

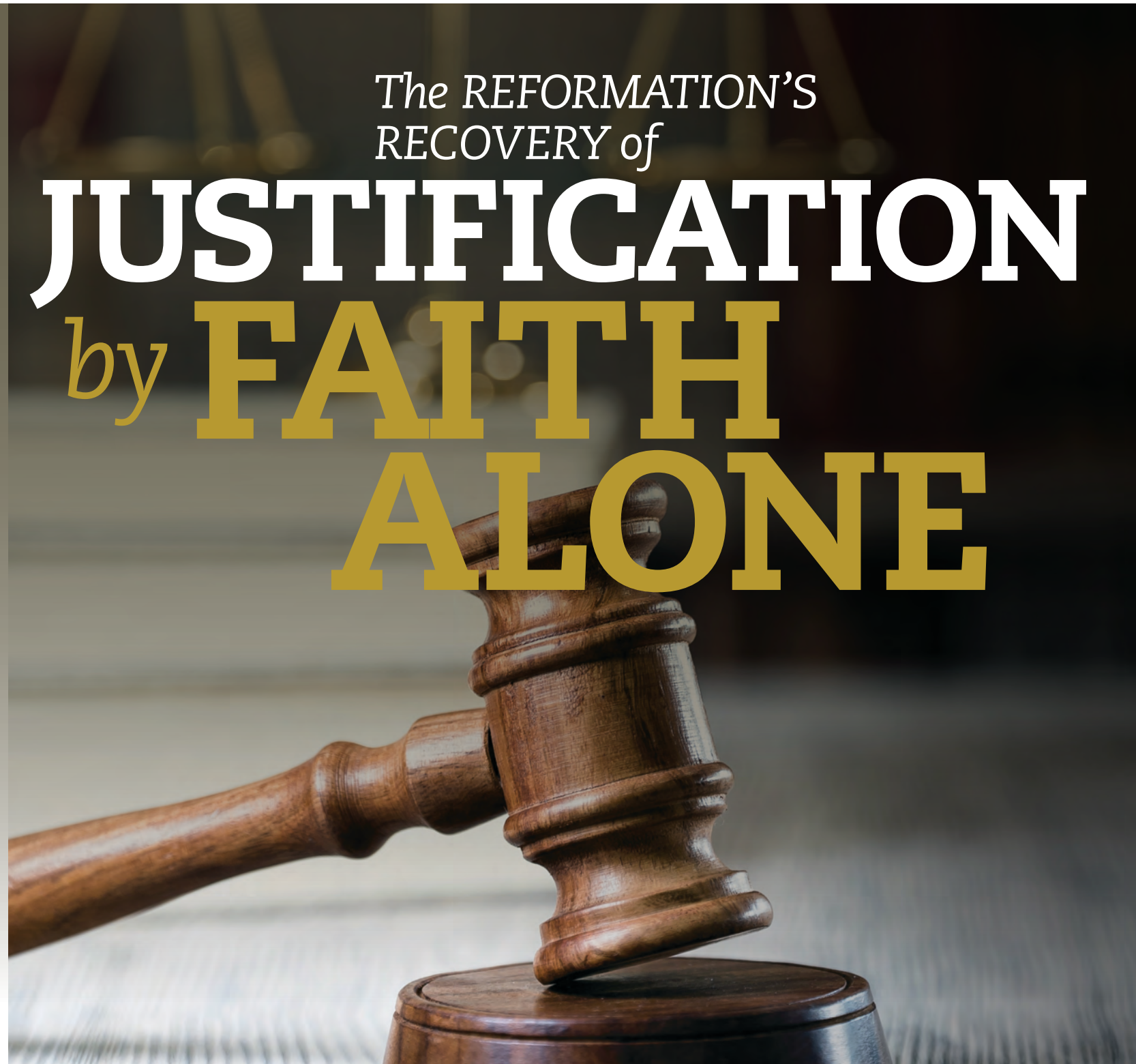
# The Standard Bearer

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*The REFORMATION'S  
RECOVERY of*

# JUSTIFICATION *by* FAITH ALONE



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## Meditation

Heinrich Bullinger, an excerpt from *The Decades of Henry Bullinger, Vol. 1*, ed. Thomas Harding, Reformation Heritage Books, 2004 (pages 112-21). Used by permission from Reformation Heritage Books

# That the faithful are justified by faith without the law and works

We have in these [manifold Bible quotes on justification that preceded this section] a most ample testimony of the whole sacred Scriptures. By these I have evidently enough declared, that God hath appointed, that whosoever doth believe in Christ, being cleansed from his sins, shall be made heir of life everlasting.

This will I make more evident yet, by declaring how that faith alone, that is, that faith for itself, and not for any works of ours, doth justify the faithful. For itself I say, not in respect that it is in us a quality of the mind, or our own work in ourselves; but in respect that faith is the gift of God's grace, having in it a promise of righteousness and life; and in respect that, naturally, of itself, it is a certain and undoubted persuasion resting upon God, and believing that God, being pacified by Christ, hath through Christ bestowed life and all good things on us. Therefore faith for Christ, and by the grace and promise of God, doth justify: and so faith, that is, that which we believe, and wherein our confidence is settled, God, I say, himself by the grace of God doth justify us through our redemption in Christ: so that now our own works or merits have no place left to them at all, I mean, in justification: for otherwise good works have their place in the faithful.... For Paul, the teacher of the Gentiles, doth in the way of opposition compare Christ with Adam, and sheweth that of Adam, so of our own nature and strength, we have nothing but sin, the wrath of God, and death. And this doth he shew under the name of Adam, to the intent that no man should seek for righteousness and life in the flesh. And again, on the other side, he declareth that we by Christ have righteousness, the grace of God, life, and the forgiveness of all our sins. In this opposition, he doth earnestly urge and often repeat this word, "of one" [Rom. 5:12, etc.] to no other end verily, but that we should understand, that faith alone doth justify.

To the Galatians he doth very evidently use this kind of argument. "To the last will and testament of a man, if it once be proved, nobody doth add or take any thing away." Reason therefore doth rightly require, that no man put to or take away any thing from the testament

of God. But this is the testament which God confirmed; that his will is, to bestow the blessing upon Abraham's seed, not in many, or by many, but through one. "For he saith not, And to the seeds, as though he spake of many; but as speaking of one he saith, And to thy seed, that is, Christ." [Gal. 3:16] Therefore, it is a detestable thing to augment or diminish any thing in this testament of God. Christ alone is the only Saviour still: men can neither save themselves nor other.

Again, in the same epistle to the Galatians he saith: "We know that man is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ; insomuch as no flesh shall be justified by the works of the law" [Gal. 2:16]. This is now the third time that Paul saith, that men are not justified by the works of the law: in the which clause he comprehendeth all manner of works of what sort soever. So then, no kind of works do justify. But what is it then that justifieth? Faith in Christ, and that verily alone. For what else can those words import, "We know that man is not justified but by faith in Christ"? For the force of these two speeches is all one, "Faith alone doth justify"; and, "It is certain that we are not justified but by faith in Jesus Christ." He addeth the example of the apostles: "And we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by faith in Jesus Christ, and not by the works of the law." In like manner also Peter argueth by an example in the Acts of the Apostles, and saith: "We believe that through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they." [Acts 15]

Moreover, in the very same chapter to the Galatians he saith: "I despise not the grace of God; for if righteousness come of the law, then Christ is dead in vain." For, if we in ourselves had had anything whereby we might be saved, what needed the Son of God to take our flesh, to suffer, and to die? But because the Son of God, being incarnate, did suffer and die, and died not in vain; therefore in our flesh there was nothing that could obtain salvation for mankind. Wherefore the only Son of God is our Saviour for ever, and by true faith maketh us partakers of his salvation.

Paul in the very beginning of his epistle to the Romans doth prove that all men are sinners; that in men there remaineth no strength for them to be saved by; and that the law of God itself doth dig up the knowledge of offenses that is, doth apply them, bring them to light, and make them manifest, but doth not take them away, blot them out, or utterly extinguish them; and that therefore God, for his own goodness' sake, to the end that the work that he hath made should not altogether perish, doth justify the faithful freely by faith in Jesus Christ. I will rehearse a few of the apostle's own words. "The righteousness of God," saith he, "is declared without the law, being witnessed notwithstanding by the law and the prophets; the righteousness of God, I say, cometh by faith in Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe. For there is no difference: for all have sinned, and have need of the glory of God, but are 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." [Rom. 3:21-25] These words of the apostle, I suppose, are most manifest to them that believe. He plucketh justification from our own merits and strength, and attributeth it to grace, whereby the Son of God is given to the world unto the punishment of the cross, that all they that believe that they are redeemed by the blood of the Son of God may be justified. Again the apostle immediately after addeth: "Therefore we hold, that man is justified by faith without the works of the law." Upon the neck of this again he argueth thus: "Is he the God of the Jews only? Is he not also of the Gentiles? Yes, even of the Gentiles also. For it is one God that shall justify circumcision by faith, and uncircumcision through faith." [Acts 5:28-30] To be God, is nothing else but to be life and salvation. But God is the God of the Gentiles also, and not of the Jews alone: therefore God is the life and salvation of the Gentiles. This life and salvation he doth communicate to us, not by the law or through circumcision, but by faith in Christ; therefore faith alone doth justify. This may be proved by the example of Cornelius the centurion, who, as soon as St. Peter had preached unto him, and he once believed, was by and by justified, when as yet he had not received circumcision, or the law; when as yet he had not sacrificed, nor merited righteousness by any work that he did: for he was freely justified in faith through Jesus Christ. For Peter

concluded his sermon to him in these words: "To this Christ do all the prophets give witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins." [Acts 10:43]

After all this, the apostle Paul bringeth forth that notable and singular example of our father Abraham, teaching by what means our father Abraham was justified. For, this being once truly declared, it cannot choose but be plain and manifest to every one, by what means God's will is to justify all men: for the sons cannot be justified any other way than the father before them was justified. Abraham therefore was not justified by circumcision, or receiving of the sacrament; for it is said that he was justified before he was circumcised. Afterward was added the signs of circumcision, as "the seal of the righteousness of faith," that is, the sign or sealing that all the seed of Abraham is justified by faith. [Rom. 4:10-12] The same our father Abraham was not justified by the law: for the law was four hundred

and thirty years [Gal. 3:17] added to the promise, not to take away sin or to work justification, but to make sin appear, and to make us altogether empty; and, when we are once made empty, to send, and as it were compel us to fly, to Christ. Again, Abraham was not justified by his works: and yet, in that

**He plucketh justification from our own merits and strength, and attributeth it to grace, whereby the Son of God is given to the world unto the punishment of the cross, that all they that believe that they are redeemed by the blood of the Son of God may be justified.**

most excellent patriarch are found to be good works; yea, and those too good works of true faith, which are both notable and many in number, such and so many as you shall scarcely find in any other. Nevertheless yet the apostle saith: "What shall we say then that Abraham our father as pertaining to the flesh (who, I say, is our father touching the flesh) did merit or find"? ...For, "if Abraham were justified by...works, then hath he to boast; but not before God." For God is only just, and he that only justifieth: all men are corrupt; yea, even Abraham is a sinner, and every man standeth in need of the glory of God. For which cause also the prophet did plainly forbid to boast in any thing, but in the mercy of God. Wherefore Abraham boasted not against God; he acknowledged himself to be a sinner, and that he was to be justified freely, and not for his own merits' sake. The apostle goeth forth and saith: "For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed in God, and it was reckoned unto him for righteousness." Two things are here affirmed: first, that Abraham believed in God; secondly, that that was imputed to him for righteousness. By this



it followeth, that Abraham was justified by faith, and not by works. And that doth the apostle prove after this manner: “To him that by works doth merit righteousness righteousness is not imputed. But to Abraham is righteousness imputed: therefore he merited not righteousness by works.” Again: “To him verily that worketh not, but believeth, his faith is counted for righteousness. But Abraham believed in God; therefore his faith was reckoned for righteousness.” [Rom. 4:1-5]

In the same chapter the same apostle bringeth forth other arguments, altogether as strong as these, to prove that faith justifieth without works. “If they,” saith he, “which are of the law be heirs, then is faith but vain, and the promise made of none effect.” [Rom. 5:14] They are of the law, which seek to be justified by the works of the law. But faith resteth upon the mercy of God. What place then shall grace and the mercy of God have left unto them, if we by works do merit justification? What shall I need to believe, that by the blood of Christ I shall be justified, if God by my works be at one with me again, who for my sins was angry with me? Finally, salvation and righteousness are promised of God. But then the promise endeth, when our own merits begin to come in place. For the apostle to the Galatians saith: “If inheritance be of the law, then is it not now of the promise. But God gave the inheritance to Abraham by promise.” [Gal. 3:18, 22] Therefore that the promise might remain stable, faith justifieth, and not merits.

Again, in the fourth chapter to the Romans he saith: “Therefore by faith is the inheritance given, that it might be by grace, that the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only that is of the law, but to that also that is of the faith of Abraham.” He rehearseth here two causes, for which he attributeth justification to faith, and not to works. The first is, that justification may be of free gift, and that the grace of God may be praised. The latter is, that the promise and salvation may remain stedfast, and that it may come upon the Gentiles also: but it should not be given to the Gentiles, if it were due

only to the law and circumcision, because the Gentiles lack them both. Finally, the hope of our salvation ought to be stedfastly established: but it should never be surely grounded, or safely preserved, if it were attributed to our own works or merits; for in them is always something wanting. But in God and in the merit of the Son of God can nothing be lacking. Therefore our salvation is surely confirmed, not to be doubted of, and assuredly certain, if that we seek for it by faith in the Son of God, who is our righteousness and salvation.

To all these I will yet add another testimony out of St. Paul, which is indeed both most evident and easy to be perceived. In his epistle to the Ephesians he saith: “By grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast himself. For we are the workmanship of God, created in Christ Jesus into good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.” [Eph. 2:8-10]

More than this I will not say, neither will I at large expound the words of Paul. For these testimonies are more clear than the noon-day, and do most evidently testify, that we are justified by faith, and not by any works.

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...Ye have heard, dearly beloved, that true faith is the justification of the church or faithful of God; that it is, I say, the forgiveness of all sins, a receiving into the grace of God, a taking by adoption into the number of the sons of God, an assured and blessed sanctification [*beatificationem*, in the Latin, referring to a state of blessedness, as in Rom. 4:6, 7], and finally, the well-spring of all good works. Let us therefore in true faith pray to God the Father, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that he will vouchsafe to fill our hearts with this true faith; that in this present world, being joined to him in faith, we may serve him as we ought; and, after our departure out of this life, we may for ever live with him in whom we believe. To him be praise and glory for ever. Amen.

## Editor's note

Where were you in 1987? That was the last time the *Standard Bearer* devoted an entire issue—the special Reformation issue—to the doctrine of justification by faith alone. It is high time we do it again, especially since the PRCA has endured a schism in which the doctrine was and is contended.

Having recently commemorated God's grace in the sixteenth-century Reformation, our writers take up

many of the important aspects of this doctrine regarded by the Reformers as the heart of the gospel and the main hinge on which religion turns, a phrase that you will find repeated in this issue. We thank our writers for their fine contributions and pray that you may not only embrace the Reformation doctrine but also enjoy the sweet peace that belongs to everyone who believes it.

*Prof. Brian Huizinga*



## Editorial

Prof. Brian Huizinga, professor of Dogmatics and Old Testament in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary and member of Grandville, MI PRC

# With one voice: The Reformers on justification

## Introduction

At the forefront of the recovery of biblical doctrine in the Reformation of the sixteenth century was the doctrine of justification. In fierce opposition to the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification by faith and works, with all of its accompanying practices, such as the buying and selling of indulgences and the doing of penance, the Reformation restored and advanced the gospel truth of justification by faith alone. What must strike every son and daughter of the Reformation as an extraordinary display of God's faithfulness is the fact that the Reformers spoke with one voice on both the importance and substance of the doctrine of justification. The leading Reformers did not agree on all points of doctrine, and most notable was their sharp division over the doctrine of the Lord's Supper and the interpretation of Jesus' words "This is my body." However, on the doctrine regarded to be of paramount importance as the article of a standing or falling church—justification—there were no significant differences among the leading Reformers. In his classic work on justification, the Scottish preacher James Buchanan goes so far as to say, "The entire unanimity of the Reformers in regard to the substance of the truth which they held and taught, is one of the remarkable facts in history."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, this unity is one of the enduring legacies of the Reformation worth celebrating today by all who love and defend the truth of justification by faith alone.

The main lines of the Reformers' doctrine of justification can be sketched following the three points marked out by church historian and theologian Alister McGrath, who writes, "The distinctive positions of Lutheran and Reformed Orthodoxy on justification are most easily expounded and compared when considered under three headings; the nature of justification; the objective grounds of justification; the subjective appropriation of justification."<sup>2</sup> The Reformers taught that justification is, as to

its *nature*, a legal act of God consisting of the gracious remission of sins and the imputation of the obedience of Christ. The *objective ground* of justification is the lifelong obedience and passion of Jesus Christ. The *instrument* whereby justification is subjectively appropriated is faith.

## Heinrich Bullinger

In this article, our spokesman for the Reformers' doctrine of justification is Heinrich Bullinger. Why Bullinger? First, most readers of the *Standard Bearer* are well acquainted with the writings of the oft-quoted Martin Luther and John Calvin, especially on the doctrine of justification. However, Christ employed a great host of men when He reformed His church in the sixteenth century and it is good for us be acquainted with more of them. Bullinger (1504-1575) was the Swiss Reformer who succeeded Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich.

Secondly, Bullinger is a worthy representative of the Reformers because his teaching was as widespread and influential as any. He was a prolific letter-writer who corresponded with hundreds of people ranging from students to the great ecclesiastical and political leaders of the Reformation all throughout Europe, producing over 12,000 letters—more than Calvin, Luther and Zwingli combined. His 124 books, not counting his thousands of tracts and letters, were initially in greater demand than Calvin's and he became known throughout Europe as the "Shepherd of the churches."<sup>3</sup>

Our presentation of Bullinger's doctrine of justification relies upon his two most famous and influential works. The first source is *The Decades* (1549-1551), which consists of fifty topical sermons divided into five groups of ten sermons each (thus, five "decades"). All fifty sermons together constitute a massive work greater in size than Calvin's *Institutes*. Bullinger's goal was to use *The Decades* to teach theology to the literate among the laity and to provide sermon content for the many

1 James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification: An Outline of Its History in the Church and of Its Exposition from Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 152.

2 Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 231.

3 George Ella, "Henry Bullinger (1504-1575): Shepherd of the Churches," in *The Decades of Henry Bullinger*, ed. Thomas Harding, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004), x-xlix.

unqualified preachers in the early days of the Reformation when seminary training was sorely lacking.<sup>4</sup>

Our second source is the fifteenth chapter of the Second Helvetic Confession of 1562 (hereafter, Confession) entitled “Of the True Justification of the Faithful.”<sup>5</sup> This confession penned by Bullinger is regarded as his most systematic and mature theological statement. It is one of the foremost expressions of Reformed doctrine that was either adopted or at least highly approved by nearly all the Reformed churches in its day.<sup>6</sup>

### Justification—Its nature

Bullinger defines justification as a legal act of God whereby He graciously acquits guilty sinners, imputes to them the righteousness of Christ, and makes them heirs of everlasting life. First, Bullinger considers justification a *legal* or *forensic* act. He writes, “To justify is as much to say as to quit from judgment and from the denounced and uttered sentence of condemnation,”<sup>7</sup> and that justification “is a law term belonging to courts where judgment is exercised.”<sup>8</sup> It is evident that Bullinger was conscious of the Roman Catholic teaching that justification was not a strictly legal act regarding the sinner’s standing before God’s law but also a restorative act whereby God infused righteousness into the sinner and renewed him so that the sinner is justified, at least in part, because of something good within him.

Second, justification consists in *acquittal* or *forgiveness of sin*. Bullinger teaches, “But we are justified—that is, acquitted from sin and death,”<sup>9</sup> and, “It followeth therefore that justification is the remission of sins.”<sup>10</sup>

Third, included in the gracious act of justification is the *imputation of the righteousness of Christ*. Nowhere in his sermon on justification in *The Decades* does Bullinger ever explain the ‘positive’ aspect of justification as the imputation of Christ’s righteousness (what is

given), but only the ‘negative’ aspect, which is the forgiveness of sins (what is taken away). But in the Confession when he took up a consideration of the cross of Christ as the ground for justification, he taught that “it is God alone that justifieth us, and that only for Christ, by not imputing unto us our sins, but imputing Christ’s righteousness unto us.”<sup>11</sup>

Additionally, Bullinger explained that Christ is the believer’s righteousness in justification not only because Christ perfectly satisfied the justice of God by making payment for the sins of His people in His death on the cross but also by fulfilling the whole law with lifelong obedience:

Moreover our Lord fulfilled the law, in that he did most absolutely in all points satisfy the will of God, being himself the holiest of all, in whom there is no spot, no evil concupiscence, nor any sin; in him is the love of God most perfect, and righteousness altogether absolute; which righteousness he doth freely communicate to us that are most unperfect, if we believe and have our hope fast settled in him.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, justification makes one an *heir of everlasting life*. Not only is the sinner freed from condemnation and the punishment of everlasting death, but with righteousness the sinner obtains the right to eternal life with God in heaven. To justify, instructs Bullinger, “signifieth...to give inheritance of life everlasting.”<sup>13</sup>

### Justification—Its basis

Regarding the second major component of the Reformation’s doctrine of justification, Bullinger explains that the obedience and suffering of the Son of God, culminating in His death on the cross, is the ground or basis for the sinner’s justification. All that justification is as a legal pronouncement of God the Judge has its basis in the cross, by which Christ paid for the sins God remits and obtained the life God bestows. Bullinger teaches

that Christ before the judgment seat of God, when sentence of condemnation was to be pronounced against us for our offences, took our sins upon his own neck, and purged them by the sacrifice of his death upon the cross, and that God also laid upon Christ our fault and punishment so that Christ alone is the only satisfaction and purging of the faithful.<sup>14</sup>

Bullinger did not fail to see the pastoral comfort of this doctrine over against Rome’s soul-terrifying denial of the cross. Rome taught that those justified in the cross of Christ can still suffer the temporal judgments

4 Joel Beeke, “Henry Bullinger’s Decades,” in *The Decades*, lxxx.

5 Readers may be familiar with this Confession thanks to Prof. R. Cammenga’s ongoing exposition of it in the *Standard Bearer*.

6 Bullinger also wrote a book, not translated into English, called: *The Grace of God that Justifies Us for the Sake of Christ through Faith Alone, without Good Works, while Faith Meanwhile Abounds in Good Works*. That long title earned Bullinger the honor of being the only theologian to have put into the title of a book his entire doctrine of justification, including his rebuttal of Rome’s contention that justification by faith alone undermines sanctification.

7 Bullinger, *The Decades*, I.6, 105.

8 Bullinger, *The Decades*, I.6, 105.

9 Bullinger, “The Second Helvetic Confession” in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 863.

10 Bullinger, *The Decades*, I.6, 106.

11 Bullinger, “Confession” in *Creeds*, 863.

12 Bullinger, *The Decades*, III.8, 249.

13 Bullinger, *The Decades*, I.6, 105.

14 Bullinger, *The Decades*, I.6, 107.



of God as payment for sin and finally must go to purgatory at death and suffer purging fires in the soul as just punishment for sins. For a child of God, the only thing worse than suffering some grievous affliction is a heart vexed by the thought that God is angry and one's suffering is divine retribution for sin. Bullinger instructs, "But those afflictions, howsoever they be patiently suffered of the faithful, do not yet wash sins away, nor make satisfaction for misdeeds." The afflictions God sends to His children never come as punishment for sin but try and purify their faith, which trial by fire "is the end and use of afflictions. And by this means the glory of Christ endureth pure and uncorrupted."<sup>15</sup>

### Justification—Its instrument

Third, the aspect of justification to which Bullinger devotes his lengthiest explanation is the truth that justification is received *by faith alone*. In the Confession, Bullinger begins his treatment of "by faith alone" by teaching, "But because we do receive this justification, not by works, but by faith in the mercy of God and in Christ; therefore, we teach and believe, with the apostle, that sinful man is justified only by faith in Christ, not by the law or by any works."<sup>16</sup> Bullinger is careful to explain that "justification is attributed to faith, chiefly because of Christ, whom it receives, and not because it is a work of ours, for it is a gift of God."<sup>17</sup> Faith is not the one good work we perform to become justified. Faith as the gift of God is an instrument by which the believer receives and embraces the righteousness of Christ.

### The Reformed confessions

We hear the one voice of Bullinger and the other Reformers in our Reformed confessions, and that voice of the confessions is most important because the churches officially judge it to be the voice of Scripture. The churches have judged that what our Reformed confessions say about justification is not merely what a great cloud of uninspired Reformers taught, but what the holy men of old—Moses, David, Habakkuk, Luke, Paul, and more—have said in perfect unison as inspired by the Holy Spirit (with no contradiction in James!).

The Reformed confessions speak with one voice on justification, and they clearly teach the three fundamental elements of the Reformation's doctrine of justification. First, justification, as to its nature, is a legal act consisting of "the remission of sins" (Belgic Confession, Art. 23) and God's gracious work whereby He "imputes

to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ" (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 23). Second, as to its basis in the cross, we confess that "Jesus Christ, imputing to us all His merits and so many holy works which He has done for us and in our stead, is our righteousness" (BC, 22), so that we rely and rest "upon the obedience of Christ crucified alone...." (BC, 23). Third, regarding the appropriation of justification by the instrument of faith, "we justly say with Paul that we are justified by faith alone, or by faith without works" (BC, 22). We confess that we are not "acceptable to God on account of the worthiness of [our] faith" (HC, LD 23) for faith is "only an instrument with which we embrace Christ our righteousness" (BC, 22), "and that I cannot receive and apply the same [Christ's righteousness] to myself any other way than by faith only" (HC, LD 23).

### Significance

What if the Reformers did not agree on the three fundamental questions of the nature, ground, and instrument of justification? Were it even possible, what if they agreed on other points of doctrine and worship but contended with each other on justification? What if only one or two spoke like the prophets and apostles but the rest were entering pulpits, universities, and the countryside heralding another gospel that only *appeared* to be different than Rome's? If the Reformers did not speak with one voice on justification, would there have even been a Reformation? If the Reformers did not agree on the article of a standing or falling church, would there even be a Reformed church? If the Reformers did not agree on the heart of the gospel, would there even be a gospel? Then what about "The Three Forms of Unity" in which Reformed churches confess one doctrine of justification and, in that doctrine, have sweet unity? How could those confessions have been born?

God be thanked and praised for His great work in Christ Jesus to cause so many weak and fallible men like Bullinger to be united on justification at that critical moment of reformation. They were united in their understanding of and commitment to what Scripture says about justification, united in their own experience of its blessedness, united in their abhorrence of Rome's corruption of it, united in their earnest contending for it, united in their resolve to live a holy life according to it, and then, united in their clear, warm, consistent, polemical, and beautiful communication of it in their preaching, lecturing, and writing to the hungry and thirsty souls of guilt-stricken sinners. All for the glory of God and His Christ!

May the God of the Reformation ever give us this one heart and voice!

<sup>15</sup> Bullinger, *The Decades*, I.6, 110.

<sup>16</sup> Bullinger, "Confession" in *Creeds*, 863.

<sup>17</sup> Bullinger, "Confession" in *Creeds*, 863.





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## Righteousness: Inherent, acquired, or imputed?

The Bible teaches that we are justified on the basis of works. But the works on account of which we are justified are not our own works. They are the meritorious works of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. On account of His doing and dying we are justified before God.

But how do sinners appropriate this righteousness? How does Christ's perfect obedience become theirs? How can they be assured of their standing before God now and in the Judgment Day? The answer of the gospel is by faith in Jesus Christ. By faith we are justified—faith alone.

We are justified by faith in Jesus Christ because it is through faith that Christ's righteousness is imputed to us so that it becomes our own. In what has been referred to as the great exchange, God imputes our sins to Christ and imputes Christ's righteousness to us. The critical word is *imputation*. What is not our own—righteousness—God imputes, or reckons, or counts as our own. He does so in such a way that it is as though we had never sinned or made ourselves worthy of punishment. It is as though we had always kept God's law perfectly.

If justification by faith is the “main hinge on which religion turns,” as John Calvin said,<sup>1</sup> the hinge of the hinge is Christ's imputed righteousness. Because we are guilty sinners, our righteousness must be an alien righteousness, that is, the righteousness of another. That other is Jesus Christ. Both Christ's perfect keeping of God's law throughout His life and His suffering the wrath of God in our stead constitute our righteousness. Christ satisfies all the claims of God's justice, both preceptive and penal. His obedience to God's law all His lifetime and His suffering the punishment that we deserved as it climaxed on the cross constitute our righteousness with God. That righteousness is imputed to us through faith.

### A Reformation doctrine

As far as righteousness is concerned there are three options. Either righteousness is *inherent*, possessed by the sinner in himself. Or righteousness is *acquired* in some

way or another; the sinner procures righteousness for himself. Or righteousness is *imputed*, the righteousness of another reckoned to the sinner's account.

At the time of the Reformation, it was the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church that man's righteousness, though in part the righteousness of Christ, is also partly inherent and partly acquired. By virtue of the goodness that remains in fallen man, at the very least the goodness of his will, man's righteousness is inherent—within the grasp of man as he is by nature. It was also Rome's teaching that righteousness is partly acquired. Righteousness could be obtained from the church and the treasury of merit at the church's disposal, especially by the purchase of indulgences.

The Reformers repudiated Rome's teaching concerning righteousness. Not only did they teach that we are justified by faith and by faith alone, apart from works. But they also taught that the righteousness that is ours by faith is the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ. John Calvin is representative: “He is said to be justified in God's sight who is both *reckoned* righteous in God's judgment and has been accepted on account of [God's] righteousness.” A few sentences later, he writes: “Now he is justified who is *reckoned* in the condition not of a sinner, but a righteous man; and for that reason, he stands firm before God's judgment seat while all sinners fall.” And he concludes the section in the *Institutes* by saying: “Therefore, we explain justification simply as the acceptance with which God receives us into his favor as righteous men. And we say that it consists in the remission of sins and the *imputation of Christ's righteousness*.”<sup>2</sup>

This teaching of the Reformation is encapsulated in the Reformed confessions. In the Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 56, which concerns the forgiveness of sins, we are taught that “God, for the sake of Christ's satisfaction, will no more remember my sins, neither my corrupt nature” but “graciously *impute[s]* to me the righteousness of Christ” with the result that “I may never be condemned before the tribunal of God.” The 60<sup>th</sup> Q. asks, “How art

<sup>1</sup> *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill and trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.11.1; 1:726.

<sup>2</sup> *Institutes*, 3.11.2; 1:726-27. In every instance, emphasis is mine. This applies also to the confessional references.

thou righteous before God?” The answer teaches us that God “grants and *imputes* to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ.”

In Chapter 11, the Westminster Confession of Faith treats the truth of justification. In the first paragraph of the chapter, the confession teaches that those whom God effectually calls, “he also freely justifieth: not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by *accounting* and accepting their persons as righteous...by *imputing* the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness, by faith.”

### What is imputation?

The Bible explains the idea of imputation. It does so by example. A few examples will help in understanding what imputation is.

One example is found in Genesis 31:15, where Leah and Rachel say concerning their relationship to their father, “Are we not counted of him strangers? For he hath sold us, and hath quite devoured also our money.” In actual fact, Leah and Rachel were the daughters of their father Laban. But as far as their experience was concerned, they were “counted,” “reckoned,” or “imputed” to be strangers. Such was the callous, unloving way in which he had dealt with them.

A New Testament example is found in the epistle of Paul to Philemon. While Paul was prisoner in Rome, Onesimus, a runaway slave who had fled from his Christian master Philemon, paid the apostle an unexpected visit in prison. Undoubtedly, Philemon had heard Paul’s preaching in Philemon’s household. While visiting Paul, Onesimus was brought to faith: “whom I have begotten in my bonds” (Phile. 10). Over the course of Onesimus’ visits with the apostle, Paul had convinced him that it was his Christian duty to return to his master. Along with him, Paul sent his epistle to Philemon, in the course of which he speaks of Onesimus returning to his rightful master, “not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved...both in the flesh, and in the Lord.” Then the apostle adds: “If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, *put that on mine account*; I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it” (vv. 18, 19). If Onesimus owed Philemon anything, either in property he took or lost work during his absence, impute that to me, Paul says. Even though he was not personally responsible, Paul assumes responsibility by insisting, “put that on mine account.” That is the idea of imputation.

In the Bible, there are three outstanding instances of imputation. First, Adam’s original sin was imputed to all humanity. Second, the sins of God’s elect people were

imputed to Christ. And third, Christ’s perfect righteousness is imputed to all elect believers through faith.

### Scriptural support

Already in the Old Testament, the doctrine of imputation was set forth, both by type and by prophecy. One of the great Old Testament types was the scapegoat on the annual Great Day of Atonement. The high priest spoke all the sins of the people over the scapegoat, figuratively imputing them to him before he was released into the wilderness. Representatively, by imputation, the scapegoat bore the sins of the people. Isaiah 53 is one of the Old Testament prophecies that speaks of the imputation of the saving work of the Servant of the Lord. He will bear *our* griefs, carry *our* sorrows, be wounded for *our* transgressions (vv. 4, 5). In turn, with *His* stripes, we are healed (v. 5), and by His knowledge, He will justify many (v. 11).

However, the main support for the doctrine of imputation comes from a collection of New Testament Scriptures. We cannot in the space limitations of this article offer extensive explanation of these passages. We are only able to point out the main lines of their support for the truth of imputation.

Romans 4:3-5 says, “For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.” Here the apostle Paul is referring to the account in Genesis 15, in which God appears to Abraham and promises him a seed like the stars of the heavens. Verse 6 tells us that Abraham “believed in the Lord; and he [that is, God] counted it to him for righteousness.” Consistently, Paul refers to Genesis 15:6 using the language of imputation: “counted” (v. 3); “reckoned” (v. 4); and “counted” once again (v. 5). Of special significance in Romans 4 is Paul’s contrast between what is earned and what is reckoned. They are polar opposites. If something is imputed, it could not have been earned. And if something is earned, it cannot be reckoned.

In Romans 4:6-8, Paul points to the example of David, as he recounts it in Psalm 32. “Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin.” Twice the apostle speak of imputation: imputing righteousness and not imputing sin. Something was credited to David that he did not deserve: righteousness. In crediting him with righteousness, God did not credit to him his sin.

The apostle teaches the doctrine of imputation in II Corinthians 5:19-21. In verse 19, he writes that in Christ God was reconciling the world unto himself, “not imputing their trespasses unto them.” The implication is: but instead imputing their trespasses to Christ. In verse 21 he goes on to say that He made Christ “to be sin for us...that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.” Again, our sins were imputed to Christ and Christ’s righteousness is imputed to us.

Another imputation passage is Philippians 3:9, “And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.” These words were spoken by Paul in the context of his opposition to those whom he calls “dogs,” “evil workers,” and “the concision” who were putting their “confidence in the flesh” (vv. 2-3). In contrast to his opponents, the apostle was not putting his confidence in “his own righteousness,” but rather in “the righteousness which is of God by faith.” Clearly, his confidence is in the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ.

One of the clearest passages teaching the doctrine of imputation is Romans 5:12-19. In this passage, the apostle contrasts two imputations that rest on two distinct headships. Because he was created by God as the head of the human race, when Adam sinned, his sin was imputed to us all: “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.”<sup>3</sup> Death passed upon all men because all sinned—in Adam. Just so is righteousness imputed to all of whom the second Adam, our Lord Jesus Christ, is the head and representative. “Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous.” The obedience of Jesus Christ, like the disobedience of Adam, is imputed to all of whom He is the head. Who are they of whom He is the head, according to the appointment of God? All of the elect. How is the obedience of the second Adam imputed to them? Through faith and through faith alone.

Neither is the doctrine of imputed righteousness a “legal fiction,” as many have alleged. It is not a legal fiction because there is a real righteousness that is ac-

tually imputed to believers: the righteousness of Christ. That is no legal fiction, but the blessed reality for all those to whom Christ’s righteousness is imputed, so real as to deliver them from death and from hell.

### The fruit of the doctrine of imputation

There is wonderful fruit that results from the doctrine of imputation. This fruit must motivate us never to surrender the doctrine of imputation, though it is under intense assault today. The proponents of the New Perspective on Paul, and their leading spokesman, the Anglican bishop N.T. Wright, jettison the doctrine of imputation as a theological construct that is not taught in Scripture. Those who are involved in the movement known as Evangelicals and Catholics Together (ECT) are also enemies of the doctrine of imputation, in the interests of placating the Roman Catholic Church, which has always been an enemy of this truth. The ECT publication entitled “The Gift of Salvation” makes no mention of imputation. The tactic appears to silence the truth to death. And as always, Arminianism is the avowed enemy of imputation. For if Christ’s death was imputed, the actual imputation of righteousness to all those whose sins were imputed to Him, He could not have died for all men.

The truth of imputation eliminates all pride and boasting in ourselves. We are not saved on account of who we are or what we have done. We are justified and saved on account of the finished work of our Lord Jesus Christ, His perfect righteousness imputed to us by faith alone.

Further, the truth of imputation extols the grace of God—the God who sends Jesus Christ and who imputes the righteousness of Christ to us. In Romans 5:15-18, no less than six times, Scripture refers to Christ’s imputed righteousness as “the gift,” “the free gift,” “the gift of grace,” and “the gift of righteousness.” Whose is this gift and by whom is it given? It is God’s gift, the gift which He has ordained and worked out in Jesus Christ. Because it is God’s free gift, God’s grace deserves to be extolled, now and forever.

And the fruit is joy and hope. We are righteous before God! What greater blessing could there possibly be? What other confidence could we have as we face the future? No saint on his death bed, eternity stretching before him, is going to put his trust in his own imperfect works. But he will die in hope, clinging by faith to the imputed righteousness of Christ. Then, and only then, will he be able to face the last enemy with confidence. Then, and only then, will he confidently face the judgment.

<sup>3</sup> It hardly needs to be said that the contrast between Adam and Christ presupposes that Adam was a real man and that what the opening chapters of Genesis teach about his creation and fall are historically accurate.



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## Justification: Resting upon the obedience of Christ alone

What is the most important question in the whole world? It is the question that tormented Martin Luther until he discovered its answer in Romans 1:17. This question will cast you about upon the waves of dread and doubt unless you have the same answer Luther found. When you embrace it by faith, you enjoy peace and happiness that cannot be taken away. The all-important question is this: *How can I, an unworthy sinner, be reckoned righteous, received into favor, and be accepted by the holy and just God?* Put another way, how can an unholy man or woman draw near and abide in the presence of the Holy One without being utterly consumed? There is one answer to this all-important question: *God justifies His people in Jesus Christ.* He is “the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26). He is the gracious God who “justifieth the ungodly” (Rom. 4:5).

Justification is God’s gracious, judicial verdict, as Judge, in which He declares the elect believer righteous in Christ. Justification is God’s verdict in which He absolves us of the guilt of our sins, acquits us of the punishment our sins deserve, and accounts us righteous in His sight, not with righteousness of our own making, but with the perfect righteousness of Christ Himself, which becomes ours by imputation.<sup>1</sup> This is the great truth that God restored to His church through the Protestant Reformation, the “main hinge,” John Calvin said, “on which religion turns.”<sup>2</sup> Every one of us ought to cherish it. “For unless you first of all grasp what your relationship to God is, and the nature of his judgment concerning you, you have neither a foundation on which to establish your salvation nor one on which to build piety toward God.”<sup>3</sup> Justification is how you and I, unworthy sinners, are accepted by the holy God.

But now, this leads to another equally pressing question: *How can God do that?* How is it possible for the holy God to justify unholy sinners? How can the Judge pronounce the verdict concerning His people, “Not guilty, but righteous!” when His people in ourselves are so plainly guilty and unrighteous? God is just, and perfectly so. Justice and holiness are attributes of His divine being. God cannot justify on a whim. God cannot pronounce a verdict that is contrary to His own divine nature, contradicts His own justice, conflicts with His own holiness, or that nullifies the demands of His law. God is perfectly self-consistent. He is the I AM THAT I AM in all His works and ways. If God is to justify us, He must justify us *justly*. How can this be done? Here is a question of basis. *What is the basis of our justification?* Upon what ground does God’s justifying verdict rest? We must know the basis, so that our souls may rest upon it. For our assurance that we are accepted by God is only as solid, strong, and stable as the ground upon which God’s justifying verdict rests.

The comforting answer to this question is that justification *has a basis*. This basis is more solid, strong, and stable than the firmest rock beneath our feet. One word—or better, one name—is the bedrock upon which God’s justifying verdict rests: *Christ*. If we want to add a second word, then we say *Christ alone!* Jesus Christ, God the Son in our flesh, and His finished work as the Mediator of the covenant, constitute the sole basis upon which the holy God justly justifies His elect people. Specifically, the basis of justification is the *perfect obedience of Jesus Christ for His people*.<sup>4</sup> The *whole Christ* is our righteousness (I Cor. 1:30). The *whole Christ* and His *entire obedience* is the all-sufficient ground for our justification.

To help us see this more clearly, it is worth our while to delve into the theological distinction between Christ’s

1 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 191-192.

2 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1967), 3.11.1, 726.

3 John Calvin, *Institutes*.

4 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 377-378.



passive obedience and active obedience. Of course, this distinction has its shortcomings. Christ's work is one unified whole that cannot be neatly divided into parts.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, this distinction is useful. It helps us wrap our creaturely minds around everything that Christ has done for us. It increases our appreciation for the unique facets of the one lustrous diamond that is the saving work of Christ.

Christ's *passive obedience* refers to His saving work of *suffering* for His people. The passive obedience of Christ is His work of taking upon Himself the heavy burden of all of the guilt, of all of the sins, of all of God's elect people, throughout all ages, and bearing the penalty God's law prescribes for those sins, namely, the curse, and eternal death. Jesus' passive obedience is His enduring of the holy wrath of God in order to deliver us from it. Christ suffered for our sins His whole life long. His sufferings culminated upon the cross, in those three hours of hellish darkness, where the Lamb of God laid down His life as the propitiation for our sins.

The term *passive* can be misleading. It does not mean inactive, but rather emphasizes that Jesus *suffered*.<sup>6</sup> Jesus humbled Himself and assumed our flesh in order to be the sin-bearing, suffering servant of Jehovah. Jesus was very active in His passive obedience. He did not helplessly succumb to sufferings that were thrust upon Him. Jesus voluntarily took the burden of our sins upon Himself. He actively bore the punishment for our sins. By His divine power He sustained His human nature in the bearing of that wrath such that He carried it all away. Thus, the term *passive* stresses not a lack of agency on Christ's part, but stresses the fact that Christ's work was to *suffer* and *die* for His people (Is. 53:11).

Christ's *active obedience* refers to His life of perfect conformity to every demand of God's holy law, such that He lived not only a sinless life, but also rendered unto God a life of flawless love, service, and devotion. Jesus was the perfect sacrifice both in life as well as in death! He saves us as much by His life as by His death. Throughout His life on earth, Jesus fulfilled every jot and tittle of God's law (Matt. 5:18). It was His meat to do His Father's will (John 4:34). Jesus' obedience was not merely outward, but inward, from the heart. He fulfilled not only the letter of the law, but its essence. He loved the Lord His God with all His heart, soul, mind, and

strength. He loved His neighbor as Himself. He performed the "weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith" (Matt. 23:23).

Thus, by His life and death Jesus fulfilled all righteousness (Matt. 3:15). Jesus fulfilled all righteousness as our Substitute, as our representative Head. He is not only our Substitute in His death; He is also our Substitute in His life!<sup>7</sup> He saves both by atoning for our sins and by fulfilling every positive requirement of the holy God in our place. With His blood He blots out our sin-debt; and with His obedient life He pays our love-debt. Christ's suffering and death take away our guilt and punishment; Christ's life of obedience constitutes us righteous and grants us the right to eternal life. Everything that God requires a man to be, Christ was. Everything God requires a man to do, Christ did.

Jesus is the complete Savior! Christ's entire life is as a beautiful tapestry seamlessly woven together with the threads of His passive and active obedience. Together, His passive and active obedience deliver us from every dimension of sin. This is most clearly seen in the culmination of Jesus' saving work, the climax of both His passive and active obedience, the cross of Calvary. Jesus "humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Phil. 2:8). Yet in His submission to death, He actively gave His life for us: "Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again" (John 10:17-18). When Christ gave Himself into the hands of sinners and suffered His blessed body to be nailed to the cross, this was simultaneously His supreme act of humility and submission, and His supreme act of love and obedience to the Father. The cross was both Christ's supreme act of love for God and His supreme act of love for His people. Even as the Father turned His face away, drawing from the crucified Christ the agonized cry, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me" (Mark 15:34), Jesus never wavered in His love for the Father or His love for us. He bore our sin and He obeyed God's will to the very end, when at last, triumphantly He said, "It is finished" (John 19:30). At the cross, the heart of the Triune God is laid bare in Christ's supreme demonstration of God's saving love.

In light of this, look again at that second question concerning *basis*. Do you see how Christ's active and passive obedience come together to form the basis for our justification? Together, Christ's passive and active obedience lay the rock-solid foundation upon which

5 Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., vol. 2 (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1994), 448.

6 The word *passive* is derived from the Latin word *pator* which means to *suffer* or to *endure*. It has the same root as the word *passion*, which in expressions such as "Jesus' Passion Week" refers to suffering.

7 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, 378.

the holy God our Judge may justly and truthfully pronounce this unchangeable verdict concerning us: “You are forgiven, righteous, and an heir to eternal life!”<sup>8</sup> Christ’s passive and active obedience are the ground of our acceptance with God and the foundation of our joy, peace, and assurance.

This truth is a fundamental part of our inheritance from the Reformation. It is the teaching of Scripture that the Reformation recovered and set forth in our Reformed creeds. We are justified on the basis of Christ blood: “Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him” (Rom 5:9). We are justified on the basis of Christ’s obedience: “For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous” (Rom. 5:19). The wonder of wonders is that God made Christ to be sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God through Him (II Cor. 5:21). There is no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus. There is no one in heaven or earth who can lay anything to the charge of God’s elect (Rom. 8:1, 33). The Heidelberg Catechism expresses this truth in LD 23: “only the satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ is my righteousness before God” (Q&A 61). Both Christ’s passive obedience (Christ’s satisfaction) and His active obedience (Christ’s holiness) constitute our righteousness before God, so that God views His people as if they never had had, nor committed any sin, and as if they had fully accomplished all that obedience that Christ has accomplished for them (LD 23 Q&A 60).

A couple of applications in closing. First, that the only basis of our justification is Christ’s perfect obedience means that our obedience contributes absolutely nothing to our justification. Even the good works wrought in the regenerated believer by the Holy Spirit, even the lively faith kindled by the Spirit, do not constitute any part of the ground upon which God’s verdict rests.<sup>9</sup> If you imagine the basis of justification as the concrete foundation, not even one pebble in the concrete mix is your work or your contribution. Every particle of it is the obedience of Christ for you. What a comfort that is! You do not have to work to build the foundation for your justification! It would be utterly futile if you did. You would perish everlastingly. Christ has built the foundation. Christ *is* the founda-

tion. In the matter of justification, “other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (I Cor. 3:11).

Secondly, dear believer, ponder for a moment everything that Christ’s active obedience means for you *personally*. This is worth highlighting because we have a tendency sometimes to so focus on Christ’s passive obedience that we let it overshadow His active obedience. Of course, Christ’s suffering and death give us all manner of consolation. His suffering and death paid for our sins, took away our guilt, and freed us from the curse and punishment our sins deserve. But there is more! Do not forget Christ’s active obedience *for you*. This, too, gives us all manner of consolation. Jesus has not only paid for your sins, but He has fulfilled God’s law for you! You are not only covered with His precious blood, but you are clothed in His perfect obedience! Christ’s passive and active obedience are the twin threads with which the garments of your salvation are woven together.

Are you struggling with a guilty conscience because your sins are more than you can count? Look to the cross of Christ. He paid it all. He took your guilt away. Are you disheartened by the weakness of your faith, the barrenness of your life, the frequent smallness of your love for God and neighbor? Look to Christ. His whole life, His obedience, His love, His very perfection, is imputed to you, purely of grace. Christ’s gracious nail-pierced hands have clothed you in the garments of His salvation, the wedding robe of His righteousness. When you stand before God’s judgment seat, what is it that God’s holy eyes behold? The perfect life of Christ. His passive and active obedience. This is how you and I, unworthy sinners, are accepted and received by the holy God.

Go back to Calvin’s words with which we started: “For unless you first of all grasp what your relationship to God is, and the nature of his judgment concerning you, you have neither a foundation on which to establish your salvation nor one on which to build piety toward God.” Do you grasp, by faith, what your relationship to God is? Do you grasp the nature of His judgment concerning you? Righteous in Christ, before God, and an heir of eternal life! God’s covenant friend! Accepted and beloved of the holy God! Rest upon the basis of it all: the obedience of Christ alone. Through the Protestant Reformation, God restored this truth to the church, so that you may know it for sure. What a precious heritage is ours! *Soli Deo Gloria!*

8 For an insightful and well articulated presentation of this position, see: Brandon Crowe, “The Passive and Active Obedience of Christ: Retrieving a Biblical Distinction,” in *The Doctrine on Which the Church Stands or Falls*, ed. Matthew Barrett (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 442

9 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, 191-192.



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## *Sola fide*: Calvin on faith as the instrument of justification

There is a sense in which it could be rightly argued that the whole of the Reformation came down to one word: “alone.” The Roman Catholic Church taught justification by faith *and works*. In opposition to that false teaching, the Reformers insisted upon the biblical truth of justification by faith *alone* (*sola fide*), which is to say, by faith alone entirely apart from good works.

In this article, for the sake of space, we are going to focus on what John Calvin taught on the subject. However, it should be noted that, while the focus here will be on Calvin, the other Reformers taught virtually the same thing as he did.

### Justification by faith...

Calvin defines justification in terms of the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness: “...We explain justification simply as the acceptance with which God receives us into his favor as righteous men. And we say that it consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness” (3.11.2).<sup>1</sup>

Calvin taught that the means or instrument of our justification is faith. He speaks of faith as “only the instrument for receiving righteousness” (3.11.7).

The unique nature of faith as it relates to justification is that it rests in and receives Jesus Christ and His righteousness. Calvin does not speak of faith in relation to justification in terms of faith being a bond or an unconscious power or disposition. Rather, he speaks of faith in terms of its conscious activity. When he defines faith, he speaks of it in terms of embracing God’s promises: “...we make them [God’s promises] ours by inwardly embracing them” (3.2.16). Elsewhere he speaks of faith in terms of grasping Christ’s righteousness: “...justified by faith is he who... grasps the righteousness of Christ through faith...” (3.11.2). A little later he speaks of it in terms of receiving Christ: “...before his [Christ’s] righteousness is received Christ is received in faith...” (3.11.7). The unique nature of faith as

the means of justification is that it trusts in and rests upon Jesus Christ and His righteousness and receives the gracious declaration of God that we are righteous before him.<sup>2</sup>

This understanding of faith indicates that, for Calvin, the primary reference to justification is to God’s declaration in the life and experience of the believer.

While Calvin did not hesitate to speak of faith in terms of its activity as the means of justification, at the same time he was concerned to guard against a wrong emphasis on faith. He wanted to guard God’s people from having their focus on faith rather than on God’s promises and Christ’s righteousness.

Calvin guarded against this wrong emphasis on faith, in part, by teaching that faith itself is a gift of God. “But faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit” (3.1.4). Not only is justification a gift of grace, but faith as the means of justification is a gift as well.

Calvin also guarded against a wrong emphasis on faith by denying that faith possesses any inherent power to justify in itself. He writes, “...faith of itself does not possess the power of justifying.... For if faith justified of itself or through some intrinsic power, so to speak, as it is always weak and imperfect it would effect this only in part; thus the righteousness that conferred a fragment of salvation upon us would be defective.” The all-important thing for Calvin is not really faith, but faith’s object. Faith by its very nature looks away from self and rests in Christ and His righteousness. He writes that faith is the means of justification “only in so far as it receives Christ.” He goes on: “We compare faith to a kind of vessel; for unless we come empty and

<sup>1</sup> Rather than footnote every reference to Calvin’s *Institutes*, I will include the reference in parentheses after the quotations. All quotations are from volume 1 of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

<sup>2</sup> Luther taught essentially the same thing about faith in relation to justification: “For faith is the firm and sure thought or trust that through Christ God is propitious and that through Christ His thoughts concerning us are thoughts of peace, not of affliction or wrath. God’s thought or promise, and faith, by which I take hold of God’s promise—these belong together.... The confident laying hold of the promise is called faith; and it justifies, not as our own work but as the work of God.... Faith alone lays hold of the promise, believes God when He gives the promise, stretches out its hand when God offers something, and accepts what He offers...” (Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, as quoted in Joel Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999], 21).



with the mouth of our soul open to seek Christ's grace, we are not capable of receiving Christ" (3.11.7). For Calvin, justification was always *by* faith, never *because of* faith. To teach the latter would be to make of faith a new work performed for justification.

On this point, François Wendel's analysis of Calvin's thought is spot on: "In [Calvin's] view...faith is nothing in itself. It acquires its value only by its content; that is, by Jesus Christ." Calvin is concerned about "a real danger in overemphasizing the function of faith." Wendel says, "We must, no doubt, attribute all these precautions to Calvin's constant preoccupation not to grant too much to man" because "by too much insistence upon the part [faith] is called upon to play in justification, we might presume upon it and to that extent diminish the work of the Christ and the glory of God."<sup>3</sup>

### ...alone!

Calvin taught that we are justified by faith *alone*. Faith is the sole means or alone instrument of justification.

This truth meant for Calvin that we are not justified by means of faith and by means of repentance. He acknowledged that the believer looking to Christ in faith for justification does so knowing and grieving over his sins. In his commentary on Psalm 32, he writes, "This voluntary confession is always conjoined with faith; for otherwise the sinner will continually seek lurking-places where he may hide himself from God." But this does not mean that faith and repentance together are the means of justification. Repentance does not rest in and receive Christ and His benefits. That function belongs alone to faith. Calvin continues in his commentary on Psalm 32:

Should any one infer from this, that repentance and confession are the cause of obtaining grace, the answer is easy; namely, that David is not speaking here of the cause but of the manner in which the sinner becomes reconciled to God. Confession, no doubt, intervenes, but we must go beyond this, and consider that it is faith which, by opening our hearts and tongues, really obtains our pardon. It is not admitted that every thing which is necessarily connected with pardon is to be reckoned amongst its causes. Or, to speak more simply, David obtained pardon by his confession, not because he merited it by the mere act of confessing, but because,

under the guidance of faith, he humbly implored it from his judge.<sup>4</sup>

Especially for Calvin did the truth of justification by faith alone mean that the child of God is not justified in any way by his good works. Obedience to the law has absolutely no part in justification. For example, he wrote, "For faith totters if it pays attention to works, since no one, even of the most holy, will find there anything on which to rely" (3.11.11). In the matter of justification, faith is diametrically opposed to works. Faith is not just distinct from works, but faith is the renouncing of works for justification. The fact that we are justified by faith repudiates all working for justification. Our good works do not enter into our justification at all. To bring works into the discussion is a denial of the truth of justification. We are justified by faith alone in Christ alone, and not by works.<sup>5</sup>

Justification cannot be by works, because all our works are tainted with sin and we cannot keep the law perfectly: "I say that the best work that can be brought forward from [believers] is still spotted and corrupted with some impurity of the flesh, and has, so to speak, some dregs mixed with it" (3.14.9). Justification cannot be by works, because the works we perform are not our own but God's gift to us: "We now see that the saints have not a confidence in works that either attributes anything to their merit, since they regard them solely as gifts of God from which they may recognize his goodness..." (3.14.20). Justification cannot be by works, because even if somehow we could obey God perfectly we still cannot merit with God and do beyond what He requires of us: "For to the Lord we have given nothing unrequired but have only carried out services owed, for which no thanks are due" (3.15.3).

In his rejection of justification by works, Calvin denies a place to *all* works. There were some in his day (as there are some still today) who said that the Scriptures' rejection of works for justification is only a denial of works done in obedience to the ceremonial law, and not

3 François Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 262-263. Jaroslav Pelikan makes a similar point about Luther in his analysis of Luther's view of faith in relation to justification: "At the same time it became necessary to protect these encomia of faith from the impression that they referred to faith as 'believing in believing' or that the imputation of faith as righteousness took place apart from Christ as its object and content" (cf. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984], 4:154).

4 John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 1:530, 531-532.

5 Luther similarly denied to good works a place in justification, but in his own inimitable way: "Trying to be justified through the Law, therefore, is as though someone who is already weak and sick were to ask for some even greater trouble that would kill him completely but meanwhile were to say that he intends to cure his disease by this very means; or as though someone suffering from epilepsy were to catch the plague in addition; or as though a leper were to come to another leper, or a beggar to another beggar, with the aim of giving him assistance and making him rich. As the proverb says, one of these is milking a billy goat and the other is holding the sieve!" (quoted in Ronald Hanks, "Luther on Justification," in David J. Engelsma, ed., *The Sixteenth-Century Reformation of the Church* [Jenison, MI: RFP, 2007], 113-4).



all works. Calvin says, “They prate that the ceremonial works of the law are excluded, not the moral works.” After proving that this cannot possibly be, he concludes, “Let them now babble, if they dare, that these statements apply to ceremonies, not to morals. Even school-boys would hoot at such impudence. Therefore, let us hold as certain that when the ability to justify is denied to the law, these words refer to the whole law” (3.11.19).

In his rejection of justification by works, Calvin contends with those who appeal to Galatians 5:6 (“faith which worketh by love”) and claim that we are justified by faith’s acts of love. Calvin calls this a “foolish subtlety” and responds, “But it [faith] does not take its power to justify from that working of love. Indeed, it justifies in no other way but in that it leads us into fellowship with the righteousness of Christ” (3.11.20). Faith will certainly show itself in love, but it is faith alone apart from love that is the instrument of justification.

It is in this light that Calvin’s reference to “passive faith” must be understood: “For, as regards justification, faith is something merely passive, bringing nothing of ours to the recovering of God’s favor but receiving from Christ that which we lack” (3.13.5). Calvin’s point is not that justifying faith is inactive or unconscious, but that its unique character is that of resting in and receiving from Christ. Faith brings nothing to God for righteousness—not the works that flow from faith or even faith itself—but rests in and receives Christ and His righteousness.

Although Calvin denied to good works a place in justification, he did not stifle the zeal to live a life of good works. The charge was laid against him that he taught a dangerous doctrine that promoted careless living among Christians, as if justified believers would abuse that confidence by purposely living wicked lives. Calvin rejects this false charge. He teaches, “Therefore Christ justifies no one whom he does not at the same time sanctify” (3.16.1). He adds, “Thus it is clear how true it is that we are justified not without works yet not through works, since in our sharing in Christ, which justifies us, sanctification is just as much included as righteousness” (3.16.2). Justification and sanctification must be kept clearly distinct, yet they are also inseparably connected to one another. We are justified by faith alone, but that faith will then show itself in the fruits of good works.

Calvin’s concern in denying to works a place in justification was chiefly *doxological*, that is, he was concerned for the glory and praise of God in salvation. To rest in one’s works for righteousness is to rob God of the honor that is due to Him alone. The teaching of justification by faith alone insures that “the Lord’s glory should stand undiminished and, so to speak, in good repair” (3.13.1).

His concern in denying to works a place in justification

was also *pastoral*. Calvin understood that, when one tries to ground his standing before God on his works, he will forever doubt and tremble under the fear that he has not done enough. Only the truth of justification by faith alone insures that “our consciences in the presence of his judgment should have peaceful rest and serene tranquility” (3.13.1).

## Conclusion

Calvin’s doctrine of justification *sola fide* (which is the teaching of Scripture and the Reformed confessions) serves as a necessary safeguard against errors of the present day. One of those errors is the false teaching of Norman Shepherd and his adherents in Reformed and Presbyterian churches. Shepherd denied the Reformed teaching of justification by faith alone by redefining the faith that justifies. For Shepherd, the controlling question was not, “What is the instrument of justification?” but, “What is the *nature* of faith as the instrument of justification?” And the answer that he gave to that question was that justifying faith is “a living and active faith,” by which he means “a living, active, and *obedient* faith,” and “a living, active, *penitent*, and obedient faith.”<sup>6</sup> Justifying faith is not defined as resting and receiving, but is defined in terms of repentance and obedience to the law. By this teaching, Shepherd undermined the gospel of justification by faith alone and taught a new, subtle form of justification by works.

This ought to serve as a warning and corrective to Reformed believers today, including Protestant Reformed believers. We must understand rightly the unique nature of faith as it relates to justification and allow no room for works to intrude.

This is important not only from the viewpoint of having our theology correct, but also from the viewpoint of the comfort of our own souls. Our right standing before God and peace in our consciences is not to be sought in our obedience, not in our repenting, not even in whether we believe enough. Faith does not rest for justification in whether we have obeyed enough, whether we have sorrowed over sin deeply enough, or whether we have trusted enough, but faith simply rests in Christ. Even the smallest faith rests in a great Savior. And there alone is rest for the weary, burdened soul!

This understanding of faith’s function as the alone instrument of justification represents sound Reformed orthodoxy. It glorifies God. It exalts Christ and His cross. And it humbles and comforts the believer.

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6 Norman Shepherd, *The Way of Righteousness: Justification Beginning with James* (La Grange, CA: Kerygma Press, 2009), xiv, 27, 30, 40. Emphasis added.



## Justified when we believe

### Introduction

A good theologian must “rightly [divide] the word of truth” (II Tim. 2:15), that is, make proper distinctions. The word translated “rightly dividing” means to cut straight. In our consideration of justification, we make distinctions. It is tempting not to do this or to be suspicious of those who do so. Nevertheless, theology without distinctions is impossible.

One of the distinctions that theologians have made is between justification in eternity and justification in time. Sometimes that distinction is expressed as being between objective and subjective justification. Another distinction is between the fact of justification and the experience or enjoyment of justification. Yet another distinction is between justification and the forgiveness of sins.

We recognize different aspects of justification. First, in eternity God decreed to justify us. Second, Christ purchased our justification at the cross and, because we are righteous in Him, God raised Christ from the dead (Rom. 4:25). Third, the Holy Spirit applies that justification to us, and imputes to us the perfect righteousness of Christ when we believe. Fourth, when we sin after justification, although we do not forfeit the state of justification, we know ourselves to be guilty and we seek and receive the pardon of our sins when we repent. Fifth, and finally, our justification before God is publicly declared on the Day of Judgment.

### The testimony of Scripture

God’s Word teaches justification by faith alone. On his first missionary journey Paul says, “Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man [Jesus] is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: and by him all that believe [present tense] are justified [present tense] from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:38-39). Paul did not preach, “You were justified in eternity, and through faith you simply come to the conscious realization of that eternal reality.” When the men of Antioch, who were “ordained to eternal life” according to verse 48, believed, they were justified. Their legal status changed. They had been under condemnation. Then they were justified. In Acts

16:30 the Philippian jailor cried out, “What must I do to be saved?” The answer was not, “You are already saved from eternity and eternally justified, so that God does not see—and never has seen—any sin in you.” The answer is the clear and simple call, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved [future tense], and thy house” (v. 31). Justification would happen after the jailor’s believing. Paul could not preach eternal justification to the Philippian jailor because, until the wretched man believed, neither he nor the apostle could know that he was an elect person. A preacher on the mission field may not declare to someone who does not yet believe, “God sees no sin in you; in fact, you have always been saved and all of your sins have been eternally forgiven without faith and without repentance.” The effect of such a message would be to confuse the unbeliever: should he believe and repent or not? Nor may an elder say to a wayward member of the church who refuses to repent, “God sees no sin in you. God sees you only in Christ. Christ’s righteousness was eternally imputed to you, so that, regardless of your impenitence, all your sins are forgiven, both now and forever.” Stubbornly impenitent people “who refuse to walk in the ways of the elect” (Canons 1:13) have no right to view themselves as elect.

This teaching preached on the mission field is repeated in the epistles. Paul proclaims “the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe [present tense]” (Rom. 3:22). In Romans 4 where the apostle deals with the imputation of righteousness, he repeats this theme: “But to him that worketh not, but believeth [present tense]” (v. 5). In verses 23, 24 we read, “It was not written for his sake alone [Abraham’s], that it was imputed to him; but for us also, to whom it shall be imputed [future tense], if we believe” (Greek: “to whom it is going to be imputed, to the ones believing” [present tense]).

I Corinthians 6 lists a number of sins of which the members of the church had been guilty, at which time they were not yet justified: “And such were some of you, but ye are...justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God” (v. 11). Before their conversion, and certainly not in eternity, they did not yet have the Spirit. In Galatians 3:3 the apostle writes

of Scripture “foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith,” not that the heathen were eternally justified without faith. In verse 24 the apostle speaks of the law “bring[ing] us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith,” not that we were already justified before we came to Jesus in faith. God’s Word insists that only the believer is justified. Therefore, to be justified you must believe in Jesus.

### The testimony of the creeds

In introducing the crucial subject of justification, the Heidelberg Catechism asks, “But what doth it profit thee now that thou believest all this?” and it answers “that I am righteous before God” (that is, justified, Q&A 59). There is real profit in believing. By believing—not by working, but by believing, trusting in Jesus Christ alone—we are righteous. The Catechism does not say, “I was always righteous.” It says, “By believing all this I am righteous.” In its explanation of justification in Answers 60 and 61, the Catechism gives faith an instrumental role: God imputes Christ’s righteousness, and I receive it by faith, that is, by believing. “Inasmuch as I embrace such benefit with a believing heart” (German: *wenn ich... annehme*—“when I receive,” A. 60). “I cannot receive and apply the same to myself [German: *mir zueignen*—“appropriate to myself”] any other way than by faith only” (A. 61).

There is an act of faith by which in justification the believer receives Jesus Christ and His righteousness. This act of faith, which is God’s gift (Phil. 1:29), is repeated throughout our lifetime, every time we consciously lay hold of Jesus Christ by faith, so that, having heard and received the gospel by faith we “[go] down to [our] house justified” (Luke 18:14). In that parable the publican entered the temple unjustified, at least as far as his consciousness was concerned. The publican confessed his sins and besought pardon—“God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (v. 13). Finally, having received a gracious answer from God, the publican went home justified. Paul gives justification before God as the purpose of our believing. Paul would answer, “But what doth it profit thee now that thou believest all this?” with the words of Galatians 2:16, “We have believed in Jesus Christ, that [the word means “so that,” or “with the purpose that”] we might be justified.” Paul does not say, “We were eternally justified;

therefore, we are justified whether we believe or not, or we are justified without believing.”

The Catechism’s teaching on justification or the forgiveness of sins is not limited to Lord’s Day 23-24. In A. 76 in connection with instruction on the Lord’s Supper and our eating and drinking Christ’s flesh and blood by faith we read this: “It is...to embrace [German: *annehmen*—“receive”] with a believing heart all the sufferings and death of Christ, and thereby to obtain [German: *bekommen*—“get”] the pardon of sin.” By believing we obtain or get the forgiveness of sins or justification. That is the language of the Catechism. In connection with the keys of the kingdom the Catechism teaches that in the preaching “it is publicly testified to all and every believer that, whenever [German: *so oft*—“as often as”] they receive the promise of the gospel by a true faith, all their sins are really forgiven them of God” (A. 84). The keys do not work merely on the mission field to open the kingdom to the erstwhile unbeliever, but “as often as” we believe the gospel in the congregation, our sins are forgiven. Our sins are forgiven—or we are justified—repeatedly by believing the promise of the gospel.

**There is an act of faith by which in justification the believer receives Jesus Christ and His righteousness. This act of faith, which is God’s gift (Phil. 1:29), is repeated throughout our lifetime, every time we consciously lay hold of Jesus Christ by faith, so that, having heard and received the gospel by faith we “[go] down to [our] house justified” (Luke 18:14).**

repeatedly by believing the promise of the gospel. In every sermon in which we receive the gospel with a true faith God says, “Your sins are forgiven. Go in peace.” Also in connection with the fifth petition the Catechism teaches us to pray, “Be pleased...not to impute...our transgressions [to us]” (A. 126). The Catechism does not say,

“Since we were justified in eternity, and since thou dost not see our sins, nor hast thou ever seen any sin in us, be pleased...”

The Belgic Confession, which was originally written in French, teaches the exact same truth, namely, that we are justified in time when we believe. Article 22 describes the miracle by which the Spirit “kindleth” (French: *allume*—“lights, ignites”) faith in our hearts, which “embraces Jesus Christ...appropriates [French: *le fait sien*—“makes its own”]...and seeks nothing more besides [Jesus Christ].” Faith, the Confession continues, “is only an instrument with which we embrace Christ our righteousness.” In Article 23, titled “Justification,” we read about Christ’s obedience or His righteousness, that it “becomes ours when we believe in Him.” The Confession does not say, “Which perfect righteousness was always ours, even before the foundation of the world,



regardless of our believing or not believing in Him.” It says, “When [that is a temporal conjunction] we [that is a personal pronoun] believe [that is a verb in the present tense, expressing an activity] in Him [that is, the object of our faith, Jesus].” In Article 24 the Confession teaches that our good works “are of no account towards our justification” and explains that “it is by faith in Christ that we are justified, even before we do good works.” In Article 26 the Confession teaches that Christ’s righteousness “is become ours by faith.” Before we believed, we did not have His righteousness. In Article 29 “[Christians] have remission of sins, through faith in Him.”

Finally, we consider the Canons of Dordt which, although they do not treat justification at length, do have some relevance to the question of when we are justified. Canons, I.4 says, “Such as receive [the gospel] and embrace [Latin: *amplectuntur*—“grasp, lay hold of”] Jesus the Savior by a true and living faith are by Him delivered from the wrath of God and from destruction, and have the gift of eternal life conferred upon them” (Latin: *donantur*—“are given [it]”). In connection with sovereign election in the first head, the Canons teach the truth that the elect receive salvation by believing in Jesus, which faith our creed ascribes to God’s decree in subsequent articles.

In the rejection of errors section of the second head, in connection with a teaching that the Arminians rejected, we read this about the orthodox doctrine of justification: “We by faith, inasmuch as it accepts [Latin: *apprehendit*—“lays hold on, grasps, seizes, takes”] the merits of Christ are justified before God [Latin: *coram Deo*—“before the face of God”] and saved” (Canons, II.R.4). Again, the Canons view justification as a blessing received when we lay hold upon Jesus Christ by faith, not something we have from eternity whether we believe or not. In Canons, III/IV.6 we read that God is pleased “to save such as believe” (Latin: *homines credentes...servare*—“to save believing men”).

Finally, the fifth head of doctrine warns against the serious consequences of falling into gross transgressions. One of them is that backsliders “incur a deadly guilt” (Latin: *reatum mortis incurrunt*—“run into the guilt of death,” Canons, V.5), which surely is incompatible

with justification, at least in its conscious enjoyment. Yet such a backslidden child of God is not permitted by

**Clearly, then, the Canons distinguish between the state of justification, which is unchanging in the life of the believer, and the enjoyment or consciousness of justification, which fluctuates, and can even be lost if we walk impenitently in our sins. The impenitent one incurs a deadly guilt until he confesses and forsakes that sin of which he is guilty (Canons, V.5, 7).**

God to “forfeit the state of justification” (Latin: *justificationis statu ex-cidant*—“falling out of the state of justification,” Canons, V.6). Clearly, then, the Canons distinguish between the state of justification, which is unchanging in the life of the believer, and the enjoyment or consciousness of justification, which fluctuates, and can even

be lost if we walk impenitently in our sins. The impenitent one incurs a deadly guilt until he confesses and forsakes that sin of which he is guilty (Canons, V.5, 7).

## Conclusion

In eternity God has made a judgment concerning His people: “I will not punish them for their sins.” That is objective justification. There is also a time when God actually blotted out our transgressions, namely, on the cross, when Christ made atonement. Thus Paul speaks of being “justified by his blood” (Rom. 5:9). Subjective justification is God’s declaration to our souls in our lifetime, repeatedly in our lifetime, that we are righteous. This declaration is received by faith alone. The forgiveness of sins is God’s sending away our sins or not remembering them, while justification includes not only the pardon of our sins, but also a further benefit—the positive declaration of righteousness. It is one thing for a judge to say, “Not guilty.” It is another for him to say, “Perfectly righteous, in perfect harmony with and in perfect conformity to my standard, which is my law.” In justification we have both, graciously given, received by faith alone.

And when we commit sin, which we so often do, we pray, “Forgive us our debts,” which prayer presupposes both faith and repentance. For such a petition, which God graciously hears, comes from a broken and a contrite heart trusting in God’s mercy, which God will not despise (Ps. 51:17), not from the heart of one who regards iniquity, whom God will not hear (Ps. 66:18).





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## Pastoral work grounded on justification

### Doctrine and life

The serious-minded Christian lives out of his or her beliefs. Ideally, what one believes should determine how one thinks and lives. Reformed theology, therefore, should shape the thinking, attitudes, lifestyle, and choices of a Reformed Christian.

This is especially true when a Christian experiences adversity. When he encounters deep sorrow, pain, loss, hardship, disappointment or discouragement, his faith carries him through. This faith stands on the Rock which is Christ. This faith relies on God's strength. This faith believes something or rather, believes in Someone. And what the Christian believes will shape his response to the adversity. That leads to the question, how will the doctrine of justification by faith alone direct a suffering believer in adversity?

Consider that question also from the perspective of the Reformed pastor. The Reformed pastor's preaching is grounded in the doctrine of justification. If every sermon does not specifically mention justification by faith, and it will not, the sermon must set forth Christ crucified, and that is justification. Will this vital doctrine also guide the counsel he gives to those who mourn, suffer emotional and/or physical pain, are anxious, or are rebelling?

My answer is, It ought to. The rest of this article is devoted to demonstrating how and why justification by faith is a proper ground of pastoral work.

### The confidence of the pastor

First, justification by faith alone gives the pastor hope in his working with each sinner/saint. Let it be clear at the outset that the pastor's hope and confidence is always and only in the Bible and in the Spirit's application of God's Word. His confidence is never in himself, in his experience, or in previous "successes." Never. In fact, the pastor, conscious of his weaknesses and of his failures in pastoral work, hesitates even to take on counseling. But if there will be any help given, any improvement, any advance, it will be by the Word of

God that the Spirit uses. Without the Word of God the pastor has nothing to bring.

The doctrine of justification by faith alone gives him confidence in pastoral work partly because of the relation between justification and *sanctification*. Justification is well defined and explained in other articles in this issue, but what is sanctification? Sanctification is God's work in and upon an elect, justified sinner, that delivers the sinner from the power and corruption of sin, makes him to be holy, and makes him sincerely willing and able to live unto God in all good works.

Justification and sanctification are inseparable. Justification is the ground of sanctification. Because Christ paid for the sins of His chosen people, He has the right also to free them from the bondage and corruption of sin. And He does, for Christ is a complete Savior. He saves from the guilt of sin and its punishment, but also from its power and corruption.

That is why justification and sanctification go together always. Those whom Christ justifies He also sanctifies. Both of these works of God are "by faith." The Belgic Confession, after clearly explaining justification by faith alone, immediately makes the connection to sanctification in Article 24, entitled "Man's Sanctification and Good Works." The article begins,

We believe that this true faith, being wrought in man by the hearing of the Word of God and the operation of the Holy Ghost, doth regenerate and make him a new man, causing him to live a new life, and freeing him from the bondage of sin.

The Confession adds that "it is impossible that this holy faith can be unfruitful in man" and that this "faith that worketh by love...excites man to the practice of those works which God has commanded in His Word." Sanctification by faith inevitably follows justification by faith.

The Belgic Confession follows the clear teaching of the great Reformers like John Calvin. Calvin wrote,

Christ justifies no man without also sanctifying him. These blessings are conjoined by a perpetual and

inseparable tie. Those whom he enlightens by his wisdom he redeems; whom he redeems he justifies; whom he justifies he sanctifies.... Though we distinguish between them, they are both inseparably comprehended in Christ. Would you then obtain justification in Christ? You must previously possess Christ. But you cannot possess him without being made a partaker of his sanctification: for Christ cannot be divided.<sup>1</sup>

This knowledge is tremendously important for the pastor. The justified sinner in his study is also sanctified. The Spirit of Christ is in him or her. The old man of sin is crucified with Christ.

The crucial importance is obvious because virtually all pastoral counseling deals with sin in some form—sins committed by the man in the study, or sins against him. Sin in marriage, sin in single life; sins of children; sins of addictions, abuse, bitterness and rebellion, being overwhelmed by troubles and sorrows emotionally and spiritually like Jacob—“all these things are against me” (Gen. 42:36). Sin. If there were no sin in the world, no one would ever appear at the pastor’s door for counseling.

Sin connects pastoral work to justification. Justification is all about sin, consisting as it does in the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ.<sup>2</sup> The Reformed pastor does well to ground his counseling on this vital doctrine. Let us examine how justification by faith alone can be of such help and comfort in counseling, not only for pastors, but for all believers who give biblical counseling to hurting fellow believers.

## Gratitude and obedience

In his counseling, the pastor’s goal is that the one living in sin forsakes the sin and walks in obedience. Guilt is an important matter to discuss, because guilt is part of the Spirit-worked conviction of sin. Guilt is a significant motivator for forsaking sin. But guilt is not the motivation for obedience. Rather it is *gratitude* that motivates the believer to a life of obedience. As the Heidelberg Catechism states in answer to the question of why believers must do good works, “...so that we may testify by the whole of our conduct our gratitude to God...” (Q&A 86).

<sup>1</sup> *Institutes*, 3.16.1, from H. Beveridge ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> See Calvin’s *Institutes*, 3.11.2.

If the sinner’s salvation is partly his work, and his righteousness before God is based in part on his good works, he may be grateful for what God had done, but the gratitude is muted, even nullified, by pride in his own contributions. On the other hand, if a sinner truly sees the horribleness of his sins (guilt), and then comes to know and believe that they are forgiven entirely because of and in the cross of Christ—what gratitude will flood his soul. “I am justified—forgiven and declared right before God—not because of anything I have done, but only by faith in Christ!” Right then and there, the pastor directs the sinner/saint to the “new and holy life” he promised to live when he made confession of his faith in Christ. Live gratefully.

## Desire to forgive

So much of pastoral counseling involves not only sins committed but sins inflicted upon a member in the church. One sees this in all marriage counseling. Husbands sin against wives, and wives against husbands. But this is true in many other instances as well. Gossip, unchristian treatment, and harsh words wound. Believers struggle with forgiving those who have sinned against them. Justification by faith alone gives the heartfelt desire to forgive, and when repentance and confession are made, freely to grant forgiveness.

Jesus illustrated this in response to Peter’s question, “Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? til seven times?” (Matt. 18:21). The parable of the unmerciful servant demonstrates that those who have received the mercy of God in the forgiveness of their many and horrible sins will exhibit the same mercy to others who sin against them by forgiving them when they ask for it. In short, those who know their own forgiveness, their full justification by faith in Christ, will be eager to forgive others who sinned against them.

## Personal value

A pastor also shares heartaches with members who are beaten down, despised, and ridiculed. The pastor grieves when he sees that the member despises herself and thinks of herself as being of no value to anyone and of no value in the church. The pastor shows that the person’s value is not based on athletic ability, looks, intelligence, wealth, or any important activity in the

**Sin connects pastoral work to justification. Justification is all about sin, consisting as it does in the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ. The Reformed pastor does well to ground his counseling on this vital doctrine.**

church or in the world. Her value is that she is one of God's chosen. God has loved her from all eternity. And what is the incontrovertible proof of that love? Jesus was willing to die for her. Her sins made her worthy of eternal damnation, but Christ endured the humiliation, the agony, the terrible wrath of God on the cross for her. Not because of her works, or anything in her, for she is justified by faith alone in Jesus Christ.

## Hope

With heavy troubles and trials members can become emotionally and spiritually depressed. All can seem dark and hopeless. Psalm 42 expresses the depth of despair to which a believer can descend. "My tears have been my meat day and night, while they continually say unto me, Where is thy God?" (v. 3)

When a member is in such a low state, the pastor desires above all to give hope. The Holy Spirit led the psalmist to that as well: "Why art thou cast down, O my soul? And why art thou disquieted in me? Hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance" (v. 5).

For the depressed and troubled saint, God is her only help and hope. Ultimately, it is the hope of heaven itself. And that hope is based squarely on justification by faith alone. There is no hope in the sinner; there is no hope that all of life will suddenly become full of light and joy. But there is the certain knowledge that she will live in the joy of heaven, not because of anything she has done or will do, but alone because Jesus Christ paid for all her sins. Justification by faith alone gives hope.

## Despair in bondage

Bondage to sin is a horrible slavery. Believers, beguiled by Satan and their own sinful flesh, can become addicted to sins in so many ways—alcohol, drugs, pornography, lies, stealing, and more. To the believer in the shackles of sin, struggling to get out, it can seem as though there is no hope of deliverance. He may well lament, "My sin is too great! I am too evil. I will never be delivered from this bondage."

The comfort of the gospel is that believers will never earn forgiveness nor make themselves worthy of being forgiven. Any and all sin make each person worthy of being cast away from God's presence. But full and complete forgiveness is in Jesus alone, in His cross. This must be an important message to the one struggling to overcome addiction: There is forgiveness for your sins. This brings relief for a believer who can confess with the apostle Paul, "Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief" (I Tim. 1:15). And that saving work of Jesus includes powerful sanctification. Genuine (Spirit-worked)

repentance and forgiveness is the start of the deliverance from addiction. Then the Spirit continues His work of sanctification—deliverance from the grip of sin.

## Death

The believer's final enemy is death. Oftentimes the believer is weak physically as he approaches the moment of death. If he lives consciously knowing that the end is near, he thinks on his life...and he sees his sins. And Satan attacks. "How can you possibly be on your way to heaven? Your entire life has been characterized by sin. You sinned in every relationship, and sin polluted every task, every worship service, every prayer." The devil seeks to ruin the joyful hope of the dying saint by robbing him of his assurance.

The dying saint's only hope is justification by faith alone. It cannot be expressed any better than by the Heidelberg Catechism:

...though my conscience accuse me, that I have grossly transgressed all the commandments of God, and kept none of them, and am still inclined to all evil; notwithstanding, God, without any merit of mine, but only of mere grace, grants and imputes to me, the perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ; even so, as if I never had had, nor committed any sin: yea, as if I had fully accomplished all that obedience which Christ has accomplished for me; inasmuch as I embrace such benefit with a believing heart.

The believer lives and dies happily only because he knows that he belongs to Jesus, "who with His precious blood, hath fully satisfied for all my sins." The dying saint looks at himself and despairs. But he looks at Christ's full satisfaction and His perfect obedience and says, by the gift of God, through faith, "That's mine!"

The Reformed pastor will encounter many sorrows and sins in the lives of Christ's sheep. Everyone knows that the pastor cannot simply teach justification by faith alone, and all the troubles will melt away. He will need to apply the Word of God in many ways and give instruction from many different passages. In all these situations, because he is dealing with sin, the Reformed pastor teaches and grounds his counseling on the blessed truth of justification by faith alone. He has hope, and he gives hope.

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#### Resolution of sympathy

The Council and congregation of Southwest PRC express our Christian sympathy to Neal and Jean Hanko, Tim Hanko, Mike and Tammy Hanko and family, Ross and Shari Kaiser and family, and Philip and Emily Miersma and family in the death of **Wilma Hanko**, their dear mother, grandmother, and great grandmother, who died at the age of 91. "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever" (Psalm 23:6).

Rev. D. Noorman, President

Tom VanderWoude, Clerk