all that God has spoken; they hope for a different outcome from the one he has declared. Their stubborn continuance in sin shows that they do not really believe God. Their “faith” is not genuine, and therefore they do not do good works. In the same way, people that claim to have faith but have no good works show that their faith is dead, “useless.”<sup>19</sup>

James calls a person who does not appreciate what he is saying “foolish, senseless.”<sup>20</sup> As if the example of the demons was not enough evidence, James contrasts their empty faith with that of two saints from the Old Testament, Rahab, and especially Abraham.

#### *Abraham’s genuine faith*

In contrast to the demons, Abraham shows what genuine faith looks like. He believed what God promised, and as a re-

sult his works were different—he obeyed God.

Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone (Jas 2:21-24).

James looks back to Genesis 22, a time when Abraham was over a hundred years old. Abraham had already believed in the Lord, and already had several experiences in his life when the Bible declares that he was “justified.”<sup>21</sup>

Now he faced his greatest test: God commanded him to offer his beloved son Isaac as a burnt sacrifice. Not only was Isaac beloved to him, but he was the son that God promised, the one that would continue his line. God had promised Abraham that Isaac would be the one through whom God would bless the nations.<sup>22</sup> It is for this reason that Isaac is called Abraham’s “only” son, even though Abraham had already fathered Ishmael and had several other sons.<sup>23</sup> Abraham believed God’s promise concerning Isaac, that Isaac would himself bear children. Isaac had to live. Therefore, he believed that God would provide another sacrifice,<sup>24</sup> or, failing that, if he had to actually go through with this terrible deed and sacrifice his son, God would raise him up again to fulfill his promise.<sup>25</sup> Abraham’s belief is consistent with his parting words to the servants at the base of the mountain: “I and the boy will go over there. We

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**Abraham believed God’s promise concerning Isaac, that Isaac would himself bear children. Isaac had to live. Therefore, he believed that God would provide another sacrifice, or, failing that, if he had to actually go through with this terrible deed and sacrifice his son, God would raise him up again to fulfill his promise.**

will worship and then we will come back to you.”<sup>26</sup>

Such was Abraham’s faith. It was still true, as it had been earlier, that Abraham believed “the God who gives life to the dead”; “against all hope” he “in hope believed”; he did not “weaken in his faith”; he “did not waver through unbelief,” but “was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.”<sup>27</sup>

James asserts that, when Abraham thus obeyed God, he was “justified.”<sup>28</sup> He certainly does not mean that Abraham had not been justified before, because he goes on to say, “The scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’” James quotes Gen 15:6, which transpired much earlier in Abraham’s life. James is not speaking of Abraham’s initial justification, or to a re-

newed justification, or to a final justification. Rather, the “justification” James is talking about is a state or condition in which Abraham lived. Abraham’s whole life in Genesis is a life of faith, a life that reveals a man who is justified, one who lives in what the Westminster Confession calls “the state of justification.”<sup>29</sup>

When James says “Abraham was justified by works” and “a person is justified by works,” he is tying works very closely to faith. He says of Abraham that “his faith was working together with (or by means of) his works.”<sup>30</sup> It is in this way that Gen 15:6 was fulfilled: Abraham’s belief resulted in his justification. For James belief requires good works. There is no belief without good works. Good works are the living expression of true faith. Throughout the believer’s life his faith is the key to justification; but, if it is fruitless, faith is dead and does not bring justification.

This passage agrees with Paul’s teaching, that true faith cannot exist without bringing forth good works.<sup>31</sup> It certainly is appropriate for us to conclude that James recognizes the foundational position of faith regarding justification, and that his expression of being “justified by works” is a shorthand way of saying “is justified by a living faith that expresses itself in works.”<sup>32</sup>

The particular instance of Abraham’s “justification” was his special obedience to God; this is when his state of justification expressed itself so that it could be observed. This agrees with Calvin’s observation, quoted above, that James is speaking of our justification as the “manifestation of righteousness,” “and that before men.”

### *Rahab’s genuine faith*

James concludes this portion of his book with a second illustration and his final summarizing statement:

In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. (Jas 2:25-26)

When the Hebrew spies came to Rahab’s house, she already believed in the God of Israel. But this faith was put to the test, was exercised, when she received and hid the spies, confessed her faith to them, risked her life to save them, and hung the scarlet cord from her window.<sup>33</sup> These were the ways her faith was expressed and how it could be observed. James states that her faith was justifying faith—it produced works.

James compares “faith without works” to a dead body. What does he mean by “faith without works”? He obviously means an empty profession. He is not talking about “mere mental assent.” If there were true “mental assent,” there would be real conviction and resulting action. The absence of works proves that there is no “mental assent” at all. Faith is belief. When we truly believe something, we act on it; otherwise our “belief” is not genuine. The only kind of “faith” that does not produce good works is a false faith, a mere profession without genuine belief. This is what James means by “a body without a spirit,” or by “faith without works.”

Throughout this passage James is concerned about people who claim to be

Christian, but who actually are not.<sup>34</sup> They actually do not believe what they say they believe, and thus they have no works that would come from a genuine faith. And he wishes to warn the Christians, so that they will be careful to cultivate their Christian lives and not fall into this unfortunate category.<sup>35</sup>

**If there were true “mental assent,” there would be real conviction and resulting action. The absence of works proves that there is no “mental assent” at all. Faith is belief. When we truly believe something, we act on it; otherwise our “belief” is not genuine.**

CONCLUSION: THE RELATION OF WORKS TO FAITH

What then is the proper relation of works to faith? It is clear from James that one view is false. If faith produces only words, but not works, then it is a false, dead faith. Faith is not mere profession of belief.

Clearly, works are essential for there to be true faith. There are several possibilities as to how these two concepts can be related. Some of these concepts are incorrect.

*Works are not the essence of faith*

It is clear that both Paul and James regard works and faith as separate entities, even though they are intimately tied together. Paul clearly contrasts faith and works. James obviously distinguishes false faith from works, but he also speaks about even true faith as “working together with his works.” He does not identify true faith as works. Faith is belief; works are actions. Faith stands behind works; they are not the same thing.

*Works are not the extension of faith*

Some may hold that faith is a very broad term, and includes works within it. In that case faith would be both belief and works based on that belief. It is this definition that enables some Roman Catholics, for instance, to say they are saved by faith alone, since they include their participating in the sacraments and their other religious duties as a part of their “faith.” It is apparent in the text that both Paul and James distinguish faith from works produced by faith.

*Works are the exercise or the expression of faith*

For both Paul and James faith expresses itself in works. Just as a thought is expressed in words, so our faith is expressed in works. Yes, there are words of profession, and they are important. But even more important is the exercise of faith, the living of the Christian life. Faith never occurs by itself, it is always accompanied by the “other saving graces.”<sup>36</sup> This universal pairing of faith and works is not merely a coincidence, but a necessary result of true faith.

*Therefore, works are also the evidence of faith*

This is the main point in James. It's not just that they are an evidence of faith, and that faith can occur without this evidence. Rather, because faith "works together" with works, because faith exercises and expresses itself in works, works are the true evidence of faith. Words can be an empty profession. Also, hypocrites can produce the appearance of good works, at least for a time. But the true believer, the one with true faith, will have to produce good works, and will persevere in them. At this point Paul, James, and all the other biblical writers come together. 

<sup>1</sup> Many of these men met for a colloquium at Knox Theological Seminary in Florida in August 2003: John Barach, Peter J. Leithart, Rich Lusk, Steve M. Schlissel, Tom Trouwborst, Steve Wilkins, and Douglas Wilson. They met for discussions with seven men who hold the traditional Protestant view under the leadership of E. Calvin Beisner. Papers of the colloquium are published in E. Calvin Beisner, ed., *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros & Cons: Debating the Federal Vision* (Fort Lauderdale, Florida: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004). See my review of this book in this issue of the *WRS Journal*.

<sup>2</sup> See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Liguori Publications, 1994), Nos. 1987-2029.

<sup>3</sup> In particular, Rom 4:1-3, 9-25; Gal 3:6-9; Jas 2:14-24. Heb 11:8-19 is relevant to James 2.

<sup>4</sup> Some English versions have the bare

question, "Can *faith* save him?" (KJV, NKJV, Douay-Rheims-American Version, NRSV). Most others use the expression "that faith": "Can *that faith* save him?" (ASV, NASB, ESV, New Jerusalem Bible). Others have equivalent expressions, "*his faith*" (RSV), "*such faith*" (NIV), or "*that kind of faith*" (NLT). Two interesting things to note are, first, that the two Catholic Bibles cited differ between themselves: "Shall *faith* be able to save him?" (DRA), and "Will *that faith* bring salvation?" (NJB); second, that the Revised Standard Version committee, sponsored by the National Council of Churches, has changed its wording from "Can *his faith* save him?" (RSV) to "Can *faith* save you?" (NRSV; note also the introduction of gender-neutral language). See the good discussion supporting the anaphoric use of the article (referring to the previous reference) in this passage by Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 219; Wallace would favor the translation "that/such faith."

<sup>5</sup> μή δύναται ἢ πίστις σωσαι αὐτόν;

<sup>6</sup> The negative particle μή, "not," plus the indicative mood of the verb "is able." If James had expected a positive answer, he would have used the negative particle οὐ.

<sup>7</sup> Rom 3:28; cf. 4:1-3, 9, 13.

<sup>8</sup> Jas 2:21, 24.

<sup>9</sup> See the balanced discussion in Excursus II in Revere F. Weidner's commentary on James in *The Lutheran Commentary* (New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1897), 88-91. Weidner points out that Luther's real position is shown by (1) his testimony at Worms, (2) his translation itself, and (3) his many positive writings about various

passages in James.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted from John Owen's translation in *Calvin's Commentaries*, Calvin Translation Society edition (reprinted; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 22:276.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 312, 314.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 315.

<sup>13</sup> Quoting the NIV; I prefer a different translation of the first word, and disagree with the placement of these quotation marks in the NIV; see below.

<sup>14</sup> *ἀλλά*. BDAG defines *alla* in this verse as introducing an objection, as "Well, someone will say," but it notes an opposing view, p. 45.

<sup>15</sup> BDAG allows this usage in 2 Cor 7:11 and perhaps in Eph 5:24. Several other examples of this usage are offered by H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto: The Macmillan Company, 1927) 240-241. A good defense of its use in Jas 2:18 is given by J. B. Mayor, *The Epistle of St. James* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 1913; reprinted; Minneapolis: Klock & Klock Christian Publishers, 1977) 99-100.

<sup>16</sup> KJV and ASV.

<sup>17</sup> NKJV, NIV, ESV, NLT, RSV, NRSV. The NLT is distinct by suggesting that the objection is that either faith or works are acceptable: "Now someone may argue, 'Some people have faith; others have good deeds.'"

<sup>18</sup> Matt 8:29; Luke 4:34; 8:31; Acts 16:17.

<sup>19</sup> The UBS<sup>4</sup> editors give a {B} rating to *ἀργή* ("useless") over *νεκρά* ("dead," in the Byzantine text). The original reading "useless" probably was changed to "dead" because of the use of "dead" in verse 26. A few manuscripts have *κενή* ("vain"), probably looking to the use of that term just seven words earlier.

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<sup>20</sup> *κενός*, "empty"; when speaking of persons, "foolish, senseless."

<sup>21</sup> Acts 7:2-4 and Gal 3:6-8 and Heb 11:8 (when he was 75 years old); Gen 15:1 (when he was 85 years old); Rom 4:3, 18-22 (when he was 99 years old); and now Jas 2:21 (when he was over 100 years old).

<sup>22</sup> Gen 17:19, 21; 21:12.

<sup>23</sup> Gen 22:2; 25:1-6. Heb 11:17-18 calls Isaac his "one and only" son (using the term *μονογενής*) because Isaac was the child promised by God.

<sup>24</sup> Gen 22:8; cf. vv. 13-14.

<sup>25</sup> Heb 11:19.

<sup>26</sup> Gen 22:5; the Hebrew uses the plural verb, "we will come back."

<sup>27</sup> Rom 4:17-21, speaking of an earlier time, when Abraham was 99 years old.

<sup>28</sup> Jas 2:21; as Paul had said in Rom 4:22.

<sup>29</sup> WCF 11:5.

<sup>30</sup> Jas 2:22, *ἡ πίστις συνήργει τοῖς ἔργοις αὐτοῦ*.

<sup>31</sup> E.g., in Rom 6-7; Gal 5:6. Jesus also taught this, Matt 7:17-18; 12:33.

<sup>32</sup> E. W. Bullinger classified this usage in Jas 2:21 as a verbal "metonymy of the subject"; "the action is put for the declaration concerning it," *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (1898; reprinted; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968) 572.

<sup>33</sup> Josh 2.

<sup>34</sup> Note the expressions "if someone says" (v. 14), "someone says" (v. 16), and "show me your faith" (v. 18).

<sup>35</sup> God uses warnings as well as encouragements as a means to keep his elect persevering in faith and sanctification. Cf. WCF 14:2, where we are to exercise faith by "yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises" of the Word of God.

<sup>36</sup> WCF 11:2.

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# *APPLICATION & PERSPECTIVE*

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## **THE JOINT DECLARATION ON THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION: AN APPRE- CIATION AND CRITIQUE**

**DENNIS W. JOWERS**

In Augsburg on October 31, Reformation Day, in 1999, Edward Idris Cardinal Cassidy, then President of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU), and his successor, then Secretary of the Council, Walter Kasper, joined seven leaders of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) in signing the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ)*. This document, according to which the Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches have achieved "a consensus on basic truths of the doctrine of justification" (*JDDJ* par. 5), has given rise to widespread confusion about the position of Rome and the churches of the Reformation on this vitally important subject. In the following, accordingly, we should like to dispel some of this confusion by (a) tracing the historical origins of the *JDDJ*, (b) outlining the contents of this widely misunderstood document, and (c) criticizing two common misunderstandings of the *JDDJ*.

### HISTORICAL ORIGINS

The *JDDJ* derives ultimately from the calls for ecumenical dialogue and reconciliation issued by the Roman Catholic Church's Second Vatican Council (1962–66), especially in its Decree on Ecumenism

(*Unitatis Redintegratio*). The following summons typifies the Council's attitude on these subjects.

We must get to know the outlook of our separated brethren.... Most valuable for this purpose are meetings of the two sides—especially for discussion of theological problems where each can treat with the other on an equal footing—provided that those who take part in them are truly competent and have the approval of the bishops. From such dialogue will emerge still more clearly what the situation of the Catholic Church really is. In this way too the outlook of our separated brethren will be better understood, and our own belief more aptly explained. (*UR* par. 9)

In order to foster such conversation, in 1967 the Vatican, in collaboration with the LWF, sanctioned the creation of an ecumenical study group, the Roman Catholic/Lutheran Joint Commission. In a series of reports that culminated in the 1994 statement, *Church and Justification: Understanding the Church in the Light of the Doctrine of Justification*, the theologians who composed this group indicated that they had reached a substantial consensus on certain aspects of the doctrine of justification. Encouraged by these developments, as well as by the 1983 statement, "Justification by Faith," produced by the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue in the USA; and by the book that grew out of consultations sponsored

by the Ecumenical Working Group of Protestant and Catholic Theologians in Germany, *The Condemnations of the Reformation Era: Do They Still Divide?*,<sup>1</sup> the Vatican and the LWF charged a select group of theologians with the task of formulating a document that would “summarize the results of the dialogues on justification” (*JDDJ* par. 4): a document that, in its third draft, would become the *JDDJ*.

After representatives of the churches that compose the LWF unanimously approved the document on June 16, 1998, the PCPCU surprised many observers by issuing a skeptical “Response of the Catholic Church to the Joint Declaration of the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation on the Doctrine of Justification.” By June 11, 1999, however, the LWF and the PCPCU agreed to attach a clarifying “annex” to the statement announcing their mutual agreement to the *JDDJ*, which addressed Catholic concerns and thus paved the way for the final signing of the document on Reformation Day in 1999.

#### CONTENTS

The *JDDJ* consists in six main parts: a preamble, a brief presentation of the biblical witness concerning justification, an even briefer account of the ecumenical significance of the doctrine, an affirmation of consensus, an explanation of the consensus (the longest and most significant section of the document), and a conclusion stressing the significance and scope of this consensus. We shall take into account other documents relevant to the interpretation of the *JDDJ*, e.g., the appendix of statements from previous documents related to Lutheran/Catholic dialogue attached to the *JDDJ*, the “Response” and “Annex” referred to above,

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the “Official Common Statement” of agreement to the *JDDJ*, and Cardinal Cassidy’s “Presentation” of the *JDDJ* to the Roman Curia, in the exposition of the *JDDJ* that follows.

#### 1. Preamble

The preamble to the *JDDJ* includes four central affirmations. First, referring to the mutual denunciations of the Reformation period, the document’s authors announce, “These condemnations are still valid today and thus have a church-dividing effect” (par. 1). Second, the authors describe the principal purpose of their statement: “namely, to show that on the basis of their dialogue the subscribing Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church are now able to articulate a common understanding of our justification by God’s grace through faith in Christ” (par. 5). Although they caution that the document “does not cover all that either church teaches about justification,” its drafters insist that it “does encompass a consensus on the basic truths of the doctrine of justification and shows that the remaining differences in its explication are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnations” (par. 5).

Those responsible for the *JDDJ* assert, third, that “our declaration is not a new, independent presentation alongside the dialogue reports and documents to date [referred to in the previous section], let alone a replacement of them” (par. 6). In the *JDDJ*, rather, the parties seek merely “to summarize the results of the dialogues on justification” (par. 4). Fourth and finally, the authors clarify the presuppositions of their statement. “Like the dialogues themselves,” they write:

This Joint Declaration rests on the conviction that in overcoming the earlier controversial questions and doctrinal condemnations, the churches neither take the condemnations lightly nor do they disavow their own past. On the contrary, this Declaration is shaped by the conviction that in their respective histories our churches have come to new insights. Developments have taken place which not only make possible, but also require the churches to examine the divisive questions and condemnations and see them in a new light. (par. 7)

In other words, the authors of the *JDDJ* emphasize that the communions they represent have progressed in some measure from the teachings they affirmed in the sixteenth century and that it is on the basis of “new insights” reached in the interim that they have arrived at their newfound agreement.

## 2. Biblical testimony

The document’s second section, devoted to the Bible’s witness to the doctrine of justification, consists in a short series of largely unobjectionable, albeit highly ambiguous, summaries of biblical teaching on this subject, divided into segments concerning the Old Testament, the New Testament as a whole, and the Pauline corpus respectively. In par. 5 of his “Presentation” of the *JDDJ*, Cardinal Cassidy draws attention to the statement in par. 3 of the “Official Common Statement” that “the two partners in dialogue are committed to continued and deepened study of the biblical foundations of the doctrine of justification.” Further study in this area is required, Cassidy explains, because the doctrine’s biblical basis “did

not seem to have been given sufficient attention in the Joint Declaration.”

**The document claims that each communion has advanced to a somewhat different doctrine of justification in the intervening centuries and that the communions’ present beliefs do not warrant condemnation.**

## 3. Ecumenical significance

After completing their cursory survey of the biblical testimony to the doctrine of justification, the document’s authors proceed to amplify their statements in the preamble about the declaration’s ecumenical importance. “By appropriating insights of recent biblical studies and drawing on modern investigations of the history of dogma and theology,” the drafters write:

The post-Vatican II ecumenical dialogue has led to a notable convergence concerning justification, with the result that this Joint Declaration is able to formulate a consensus on basic truths concerning the doctrine of justification. In light of this consensus, the corresponding doctrinal condemnations of the sixteenth century do not apply to today’s partner. (par. 13)

## 4. Summary of the consensus.

In the succeeding section, entitled “The Common Understanding of Justification,” the authors of *JDDJ* present, in brief compass, what they regard as the

teaching of the Lutheran and Catholic churches on the subject of justification. More significant than any sentence within this profoundly ambiguous section, perhaps, is a statement, drawn from the American dialogue report “Justification by Faith,” cited as relevant to this section in the appendix entitled “Resources for the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.” The statement reads: “a faith centered and forensically conceived picture of justification is of major importance for Paul and, in a sense, for the Bible as a whole, although it is by no means the only biblical or Pauline way of representing God’s saving work.” Here, it seems, the document’s authors rather severely contravene the teaching of the Council of Trent, according to which infused righteousness is justification’s sole formal cause (DH 1529). Contradictions of traditional Catholic and Lutheran doctrine, however, begin to abound only in the subsequent section in which the authors of the *JDDJ* elaborate their consensus on the subject of justification.

##### 5. *Elaboration.*

The next section, entitled “Explicating the Common Understanding of Justification,” consists in seven parts devoted, respectively, to (1) human freedom, (2) justification’s content, (3) the instrumentality of faith in justification, (4) the Lutheran conception of the Christian as *simul justus et peccator*, (5) the distinction between gospel and law, (6) assurance of salvation, and (7) good works in the life of the Christian.

(1) *Human freedom.* In the first of these subsections, promisingly entitled “Human Powerlessness and Sin in Relation to Justification,” the authors of the

*JDDJ* acknowledge a breach within the current consensus between the LWF and the Catholic Church on the subject of justification. They write in pars. 20 and 21:

When Catholics say that persons “co-operate” in preparing for and accepting justification by consenting to God’s justifying action, they see such personal consent as itself an effect of grace, not as an action arising from innate human abilities.

According to Lutheran teaching, human beings are incapable of cooperating in their salvation, because as sinners they actively oppose God and his saving action. Lutherans do not deny that a person can reject the working of grace. When they emphasize that a person can only receive (*mere passive*) justification, they mean thereby to exclude any possibility of contributing to one’s own justification, but do not deny that believers are fully involved personally in their faith, which is effected by God’s Word.

By these sentences the document’s authors seem to mean that, while the language employed by each side may appear offensive to the other, the intentions of the divided communions’ formulae conflict so mildly that they do not warrant mutual condemnation.

In his “Response” to the *JDDJ* (par. 6), however, Cardinal Cassidy of the PCPCU complains that the document’s framers pay insufficient heed to the Catholic doctrine of the possibility and necessity of human cooperation with justifying grace. In addition to the Lutheran acknowledgment that the sinner can resist grace, the Cardinal asserts, “it must also be affirmed that...there is also a new ca-

capacity to adhere to the divine will, a capacity rightly called '*cooperatio*.' This new capacity given in the new creation does not allow us to use in this context the expression '*mere passive*.'"

The "Annex" to the *JDDJ* fails unambiguously to resolve this matter, and the document itself admits the presence of "remaining differences of language, theological elaboration, and emphasis in the understanding of justification" maintained by each communion (par. 40). This language and Cardinal Cassidy's "Response" thus indicate that the LWF and the Catholic Church reach at most an "internally differentiated consensus" in the *JDDJ*. The following subsection, "The Justified as Sinner" (pars. 28–30), in fact, seems more to underline the differentiated character of the two parties' consensus than to resolve any substantial disagreements.

(2) *What is justification?* The problematic character of the next section appears from its title: "Justification as Forgiveness of Sins and Making Righteous." The appendix of dialogue statements confirms misgivings this title might engender in Protestants by quoting the following affirmation from the U.S. document, "Justification by Faith": "By justification we are both declared and made righteous. Justification, therefore, is not a legal fiction. God, in justifying, effects what he promises; he forgives sin and makes us truly righteous."

By quoting this statement, the authors of the *JDDJ* appear to endorse either (1) a traditional Catholic understanding of justification, according to which the created justice inhering in justified persons expels from their being everything

hateful to God and so brings about both their forgiveness and their purification; or (2) a "double justice" theory of justification, according to which God both imputes the alien righteousness of Christ to sinners and transforms them intrinsically so that they become objectively worthy of heaven.

If they advocated the former conception, the document's framers would at least adhere to orthodox Catholic doctrine, according to which forgiveness and interior transformation, the two elements of justification as defined by the Council of Trent, derive from a single formal cause, viz., a justice, distinct from that of Christ, infused into the soul at baptism. In the words of the Council of Trent's "Decree on Justification," chapter 7:

Justification ... is not merely remission of sins, but also the sanctification and the renewal of the interior man ... [and] its only formal cause is the "justice of God, not that by which he himself is just, but by which he makes us just," that, namely, by which, when we are endowed with it by him, we are renewed in the spirit of our mind, and not only are we reputed, but we are truly called and are just. (DH 1528–9)

Although this conception of justification seems patently unbiblical (cf. Rom 3:21, 28; 4:6; 8:8; 2 Cor 5:21, etc.) and contrary to the Lutheran confessions (cf., e.g., Epitome of the Formula of Concord 3.7, 21), the authors of the *JDDJ* could, indeed, remain faithful to one of the two communions' doctrinal standards by advocating it. When the framers of *JDDJ* write that "by justification we are both declared and made righteous," however, they seem, rather, at least to verge on

embracing the compromise theory of “double justice”: a theory that both the Council of Trent and the Lutheran confessions explicitly reject, albeit for opposite reasons.

According to the “double justice” theory, as classically expounded by Girolamo Seripando, God both imputes the righteousness of Christ to sinners and endows them with righteousness sufficient to merit, as a matter of strict justice, the blessings of heaven. According to the “double justice” theory, that is to say, the term “justification” signifies not one, but two realities with two radically distinct formal causes: (1) an extrinsic, legal imputation of the divine/human righteousness of Christ whose formal cause is that very divine/human righteousness, and (2) an infusion of merely created righteousness whose formal cause is the merely created righteousness infused. In this section, accordingly, the authors of *JDDJ* come perilously close to denying that justification is either the mere imputation of Christ’s righteousness (the Lutheran position) or the mere imputation of created righteousness (the Catholic position) and thus running afoul of the authoritative documents of both traditions.

(3) *Faith*. The following section, which concerns the relation of faith to justification, seems, likewise, simply to juxtapose the two communions’ starkly contrasting positions. Describing the Lutheran viewpoint, the authors write, “In the doctrine of ‘justification by faith alone’ a distinction but not a separation is made between justification itself and the renewal of one’s way of life” (par. 26). The document’s framers thus attribute to the LWF a differentiation of justification from sanctification that contravenes the Catho-

lic insistence on the identity of justification with the inner renewal of the human being.

In representing the Catholic position, the document’s framers appear to repeat, albeit in simplified language, Trent’s definition of justification quoted above: “The justification of sinners is forgiveness of sins and being made righteous by justifying grace” (par. 27). That these positions do not represent “a common understanding of our justification by God’s grace through faith in Christ” (par. 5) is manifest. The “Annex” to the document, accordingly, seems to resolve the contradiction by committing both parties to the view that “justification is forgiveness of sins and being made righteous” (sec. 2.A).

(4) *Simul justus et peccator*. In the following section, entitled “The Justified as Sinner,” the authors of the *JDDJ* appear once more to juxtapose two incompatible positions. Lutherans believe that all concupiscence is sin in the proper sense of the term; Catholics do not. It is not without reason, therefore, that Cardinal Cassidy protests in his “Response”:

According...to the doctrine of the Catholic Church, in baptism everything that is really sin is taken away, and so, in those who are born anew there is nothing that is hateful to God. For Catholics, therefore, the formula “at the same time righteous and sinner,” as it is explained at the beginning of n. 29 (“Believers are totally righteous, in that God forgives their sins through Word and Sacrament.... Looking at themselves...however, they realize that they remain also totally sinners. Sin still lives in them”) is not acceptable. (par. 3)

Naturally, the Catholic position as recounted in this section is equally repugnant to traditional Lutherans; the authors of the *Epitome* specifically reject the view that “depraved concupiscences are not sin” (1.12; cf. Augsburg Confession 1.2; Solid Declaration 1.18).

(5) *Law and gospel.* The main text of the next section, entitled “Law and Gospel,” seems largely uncontroversial. An editorial comment inserted by the authors into the appendix of quotations from previous Lutheran/Catholic dialogues, however, seems most exceptionable: “According to Pauline teaching this topic concerns the Jewish law as means of salvation. This law was fulfilled and overcome in Christ. This statement and the consequences from it have to be understood on this basis.”

If this is the case, and Paul’s references to justification “without the deeds of the law” (Rom 3:28; cf. 3:20–21, 27; 4:1–8, 13–15, etc.), accordingly, do not exclude the possibility of a person’s gaining justification at least partially through upright works, then the Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith alone possesses no exegetical basis. Although the authors of *JDDJ* do not explicitly disavow the doctrine of justification by faith alone in this section, therefore, they do implicitly contest the doctrine by denying one of its scriptural premises.

(6) *Assurance.* In the following section, “Assurance of Salvation,” the authors of *JDDJ* accurately set forth the Catholic position on this subject: “No one may doubt God’s mercy and Christ’s merit. Every person, however, may be concerned about his own salvation when he looks

upon his own weaknesses and shortcomings.” The document’s authors neglect to mention, however, that this stance is irreconcilable with the position of the Lutheran confessions. For, the drafters of the *Epitome* state,

We believe, teach, and confess...that, although those who truly believe in Christ and are born again are subject to many infirmities and stains until death: nevertheless, they ought not to doubt either the justice, that is imputed to them by faith, or of eternal salvation. In fact, they ought, rather, to be firmly convinced that, on account of Christ, in accordance with the promise and the unshaken word of the Gospel, they have God reconciled to them. [3.6]

According to the fourth article of the Augsburg Confession, justifying faith itself is the belief of Christians that “they are received into favour, and their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake.” The Fathers of the Council of Trent, however, explicitly anathematize anyone who says “that no one is truly justified except the one who believes himself to be justified.” In spite of the apparent consistency of the positions set forth in this section, therefore, it seems impossible for either of the two communions to acknowledge the other’s official position as unobjectionable without departing radically from its doctrinal standards.

(7) *Good works.* In the final subsection of the document’s explanation of the consensus on justification between the Catholic Church and the LWF, entitled “The Good Works of the Justified,” the authors accurately present the Lutheran position on this subject as irreconcilably

opposed to the teachings of the Council of Trent. According to the authors of the *JDDJ*, “Lutherans...emphasize that righteousness as acceptance by God and sharing in the righteousness of Christ is always complete” (par. 39). The Fathers of Trent, however, anathematize anyone who denies that persons may augment the grace of justification in themselves through good works (DH 1574).

Likewise, the document’s authors radically understate the Catholic understanding of the merit of good works performed by Christians. Aside from assurances that Catholics do not intend, when speaking of merit, to denigrate the gracious character of justification and the works themselves that God enables Christians to perform, the authors state merely: “When Catholics affirm the ‘meritorious’ character of good works, they wish to say that, according to the biblical witness, a reward in heaven is promised to these works” (par. 38). With this assertion the Lutheran confessions agree (cf. Apology for the Augsburg Confession 4.194).

The document’s authors omit, however, perhaps the most distinctive element of the Catholic understanding of merit: the absence of which in the *JDDJ* Cardinal Cassidy rightly protests in his “Response” (par. 8; cf. DH 1545–7, 1582).

The Catholic Church maintains...that the good works of the justified are always the fruit of grace. But at the same time, and without in any way diminishing the totally divine initiative, they are also the fruit of man, justified and interiorly transformed. We can therefore say that eternal life is, at one and the same time, grace and the re-

ward given by God for good works and merits.

An account of the Catholic doctrine of merit that omits this aspect, as the *JDDJ* does, must surely qualify as misleading.

### 6. *Significance and Scope*

In the final section of the *JDDJ*, entitled “The Significance and Scope of the Consensus Reached,” the document’s authors state (a) that the LWF and the Catholic Church have achieved consensus about the essential elements of the doctrine of justification, (b) that the teachings of each communion as presented in the document lack the objectionable elements that gave rise to the mutual condemnations of the sixteenth century, and (c) that the churches, nevertheless, take these condemnations seriously and intend to seek reconciliation without forsaking their heritage.

### CONCLUSION

From our presentation of the contents of the *JDDJ*, it should be plain that, *pace* some critics, the document claims neither that the disagreements of the Reformation period resulted from mutual misunderstanding nor that the LWF and Catholics have reached total agreement on the subject of justification. The document claims, rather, that each communion has advanced to a somewhat different doctrine of justification in the intervening centuries and that the communions’ present beliefs on this subject, as formulated in the *JDDJ*, do not warrant condemnation. ☞

<sup>1</sup> Ed. by Karl Lehmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg; transl. by Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

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# SERMON

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## GOD'S JUSTIFYING SERVANT

KENNETH ORR

*"He shall see of the travail of his soul,  
and shall be satisfied: by his  
knowledge shall my righteous servant  
justify many: for he shall bear their  
iniquities." (Isaiah 53:11)*

The fall of the year always reminds us of harvest time, when we sing together "Come ye thankful people come, Raise the song of harvest home." And we pray together, "Lord of harvest, grant that we, wholesome grain and pure may be." It is during October that all Protestants worth their salt remember the great harvest the Lord brought to us out of the Reformation. The blood of the martyrs was truly the seedbed of the Church. As we gather together we remember those who loved God's truth more than they loved their own lives. To die for truth is grand, but to die for God's truth is glory.

The subject we have for meditation is one of those truths. It is what Abraham Booth called "The capital article of the faith once delivered to the saints." This doctrine is the "hinge and pillar of Christianity," said Thomas Watson. It is found in verse 11 of Isaiah 53, "He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many: for he shall bear their iniquities."

This is the doctrine that not only convinced the heart of Martin Luther, but changed the course of sacred history. Our

catechism states, "Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ, imputed to us and received by faith alone." The old Puritan Henry Smith put it this way, "God hideth our unrighteousness with Christ's righteousness. He covereth our disobedience with His obedience. He shadoweth our death with His death, so that the wrath of God cannot find us." "Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect?" This is a question answered by the blood of the Lamb of God and confirmed, in blood, by thousands of little lambs over 400 years ago. Beloved, if the wrath of God is turned away from me, then I want to know about it. There is no more important question than the one posed by Job, "How can a man be just before God?" especially since there is "none righteous, no not one." It is important because it is asked of every person who ever lived. A man's eternal destiny hinges on the answer. It is a very difficult question because man is all sin and God is all righteousness. It is a question men incorrectly answer every day because they have insufficient views of their own guilt and of God's unwavering standard of justice on the guilty. He will not acquit them. It is a supremely important question because God alone can answer it and Christ alone is the answer.

Yet if you were to ask the average church goer, "What is justification?" you might get a hundred different answers. Also many of God's people are too familiar with the meaning of the word justification but little influenced by the impact of

its truth. They have the answer memorized, but haven't settled it in their hearts and in their lives.

God takes a man, utterly devoid of anything good, whose very righteousnesses are as filthy rags, whose every intention is evil, every desire iniquitous, every act unholy and unworthy. This man is not seeking after God, does not fear God, sees no beauty in Christ that he should desire him. This sinner is blind and impotent to all spiritual good. He is hell-born, hell-bred, and hell-bent. He stands guilty and condemned before God and his law. And these are the objects of God's righteousness freely bestowed. To these ungodly people, God reckons to their account the perfections of Christ's life, and the blood of Christ's death. His blood washes away all their sin, and his righteousness gives them a legal title to heaven and glory. Man's works and will have nothing to do with it whatsoever. This transaction is between God and His only-begotten Son, not only on the sinner's behalf but in the sinner's place.

The Roman Catholic Church condemns this doctrine by cursing all who believe it and that is why a freely bestowed justification became the principal truth to come out of the Reformation. Justification by faith alone, plus nothing. This is my glorious subject, and will be taken in three ways:

1. The Character of Justification: Its Essence
2. The Condition of Justification: Its Essentials
3. The Consolation of Justification: Its Effects.

#### 1. THE CHARACTER OF JUSTIFICATION: ITS ESSENCE

The Bible tells us that the Lord Jesus Christ was God's agent in creation. "All things were made by him and without him

**The old Puritan Henry  
Smith put it this way,  
"God hideth our  
unrighteousness with  
Christ's righteousness.  
He covereth our disobedience  
with His obedience.  
He shadoweth our death  
with His death, so that  
the wrath of God  
cannot find us."**

was not anything made that was made." And God was satisfied with the work of his Son. God "saw everything that he had made and behold it was very good." And we can see in our text that God was also pleased with his Son's work in redemption. "He shall see the travail of his soul and shall be satisfied." For the redemption of sinners there is only one place God looks—the mercy seat. It is from this mercy seat that God is able to be "just and the justifier of them that believe." Jesus Christ is the source of all our righteousness; there is none apart from him. Because God has seen the travail of Christ's soul and is satisfied, because of that knowledge (approval), his righteous Servant shall justify many. As man Christ suffered; as God Christ satisfied. And free-grace salvation is the result. Apart from God in Christ,

there is only condemnation. God will not acquit the guilty, and we need only look at Calvary to confirm it.

The first thing I want you to see about this justification is that it is gratuitous, or freely given. Paul, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Romans, after establishing the fact that “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God,” in the very next breath from heaven, without a word about man’s work or man’s will, God says, “Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

Martin Luther had been brought up as a Roman Catholic and had been raised to believe that he had to depend on the Church and his own works for his justification before God. Therefore, he was never assured that he was saved, because he always came short. But one day the Holy Spirit opened up his darkened heart to realize that his justification before God was wholly dependent on God’s free grace in Christ Jesus alone. Salvation was the gift of God’s grace.

This word ‘freely’ is a wonderful word. We can see its meaning clearly in the translation of this same word in John 15:25. Here the Savior is confronting his disciples on the night before he was to die. He is telling them that they will be hated like he was hated, and the reason is found in verses 23 & 24, “He that hateth me hateth my Father also. If I had not done among them the works which none other man did, they had not had sin: but now have they both seen and hated both me and my Father.” Then we find our word in the next verse. “But this cometh to pass that the word might be fulfilled that is written in their law, they hated me without a cause.” Those three words are formed

into one word in Romans 3:24, freely, “Without a cause”; there was no reason in Christ why these people should hate him. They hated him without a cause. He gave them nothing to excite their hatred of him. All he thought and did was good.

So here we have the same word in Romans 3:24, “Being justified freely (without a cause).” There was nothing in us to excite God to justify us. There was no reason in us why he should be so gracious to us. All we thought and did was wrong. God did it freely; he did it without a cause in us. “Grace, ‘tis a charming sound, harmonious to the ear.” God’s free gift wasn’t even given to neutrals, but to those who positively deserved his wrath.

Beloved friends, justification is free because it is the Divine prerogative of God’s grace. “It is God that justifieth.” In justification grace reigns alone, high above the faltering work and vacillating will of men. It comes from the perfect heart of God to perfectly ungodly sinners. Someone said, “Justification is a mercy spun out of the bowels of Free Grace.”

It is not only free but it is full. Complete. Please notice the two prominent words in our text: “My *righteous* servant shall *justify* many.” The word righteous and the word justify are the same word in the Hebrew and in the Greek. Just as the words faith and believe are the same. Faith is the noun, the substance of things hoped for, and believe the verb, the evidence of things not seen. Faith is the gift and belief is the reception of the gift and both are given by God. See Ephesians 2: 8-9.

So righteousness and justification are the same. Righteousness is the noun;

it is the substance of God; and justification is the verb, the action word; it is how God imputes his righteousness; but they are one in the same essence. Do you see what that means here? God's righteous servant shall justify many. The very righteousness of the Servant is given to the sinful many. What Christ is essentially, is given sinners emphatically!

"But of God are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom and righteousness, and sanctification and redemption." Here is the supreme character of justification. It is the righteousness of God himself, given by God himself and declared by God himself to be the sinner's, in a free act of sovereign grace. Every believer is freely and fully justified before God.

The old Puritan Thomas Watson said, "Mary Magdalene was as much justified as Mary the mother of Jesus, for they both had God's righteousness." Friend, if you only have a mustard seed's worth of faith (from God) you are as righteous as the Son of God. "For God hath made Christ to be sin for us, who knew no sin, that we (who knew no righteousness) might be made the righteousness of God in Him." Christ was treated as if he were a sinner, and we are treated as if we were the Savior.

Not only is it free and full, but our justification is forever. Can a member of Christ's righteous body be broken off? Can Christ be the perfect head without a perfect body? "Is Christ divided?" Who can separate us? "I am the Lord, I change not, therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed."

## 2. THE CONDITION OF JUSTIFICATION: ITS ESSENTIALS

First of all it is not of works. This is the negative side of God's free grace. The conclusion Paul comes to about our gratuitous justification is that it is not of works. Romans 3:28, "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law." Cf. Romans 4:4-8; also Titus 3:5-7.

The Roman Catholic quotes the Apostle James who says, "Ye see then how that by works is a man justified and not by faith only." There seems to be a discrepancy here. On the one hand, we are told that we are justified *without* works, and on the other, we are justified *by* works. But of course there are no contradictions in God's Word. The difference is only a matter of emphasis. Paul was opposing the legalists who taught justification by the law; so he stated, "We are not under the law," while James was opposing the Antinomians whose profession of faith was united to a life of blatant worldliness and ungodliness; so he states, "Faith without works is dead." Paul was speaking about our justification before God, while James was speaking of our justification before men.

The folks James was writing to were making a bold profession of faith, while at the same time indulging in the things of the world just like the ungodly around them. They seemed to be religious but didn't bridle their tongues; they gave the rich the prominent seats. They had bitterness and envy in their hearts; they had desires that were earthly and devilish. Many were friends of the world and therefore enemies of God. They lived in pleasure on the earth with no view of the purity of heaven. And the people around

them were laughing at their profession of faith. So James states “be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.”

Dear ones, the Spirit of God puts a difference between the desires, habits, and activities of those addicted to the world’s system and those he has awakened to the purity of Christ’s righteousness. We had better be careful that we don’t call our liberty in the gospel a license to be worldly and therefore be called by the Holy Spirit, “adulterers and adulteresses.” I will not name world activities but I am prepared to warn God’s people and myself that we must avoid what the world loves and despise what God hates. We are to “prove all things, and hold fast to that which is good.” We are to “abstain from all appearance of evil.” We are to “make no provision for the flesh nor give place to the devil.” Christian liberty is one of the dearest treasures in God’s vault. “All things are lawful, but all things are not expedient” (profitable). And you, before God, must have the liberty to decide what is expedient. This is the work of the Holy Spirit in us and not the work of the Church over us. “Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.” We must not destroy the wonderful Reformation doctrine of the priesthood of the believer.

But at the same time I will not want to make shipwreck of my life by professing boldly and then indulging in the “lusts of the flesh, the lusts of the eyes, and the pride of life.” This pulpit and these pews must be the most unworldly in the world. “Faith, if it hath not works, is dead being alone.” We must not make ourselves liable to the wrongful judgments by the world of God’s people. This is why James states that “we must walk circumspectly.”

He is saying that others will only know if you are justified before God if they can

**Here the sinner’s pardon  
is built on the very  
attribute that is so  
dreadful to the  
unbelieving, the  
intractable justice of God.  
The attribute that  
seems to bar the door to  
God’s forgiveness is  
actually the very  
threshold over which we  
receive God’s mercy.**

“see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven.”

But back to the original contention of Paul. We are justified before God without the deeds of the law. Good works are the result of our free justification by grace, not the cause of it. But they will always be the result, or we deny the power of God in sanctification. So our justification is not of works. And it is all of Christ. This is the heart of our truth today. “He shall justify many for he shall bear their iniquities.” Iniquities cry out for condemnation. But Paul asks, “Who shall condemn? . . . It is Christ that died.” “Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God.” We of-

ten think of God's mercy here, and rightly so. But the Holy Spirit states that in making propitiation or atonement, God declares his righteousness. Here the sinner's pardon is built on the very attribute that is so dreadful to the unbelieving, the intractable justice of God. The attribute that seems to bar the door to God's forgiveness is actually the very threshold over which we receive God's mercy. God's justice is satisfied in Christ, so now He can be merciful. God's justice has become the believer's friend because God has judged Christ in the sinner's place. The two essentials in our justification are pardon and righteousness; both of them are gotten through the merits of Christ. The one, pardon, comes through his bearing our iniquities; and the other, righteousness, comes through the imputation of the righteousness of God, laid to our account because of Christ's perfect obedience to the law that we broke. Here we have a wonderful display of divine justice and boundless grace, all in order to make sinners right with God.

- Of divine justice if we consider the ground of it: the blood shedding and death of Christ.
- Of boundless grace, if we consider the state of those justified, which is so wonderfully phrased by Solomon in his song to his bride, "Thou art all fair my love." Or Isaiah who says, "Thy people also shall be all righteous."

I am certain that there is no one here who would base their acceptance with God on their own righteousness. But many times we do that very thing by condemning ourselves when we do wrong. Now our sins must be condemned; please don't get me wrong. But by condemning

ourselves when God doesn't, we are in fact asserting that if we had done what is right, we would be accepted with God. Condemning ourselves is very close to anti-Christ. Let's remember that Christ Jesus is not only our justification but is also our condemnation.

There are also many among God's people who base their acceptance with God on the strength of their faith or the degree of their repentance. They make faith and repentance a work. So they are up and down all the time. But we need a standard that doesn't change, and that standard is Christ. The Savior bore our sin, in order to bear it away, out of God's sight, thereby expiating or putting away our guilt (as one old boy said "passing it by not even taking notice of it"); and we in turn receive his righteousness imputed or declared to be ours by faith, simply because God declared it and Christ earned it.

Justification is not to say that a believer is not a sinner, or doesn't deserve to be held accountable for that sin. It just means that all that God hated in us was washed away and covered by incorruptible blood and all that God loves in us (Christ) has been declared to be ours. When we are justified we are acquitted at God's bar of justice from every accusation, be it the Devil, our friends, or ourselves. And we are entitled to all the blessings of Christ's obedience and suffering. We are "Complete in Him."

Remission of sin and pardon takes away our liability to eternal death and Christ's righteousness gives us a right and a title to eternal life.

You see beloved, God was not only pleased in bruising his Son, but when he saw the travail of his soul he said “this is my well-beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” In whom I am well atoned, well pacified, well satisfied and glorified. God says, “I look no further than Christ.” And we shouldn’t look any further as well. Faith rests on God’s estimate of Christ. “For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth.”

The final condition is Faith. “We are justified by faith.” Paul preaching in Acts 13 states, “Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: and by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses.” And even this condition is met by Christ. Philippians 1:29, “It is given on the behalf of Christ to believe.”

### 3. THE CONSOLATION OF JUSTIFICATION: ITS EFFECTS

Finally, in justification we have peace with God. Cf. Romans 5:1. Someone in describing peace said it is “a richer jewel than any prince wears in his crown.” We have the power of God to keep us and the peace of God to comfort us. Some other consolations of an imputed righteousness are access to God, acceptance with God, and confidence in God despite many trying and adverse circumstances. We inherit glory, for “whom he justified, them he also glorified.” If God does this work, my friends, we must believe it, consider it good, live like it, and enjoy it.

- In justification God has made provision for the glory of his honor, for sin is punished in Christ.

- In justification God has vindicated his holiness, for Christ has fulfilled the law, every jot and tittle.
- In justification God has manifested his truth and faithfulness, for he is just and the justifier of them that believe in Jesus.
- And in justification God has given a consolation for every repenting sinner, which is peace, perfect peace.

Justification is a truth that comes from the heart of God, flows through the whole body of divinity, runs through every part of Christian experience, and operates in every part of practical godliness. To give you an example, Joseph was not only loosed from his prison but was made Lord over the kingdom. So God takes us from the dunghill and sets us up with princes, high above all the guilt that can be mustered against us. Joseph was answerable only to Pharaoh. And we are answerable only to God, and Christ answers to God in our place.

In view of this mighty work of God’s grace in Christ, let’s raise our voice in harvest praise “unto him that loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father. To him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.” Let’s go from this meeting singing, “Let the righteous be glad, let them rejoice before God; yea, let them exceedingly rejoice” (Psalm 68:3-4). 

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# BOOKS

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## SOME CLASSIC WORKS ON JUSTIFICATION

LAURIE A. P. COPELAND

*Commentary on Galatians*, by **Martin Luther**. Kregel Classics, 1979. Pp. 384. ISBN, 0 8254 3124 7

The doctrine of justification by faith alone (*sola fide*) is the fundamental principle of the Reformation. In his acclaimed and prized commentary, Luther irrefutably defends justification by faith alone apart from the works of the law. This is an exceptional apology of what continues to be a controversial doctrine. Using stern language and an aggressive polemic style that is unsurpassed, the famed Reformer captivates the reader in this unique verse-by-verse exposition. I thoroughly enjoyed this engaging book.

Luther hails the doctrine of justification by God's free grace through faith alone. The righteousness that justifies sinners comes from God through faith in the merit of Christ and is imputed to our account by God. The faith itself is a gift and grace from God and is the only instrument through which we are justified. The righteousness of faith is apart from the works of the law or ceremony. It is a passive righteousness not earned or achieved through the merit of man as opposed to an active righteousness which man purports to achieve, but fails to meet the perfect standard God requires. The righteousness that justifies has its origin from God and its merit in Christ. Luther exalts free grace and justification by faith

alone. With strong language, he denounces those who mingle law and grace calling them such things as "false apostles," "black devils," "troublers of the church," "blind guides," and "perverters of the gospel." He minces no words and repudiates all false teachers who pervert free grace.

Concerning Luther's commentaries, this is his *Magnus opus* and is invaluable. It is a priceless contribution to the doctrine of justification and vital resource for every Christian. A timeless classic for today, it is understandable, and packed with information. It will encourage you and inspire the reader to stand and defend the gospel "which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3).

As Luther would say:

What are the papists (I pray you), yea, the best of them all, but destroyers of the Kingdom of Christ, and builders up of the kingdom of the devil and sin, of wrath and damnation? Yes, they destroy the Church which is God's building, not by the law of Moses, as did the false apostles, but by men's traditions and doctrines of devils. But we, by the grace of Christ, holding the article of justification, do assuredly know that we are justified, and reputed righteous before God by faith only in Christ. Therefore we do not mingle law and grace, faith and works together: but we separate them far asunder. (p. 80)

**Justification**, by **Archibald Alexander Hodge**.

A.A. Hodge (1823-1886) was the son of notable theologian Charles Hodge. Named after Archibald Alexander, the first principal of Princeton Seminary, Hodge was an American Presbyterian leader.

Hodge presents a clear teaching on the doctrine of justification in his article on the subject that can be found in his book *Outlines of Theology* (Banner of Truth, ISBN 0851511600) or online.<sup>1</sup> Hodge demonstrates the doctrine as represented by Scripture and through the eyes of various inspired writers. Written with exceptional clarity, he furnishes an excellent essay on the subject.

Justification is one of the main themes and doctrines of the Bible. The Old Testament instructs us that we are justified by faith alone apart from works; Abraham believed God and “it was counted unto him for righteousness” (Rom 4:3 KJV). The New Testament also attests to the free grace of God by being “justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ” (Rom 3:24). After illustrating how the law condemns a sinner, Hodge explains why it can never justify a guilty person: “the just shall live by faith” (Rom 1:17). He vindicates the supreme excellence of Christ’s righteousness as our only merit in salvation.

Providing a large number of Scripture references from both the Old and New Testaments, Hodge writes a delightful exposition on the doctrine and a valuable resource for anyone interested in furthering their knowledge on this subject.

A quote from the article:

The fact that a man is forgiven, implies that he is guilty; and the fact that he is guilty, implies that his justification cannot rest upon his own character or conduct.

***The Doctrine of Justification: An Outline of its History in the Church and of its Exposition from Scripture***, by **James Buchanan**. The Banner of Truth Trust: 1991. Pp. 514. ISBN, 0-85151-440-5

James Buchanan (1804-1870) was born in Paisley and was known as an eloquent preacher and prolific writer.

Buchanan sets forth an extensive work on the doctrine of justification which J. I. Packer in the Introductory Essay says is the preeminent book on the subject from the viewpoint of covenant theology. There are few works written on the doctrine that are as exhaustive and thorough. It might be better termed the atlas of the doctrine because of its immensity and completeness. Coming from the heart of a pastor, it has a warm sense about it and is overall a great achievement.

Buchanan wrote the book to recapitulate the historic orthodox doctrine and show how some have strayed from the faith. Throughout history, it has been opposed through the “spirit of self righteousness,” “corrupted by human inventions,” and “sometimes perverted and abused by Antinomian license.” Buchanan traces the history of the doctrine and describes the great controversy throughout Protestant history. Listing the various heresies that arise from God’s free grace, he describes several as they have appeared in history. He presents a thorough and incomparable analysis of the doctrine, including “the law and justice

of God” and how the law can never justify a condemned sinner. Buchanan demonstrates how “the mediatorial work of Christ” was “formed in the eternal councils of the Godhead before the world was.” He explains how the immediate ground of a sinner’s justification is “the imputed righteousness of Christ” and exalts the pre-eminence of Christ’s righteousness.

Although it is a lengthy doctrinal book, it is stimulating and easy to read and would be an outstanding book for pastors, ministers, seminarians, or those who desire a complete discussion on this topic. I highly recommend it for anyone, especially considering the conflict that is appearing in the Reformed churches today.

A selected quote:

Accordingly, we find that, in Scripture, the punishment of sin, which is the penalty of the Law—and the pardon of sin, which is the privilege of the Gospel—are brought together and harmonized in a propitiation, in which justice and mercy are equally displayed. (p. 310)<sup>2</sup>

***Justification Vindicated***, by **Robert Traill**. The Banner of Truth Trust, 2002. Pp. 77. ISBN, 0 85151 818 4

Robert Traill (1632-1716) was born in Elie, the son of a Scottish Covenanter minister. A Presbyterian pastor following in the steps of his father of the same name, he was persecuted and exiled to Bass Rock during the “Killing Times.”

Originally written under the title *A Vindication of the Protestant Doctrine Concerning Justification from the Unjust* *The WRS Journal 13:1, February 2006*

*Charge of Antinomianism*, this book was subsequently republished under the current title *Justification Vindicated*. Traill presents a brief but excellent defense of the orthodox doctrine of justification, largely to combat the assailing Antinomians of the day. Antinomianism is a false teaching that practices liberation from the law of God which results in using free grace as a license for sin, and is denounced by the Apostle Paul in Rom 6:1-2. Traill manifests a powerful defense against the erroneous teaching and a masterful apology for the doctrine of justification. Demonstrating an aggressive approach toward the doctrine, Traill repudiates the heretics of his day and extols the gospel of God’s free grace. This is a wonderful book that the reader will find profitable and inspiring.

It was the justifying grace of God that provoked the Antinomian controversy. Traill provides an understandable account of the difference between sanctification and justification and teaches us how the imputed righteousness of Christ is the only merit of our justification.

Traill’s account of the doctrine of justification is worthwhile to those who desire to read a condensed work on this subject. Benefited by its instruction on the doctrine, the reader will learn how the law of God is the perfect rule of life for the Christian. It is a classic book on the subject and is respected for its clarity and accuracy.

A good quote:

But when they draw near to the awful tribunal, what else is in their eye and heart but only free grace, ransoming blood, and a well ordered covenant in

Christ the Surety? They cannot bear to hear any make mention to them of their holiness, their own grace and attainments. (p. 32)

***Faith & Justification***, by **Theodore Beza** (1519-1605). Taken from chapter four (sections 1-13) of the French Theologian's book, *The Christian Faith*, translated into English by James Clark. Focus Christian Ministries Trust, East Essex England, 1992. The electronic edition scanned and edited by Shane Rosenthal for Modern Reformation Online. Original pagination retained. The title was created for the online edition, and is not found in the original.<sup>3</sup>

This short treatise was popular during the Reformation. The article explains how the Holy Spirit "makes us partakers of Jesus Christ by faith alone." It presents a short but precise account of the role of faith in our justification. Faith is the "sole instrument by which we take hold of Jesus Christ when he is offered to us, the sole vessel to receive him (John 3:1-13; 33-36)." It is a wonderful essay on the subject, and includes innumerable Scripture references.<sup>4</sup>

***Justification: Forensic or Moral?*** by **Francis Turretin** (1623-1687). This article has been extracted from Turretin's *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae* (Question 16).

This is an outstanding article on the forensic nature of justification. The Genevan Reformer describes the forensic meaning and demonstrates why the Bible does not constitute a moral sense of justification as the Romanists advocate. A forensic understanding would include a judicial process with laws, "accused persons who are guilty, Rom 3:19"; "a hand-

writing contrary to us, Col 2:14"; "of divine justice demanding punishment, Rom 3:24, 26"; "of an advocate pleading the cause, 1 John 2:1"; "of satisfaction and imputed righteousness, Rom 4 and 5"; "of a throne of grace before which we are absolved, Heb 4:16"; "of a Judge pronouncing sentence, Rom 3:20, and absolving sinners, Rom 4:5." The Papists employ the term improperly by denoting a moral meaning and infusing righteousness to the sinner. Turretin repudiates their false teaching and sets forth the proper Scriptural interpretation.

A worthy article and outstanding polemic against infused righteousness, I recommend this respected work on this subject.<sup>5</sup> 📖

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.graceonlinelibrary.org/articles/full.asp?id=13|17|376>

<sup>2</sup> The entire book is now available online: <http://www.gracecarlisle.org.uk/books/Buchanan/6.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> This information is taken from <http://www.modernreformation.org/tbfaith.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> You can find this distinguished article on the web: <http://www.modernreformation.org/tbfaith.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> You can find this excellent article on the web: [http://reformedperspectives.org/newfiles/fra\\_turretin/TH.Turretin.justification.html](http://reformedperspectives.org/newfiles/fra_turretin/TH.Turretin.justification.html).

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## ***MORE BOOKS***

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**The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros and Cons: Debating the Federal Vision**, ed. by E. Calvin Beisner. Fort Lauderdale, Florida: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004. Pp. 331. Reviewed by John A. Battle.

Concerned about the developing controversy surrounding the Federal Vision in conservative Reformed churches, E. Calvin Beisner and other members of the faculty of Knox Theological Seminary organized a three-day colloquium retreat in Fort Lauderdale. This meeting was held in August 2003, and was paid for by an anonymous Christian businessman desiring to see the controversy clarified and possibly settled. Invited participants to the colloquium included seven men who support the Federal Vision (John Barach, Peter J. Leithart, Rich Lusk, Steve M. Schlissel, Tom Trouwborst, Steve Wilkins, and Doug Wilson) and seven men who criticize it (Christopher A. Hutchinson, George W. Knight III, Richard D. Phillips, Joseph A. Pipa, Jr., Carl D. Robbins, Morton H. Smith, and R. Fowler White). Professor Beisner moderated the meeting. For this meeting each participant was to prepare a position paper, to be discussed by the whole group. Each participant was also assigned to reply to one of the other papers. This book is the collection of these papers.

Twenty-two chapters of the book are divided into four parts: (1) Overviews (giving the broad outline of the Federal Vision [FV] and the major concerns against it), (2) Paradigms and Perspectives (discussing the overall hermeneutic employed by the FV, particularly its view of scrip-

tural interpretation, and the linking of the doctrine of the Trinity to our understanding of covenant relations), (3) The Federal Vision and the Doctrine of Salvation (the longest section, dealing with the FV views of covenant, salvation, the covenant of works, regeneration, and apostasy), and (4) The Federal Vision and the Sacraments (dealing with the FV view of baptism and the Lord's Supper). Dr. Beisner provides a final chapter, summarizing the controversy.

While it is impossible in this brief review to interact with all the subjects discussed, I believe it is important to point out the sympathy of the FV men for postmodernism.<sup>1</sup> This tendency is shown strongly in the first Part of the book. The FV writers prefer the idea of "drama" or "story" to propositional revelation. Schlissel objects to our "forcing saving faith into the mold of mere assent rather than . . . as a holistic, living response to the Word and will of God." He objects to "seeing Scripture as a repository of truth claims and propositions rather than as a story" (p. 22). "Reason," he says, "requires a proposition as its object whereas Faith requires a history and/or a Person as its object." He mistakenly says that, "When God called Abram, it was not by a proposition, but by a promise" (p. 24). Of course, a promise *is* a proposition. This leads Schlissel to identify faith as the same as obedience: "To submit to God's Word is what it means to believe. *To believe is to obey*" (p. 26, emphasis his).

Leithart's chapter on interpretation likewise reveals a different approach to the Bible than that taken traditionally by

Reformed writers. He speaks disparagingly of “treating realities of God as mere propositions,” maintaining that “abstraction, especially Enlightenment abstraction, is the great bogey-man of the Auburn Avenue speakers.” He says that Reformed theology has compromised in many respects with the Enlightenment and that we must “continue the process of purgation” (p. 65). This is done by emphasizing the personal side of God and of the Bible. In his view the members of the Trinity are in covenant relation to each other, and by creating man God has created him in relation to himself. Since man is both spiritual and material, his body and outward actions are not to be separated from his “inner man.” This is seen to have profound implications for our views on church membership and the sacraments. It is not surprising that Leithart approvingly quotes the Roman Catholic Karl Rahner’s famous thesis, “The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity” (p. 59), and considers the only modern evangelical writer who appreciates his approach to be the postmodernist Stanley Grenz (p. 66).

This postmodern approach to Scripture is echoed later in the book by Rich Lusk. Lusk denies the theological covenant of works, and says, “The Bible came to be treated as a collection of propositions rather than an unfolding drama. No where (sic) is this seen more clearly than in the creation of the covenant of works doctrine” (p. 119). Supposedly, in his view, if you understand the Bible as being made up of true propositions, you will support a covenant of works; but if you take it as a “drama,” you won’t. Personally, I’d much rather take the sentences of the Bible as expressing true propositions,

than try to have to derive my theology from some “drama” or series of events. Biblical narratives are composed of “propositions” too. Without propositions “drama” carries no revelatory power.

There are many areas of doctrine held by the FV that are exposed and explored in the course of these chapters. It is apparent that some of the FV emphases tend to correct some abuses in Reformed churches. Often we see de-emphasis on the visible church and the importance and value of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Often Reformed people have not appreciated the privileges of the Abrahamic and new covenants, and their application to our children. Tom Trouwborst rightly criticizes the horrific sentiment of Thornwell, “But, until they [our baptized covenant children] come to Him, . . . they are to be dealt with as the Church deals with all the enemies of God” (p. 198). In that sense, the FV controversy can help Reformed churches educate and rear our children as they are, children belonging to the Lord and beloved by him. However, the price is too high when they make baptism convey the same blessings to all, the elect and the non-elect.

Clearer definitions are needed. The Abrahamic and new covenants deal with the visible church and the invisible church in different respects. They are derived from the overarching covenant of redemption (covenant of grace), in which Jesus is designated as the Savior of the elect, not of the reprobate. We need to distinguish sharply the visible and the invisible church. While there is great overlap, they are by no means identical.

The overall tone of this book (with a few exceptions, as the interchange be-

tween Phillips and Schlissel, ch. 7-8) is irenic and constructive. Written early in these controversies, it seems hopeful that the writers can come to some clarification and agreement. However, the two positions staked out are not reconciled that easily. As this controversy has continued after the colloquium was held, these men have more and more interacted with each other. It appears that the FV men have hardened in their position against the traditional position of the Reformed churches. In personal correspondence the book's editor expressed this to me:

Thank you for your comment about *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros & Cons*. I would mention that if I were to rewrite the conclusion in light of the continued correspondence with the Federal Visionists, it would be considerably more negative, on more points, than the conclusion there was. Many things became better clarified in succeeding months through literally thousands of e-mails back and forth among the fifteen participants in our colloquium. But at least the book helped get some things out on the table, and now it is up to the teachers in the churches to carry through the controversy and earnestly contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints.<sup>2</sup>

This book provides an excellent introduction to the Federal Vision controversy, as it expresses the main features of the conflict in the proponents' own words. Even though more has subsequently been written on both sides, I recommend this book highly as an excellent introduction and resource. 📖

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the *WRS Journal* 6:2 (August  
*The WRS Journal* 13:1, February 2006

1999); the entire issue is devoted to the criticism of postmodernism in evangelical theology.

<sup>2</sup> E. Calvin Beisner, email letter to John Battle, Nov. 29, 2005.

***The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism***, by Norman Shepherd. Grand Rapids: P & R Publishing, 2000. Reviewed by Christopher Lensch.

#### *Background*

At the end of the twentieth century Professor Norman Shepherd was at the center of debate in conservative Presbyterian circles regarding his teaching of God's covenant. Building on contemporary advances of understanding of ancient covenant-making, Dr. Shepherd developed his doctrine of the divine covenant that emphasized the bi-lateral roles of both God and man within the covenant relationship. At issue in the debate was man's "covenant obligations" to God and the question of what function man's faith and obedience served in the covenant relation to God.

This question impinged on the great Reformation doctrine of justification. Since it appeared that Dr. Shepherd was not fully satisfied with the Westminster Confession's statement on justification, and when some of his colleagues objected to how he framed his statement of justification, Norman Shepherd changed jobs and ecclesiastical affiliation.

This short book is the transcription of two separate public addresses given by Dr. Shepherd. The first section, pre-

sented in 1999, summarizes the author's teaching regarding man's relation to God through divine covenant. The second section represents his earlier thought that develops a covenantal approach to evangelism; it was presented in 1975 and published the next year within a collection of essays out of Westminster Theological Seminary.

### *Strengths*

The essence of God's covenant with man is captured in God's own statement, "I shall be your God, you will be my people, and I shall dwell in your midst." Expressions of the covenant, often in technical formulas or covenant language, run the entire length of the Scriptures. An understanding of the biblical framework of the covenant is highly relevant because of its ultimate expression in the new covenant.

Norman Shepherd has put a lot of thought into the importance and relevance of covenant theology. All covenants in sacred history always have two sides that reflect God's promises (and threats) on the one hand, and man's obligations on the other. In his first section Dr. Shepherd develops the interrelation of both parties through the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and New covenants. A key strength is his insistence on seeing God's grace in each one of these covenants, not only in giving promises but also in his enabling his people to fulfill their obligations. Even the Mosaic covenant, accurately described as a conditional covenant,<sup>1</sup> has many gracious elements, like (1) the promised fulfillment of God dwelling in the midst of his people in the form of the Shekinah, (2) the assurance of for-

givenness, and (3) the wisdom of God's law that called his people to holiness.

A valuable insight from the second section is the connection Shepherd makes between Jesus' Great Commission and the Abrahamic covenant. The parallels are subtle but real.<sup>2</sup>

Also, in the first and most recently developed section, the author reaffirms that the promised blessings of the covenant are not by works of obedience. Rather they "point to sovereign grace" as stated in Rom 4:16 and Eph 2:8-9 (p. 45).

### *Weaknesses*

Norman Shepherd addresses the implications of a covenant framework of life. One ultimate issue of relevance is the age-old question of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. In this matter Shepherd does not qualify his construct nor use the language of the classical Reformed statements.<sup>3</sup> While he believes in God's unconditional power of predestination, in terms of the life of the church and the gospel, he wants to avoid a focus on the eternal decrees of God. He uses the words "mystery" and "incomprehensible" in this connection, saying that man cannot delve into God's purposes.<sup>4</sup> What we can see in the church, according to Shepherd, is a person's faithfulness in living out one's covenant obligations. Herein is the shift from a classical perspective to one that puts the focus on man and his obligations in the covenant.

Shepherd rightly insists that "the blessings of the new covenant are pure grace" (p. 50). However, his new emphasis on the Christian's necessary faithful-

ness flowing from faith, an emphasis that he believes has been neglected in Reformed circles, has helped launch a wing of modern Reformed churches into uncharted waters. In trying to balance the poles of God's bi-lateral covenant, Dr. Shepherd has tilted toward an anthropocentric ecclesiology. Disciples who hold to an "objective view" of justification that promises salvation at baptism<sup>5</sup> have moved toward a mechanical soteriology that also can be described as more anthropocentric.

### Conclusion

*The Call of Grace* is the revised publication of two messages that originally were produced for public audiences. For this reason Dr. Shepherd's position on the covenant is presented here on a more popular level. It does not claim to be an exhaustive treatment of his position, and the popular approach may explain why there are occasional, unsubstantiated generalizations.

Other Reformed leaders<sup>6</sup> have raised serious concerns about Dr. Shepherd's theology. What is not said in this book in terms of Shepherd's divergence from the Reformed creeds may be as great a concern. 

<sup>1</sup> In historic terms the Mosaic covenant is recognized as a "suzerain-vassal treaty" because of all its conditional statements, as opposed to the unconditional "royal grant" type of treaty given to Abraham.

<sup>2</sup> Consider how these Abrahamic elements are found in the Great Commission: Abraham was the father of many nations, (Gen 17:4); he would inherit the land/earth (17:8), called the "world" in

the Great Commission; all peoples of the earth would be blessed in Abraham (Gen 12:3; 17:18); God's blessings would come upon Abraham's descendants primarily through godly instruction through their generations (Gen 18:19), an element that sounds much like "teaching them to observe all things..."; and finally, both the Abrahamic covenant and the Great Commission command a covenant rite of initiation. Another argument for Abrahamic-New Covenant parallels that Shepherd does not mention is the symmetric structure wherein Matthew opens his gospel with Abraham and closes it with the Great Commission parallels to the Abrahamic covenant.

<sup>3</sup> Note the WCF 3:5, 6, 8; 9:4, and Jonathan Edwards' *Freedom of the Will*. Also, Shepherd appears to avoid reference to the classic construction of the covenants of works and of grace.

<sup>4</sup> The author devotes two chapters (6, 7) to what he perceives are difficulties for Calvinists in evangelism because of their interest in the invisible work of God in election and regeneration. Here is a fuller statement: "From the perspective of the covenant, there is mystery because we are creatures and God is the Creator. We cannot know God exhaustively. God remains incomprehensible. We can never know God's decree as he knows it, and for that reason we cannot begin to reflect on his salvation from the perspective of the decree, even though our salvation originates in the predestinating love and purpose of God. To look at covenant from the perspective of election is ultimately to yield to the primal temptation to be as God. The proper stance for Adam and all of us after him is a covenantal stance of faithful obedience. Only from that

perspective can election be understood as grace. Therefore, although from the perspective of covenant there is mystery, there is no dilemma and no paradox or contradiction" (p. 83).

<sup>5</sup> At least in this book (pp. 101-103) Shepherd does not appear to go as far as some of his disciples or those of the "Federal Vision" movement who tie the justification of the sinner with public baptism.

<sup>6</sup> See *The Current Justification Controversy* by O. Palmer Robertson. There are numerous reviews of *The Call of Grace* on the internet. Three include <http://www.paulperspective.com/docs/beisner2.pdf>, [http://www.grebeweb.com/linden/shepherd\\_review%20venema.html](http://www.grebeweb.com/linden/shepherd_review%20venema.html), and <http://www.trinityrcus.com/Articles/reportshepherd1.htm#call>.

*Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith*, by Francis Watson. London and New York: T & T Clark, 2004. Pp. 584. Reviewed by Dennis W. Jowers.

This major work is a comparative study of the OT Scriptures most central to Pauline theology, of Paul's interpretation of them, and of the rival interpretations proposed by non-Christian Jews of late antiquity. One of its overriding aims, albeit by no means its only aim, is to overcome the tendency of present-day NT scholars to conform Paul's theology as much as possible to that of his fellow first-century Jews. While Watson recognizes that Paul is no crypto-pagan who adopts a basically Gentile worldview over against his former co-religionists, he also considers the minimization of differences between Pauline and non-Christian Jewish

soteriologies characteristic of the so-called "new perspective on Paul" as unhelpful at best and, at worst, profoundly misleading.

Watson divides his work into four main parts, which he entitles, respectively, "Antithesis," "Promise," "The Wilderness," and "Last Words." He opens the first part, "Antithesis" with a chapter on Paul's interpretation of OT Scripture in Rom 3:21-4:25 in which he attempts "to substantiate the claim that Paul's doctrine of righteousness by faith is an exercise in scriptural interpretation and hermeneutics" (p. 76): that, in other words, Paul derives his doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone largely, if not exclusively, from his reading of the OT. Naturally, such a hypothesis might seem to underestimate the role played in Paul's ministry by the more direct revelation to which he refers in Gal 1:11-12: "I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ." Nevertheless, Watson's understanding of Paul's theology of the fruit of OT exegesis contrasts refreshingly with the more common view that Paul simply imposes an ideology derived from without on OT prooftexts. Watson completes his section on "Antithesis" with a chapter on the interpretation of the minor prophets, and especially Habakkuk 2:4, in the Qumran community, and an additional chapter in which he offers his own interpretation of Habakkuk 2:4.

In the following section, "Promise," Watson devotes two chapters, entitled simply "Genesis (1)" and "Genesis (2)" to the Abraham narrative in Genesis. Here Watson, as before, begins by surveying

Paul's approach to the patriarch. Paul, he argues, recognizes a dialectic in Genesis between Abraham the observer of God's commands and Abraham the recipient of promises, and chooses to unfold the blessedness of Abraham exclusively from the latter motif. In Watson's view, moreover, Paul crafts a "theocentric" (pp. 183, 218, 220) interpretation of Abraham's life story, in which Abraham is sustained and blessed by an all-powerful deity over against the dominant anthropocentric paradigm, according to which Abraham the righteous earns divine favour for himself and his descendants. After surveying this Pauline "*counter-reading*" (p. 219, Watson's italics), Watson turns to more anthropocentric interpreters of Scripture such as the author of Jubilees, the author of the Genesis Apocryphon, Philo, Josephus, and Eupolemus, whose accounts of Abraham's life he characterizes as "eulogizing and hagiography" (p. 268). Paul and his Jewish contemporaries, as Watson presents them, hold almost diametrically opposed views about Abraham's fundamental relationship towards God.

The third and longest section of Watson's book, "The Wilderness," concerns Pauline and late antique Jewish interpretations of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. In this section's first chapter, entitled simply "Exodus," Watson focuses on the Moses/Christ, letter/spirit antithesis of 2 Cor 3 and its possible roots in the text of Exodus itself. The character of the Old Covenant as a ministry of death he traces to the slaughter of the Golden Calf's worshippers after Moses' first, abortive deliverance of the tables of the law to the people. Watson relates the peculiar significance Paul attaches to Moses' veiling himself when conversing with the

people, likewise, to an oddity in the scriptural account of the veiling of Moses' face. In Exod 34:29–35 it is not entirely clear (a) that Moses' face is actually veiled when he initially recounts the law to Aaron and the elders; and (b) that Moses dons the veil during the time when, having emerged from the tent with a revelation, he instructs the people in the commands of the Lord. The actual purpose of the veil, Watson claims, was to conceal the disappearance of the glory that illumined Moses' face immediately after he received a revelation. Since, in Watson's view, Paul metaphorically identifies Moses himself with the law, Watson concludes that the veil signifies the deceptive appearance of grandeur exuded by the letter that kills.

This interpretation seems quite dubious. Watson does, nonetheless, successfully disassociate Paul's construal of Exod 34 in 2 Cor 3 from Philo's interpretation, which allegorical interpretation claims to lead to deeper and more important truths than the literal method. He also interprets 2 Cor 3 itself in a way strikingly reminiscent of Augustine's *On the Spirit and the Letter*. Whereas the letter that kills is the law that demands of human beings what they cannot and do not wish to do, the Spirit endows human beings with the desire and the ability to obey God's commandments.

In the second chapter of "The Wilderness," which is devoted to Leviticus, Watson argues that, although Paul does not interpret Lev 18:5 in a "perfectionist" fashion (p. 326), he does regard its offer of life to law-abiding persons inaccessible to human beings as they are. Likewise, Watson maintains, Paul in Rom 10:5–9 employs the contrast between this text and certain Deuteronomic passages to

unveil the presence of an alternative soteriology of grace within the Pentateuch. After contrasting Paul's interpretation of Leviticus with that of Josephus, then, Watson begins the final chapter of "The Wilderness," devoted to Numbers. This chapter constitutes a sustained argument, based on Rom 7 and 1 Cor 10, for the following thesis: "For Paul, the Book of Numbers shows how, in the aftermath of the Sinai event, the law represented a sentence of death for virtually all of its original addressees" (p. 355). Unlike the author of the Wisdom of Solomon, whose reflections on Numbers Watson contrasts with those of Paul, the Apostle:

chooses not to conceal the fact that the gift bestowed at Sinai led immediately to catastrophe, but rather to highlight it and to find paradigmatic significance in it. The catastrophe is the subversion of the law's conditional promise that 'the one who does these things will live by them,' an offer that was immediately overtaken by the reality of sin and death. (p. 411)

"Against this dark background," Watson concludes, "the unconditional divine promise to Abraham...stands out all the more brightly" (ibid.).

In the fourth and final segment of the book, "Last Words," Watson devotes two chapters to Deuteronomy. In these chapters, surprisingly, Watson mingles with the soteriological themes that have commanded his attention thus far discussion of ethical and eschatological issues raised by the use of certain Deuteronomic texts by Paul and the authors of 4 Ezra and Baruch. In the conclusion to the work Watson reasserts what we consider the

central thesis of the entire book, a thesis that, in our view, contains significant moments of truth. "It can be simply stated," Watson writes:

that Paul's controversy with "Judaism" (Christian or otherwise) is in fact a conflict about the interpretation of the Torah; that the disputing parties agree that the Torah, correctly understood, is soteriologically normative; and that the question at issue is whether interpretative priority is to be given to a particular mode of divine agency (the making of an unconditional promise) or of human agency (the observance of the commandments). (p. 528)

Although his book is flawed, especially in its overemphasis on the exegetical origins of Paul's theology, Watson succeeds brilliantly in underscoring two truths: (a) that Paul's exegesis of the OT is not arbitrary, but methodical and faithful; and (b) that Paul does approach the scriptural text with a profoundly theocentric hermeneutic: a hermeneutic that, in our view, Christians would do well to apply in their own interpretation of Scripture and in everyday reflection on the world and their lives. 📖

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## ***LETTER TO THE EDITOR***

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Dear Editor,

Thank you for the festschrift dedicated to Rev. Robert Anderson in your last issue. Seeing it prompted thoughts in my own mind that I wanted to share with the readers of the *WRS Journal*.

As Pastor Anderson's youth and music minister for several years, I had the opportunity to see him in action on many different fronts: Sunday services, camps and retreats, Presbytery and Synod meetings, informal fellowship times, and private conversations and times of counsel. The memories flood in—his treats for my children in his pocket; our incessant punning competitions that drove everyone around us berserk; his knack for finding “treasures” on his daily walks; the glued down quarter on the cabin step at camp; fierce competition on the Sindings' paddleball court; flannel shirts and awesome grilling; mashing potatoes at camp; Chelsea's baptism; constant fatherly care demonstrated toward me and my family; leadership in assisting the church plant

in St. Helens; thoughtful, cautious insights on the floor of presbytery; graciousness under the fires of adversity and opposition; profound simplicity and conviction in preaching; gentle humility and meekness clothing inner steel.

When he could rightly claim the position of statesman within our circles, he never puts himself forward in an unseemly manner. It is this characteristic of gracious humility that marks the man, and that was the very first impression that I ever had of him, years ago. It was my first Synod, prior to my licensure and theological training, held in Knoxville that year. The activities were a whirlwind to someone unfamiliar with what was going on. The one person and impression that stood out to me was Pastor Anderson. When I heard him preach, I said to myself, “I want to sit under that man's ministry.” Thankfully, the Lord granted that prayer, and I will never be the same because of it.

*Rev. Leonard Pine*

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### ***Thoughts or Comments on this issue of the WRS Journal?***

By all means feel free to submit letters to our editor! Letters should be limited to 300 words, and either typewritten or sent electronically. See our contact information on the inside front cover.

*Thank you!*

# ***NOTES***

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