

# THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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## Justification and the Clarity of the Bible

Edited by John W. Robbins

### *Justification—the Key to Biblical Clarity*

Is the Bible clear and easy to understand? Has the proliferation of divisions within the Protestant movement proved that the Reformers were too optimistic in affirming the clarity of the Bible? If it is clear, why are so many professed Christians so incredibly ignorant of the Bible?

When the Reformers contended that the Bible is clear and easy to understand, they did not mean that it is uniformly so. Obviously, there are difficulties about certain parts of the Bible that may never become clear in this life. Neither did the Reformers close their eyes to the fact that men of scholarship and mental acumen had failed to understand the Bible. But what they did mean was that the Bible is clear when seen in the light of the great Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone. The first principle of the Reformation—the Bible alone—and its corollary—justification by faith alone in Christ alone—stand together. If one is lost, so is the other. Said Luther:

If the article of justification is lost, all Christian doctrine is lost at the same time. . . . It alone makes a person a theologian. . . . For with it comes the Holy Spirit, who enlightens the heart by it and keeps it in the true certain understanding so that it is able precisely and plainly to

distinguish and judge all other articles of faith, and forcefully to sustain them (*What Luther Says*, ed. E. Plass [Concordia, 1959] Vol. 2, 702-714, 715-718).

If these statements by Luther are correct, this means that there is one main reason why the Bible is not clear in today's church. We have lost sight of the truth of justification by faith alone. Let this central Biblical message be restored to its right place, and the Bible will become essentially clear.

### *Justification Illuminates All Other Truths*

The Bible is the revelation of the saving purpose and action of a holy and gracious God. God delivers a handful of believers from the flood, Lot from the flames of Sodom, Israel from the bondage of Egypt, Hezekiah from the threats of Sennacherib, the Jews from their captivity in Babylon, and the Psalmist from the plots of his enemies. All these Old Testament deliverances point forward to that culminating act of righteousness when God the Son himself comes to Earth in the flesh and person of Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ we see that he is the God who is with his people in bodily infirmities, poverty, suffering, loneliness, and death. In Jesus Christ he is also seen as the God who is for us in the face of everything that is against us. In our alienation from God, only God can help us. He,

therefore, because of love, must leave all, give all, and suffer all. Nor does he fail to redeem his people.

This saving purpose of God carried out by Jesus Christ is what the Bible calls "the righteousness of God" (*Romans* 1:17). It is efficacious for all God chose to be saved, just as God's Old Testament acts of temporal salvation were effective for those chosen to be saved. That is what the entire Bible is about. When the Bible is read and understood in this framework, its message is as clear as the noonday. But if the theme of Christ and justification by faith alone slips out of sight or is even moved from the center, the Bible is no longer clear. It becomes pulled about as if it were a fantastic jigsaw puzzle, or mutilated into a manual of self-improvement, or wrested to sanction any number of bizarre religious experiences, or exploited by those who imagine events in international politics. Even doctrines which are true in themselves become false when they are removed from the Biblical framework and put into an un-Biblical context.

In the first tract written to the English people on behalf of the Reformation, John Bugenhagen declared, "We have only one doctrine: Christ is our righteousness." That expressed the spirit of the Reformation. The "only one doctrine" emphasis of the Reformers did not mean that they ignored other essential doctrines, but they saw the truth of justification by faith in Christ as embracing every other doctrine. It is not good enough to relegate the article of justification by grace alone, for Christ's sake alone, through faith alone, to merely one article of fundamental belief among about six others. It must become the center of all other doctrines. For the doctrine of justification by faith alone, rightly considered, presupposes or implies every other Biblical doctrine. For example:

### *The Trinity*

The central Biblical message about justification by grace alone, for Christ's sake alone, through faith alone makes the truth of the Trinity shine (see *Romans* 3:24-26): "... being justified freely by his grace. . . ." Here we are brought to contemplate the source of salvation in the mind of God the holy Father. "... through the redemption that is in Christ

Jesus . . . his blood. . . ." This points us to the ground of our acceptance in the doing and dying of the God-man, the holy Son. "... through faith. . . ." Since the Bible everywhere testifies that we cannot of ourselves come to God or believe in Jesus Christ, this points us to the way in which salvation is applied to our hearts by the work of God the Holy Spirit. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes on him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (*John* 3:16).

The electing love of God the Father, the life and death of Jesus Christ, the God-man, and the faith placed in our hearts by God the Holy Spirit teach the truth of the Trinity. The Trinity accomplishes our salvation.

### *Law and Human Depravity*

The message of grace alone, Christ alone, and faith alone presupposes man's utter lostness. The *alone* underlines the fact that the fallen sinner can make no contribution to his salvation. The price of redemption, even the blood of the Lord of glory, makes it clear that every ordinary human work is valueless to procure salvation. *Grace alone* means to be accepted in spite of being unacceptable. *Christ alone* means that we have absolutely no righteousness before God but Jesus Christ. *Faith alone* means that we confess that the only thing about us which is good is that God has pronounced us good out of sheer mercy toward us and out of sheer justice for Jesus Christ. Sin cost Adam and Eve their home in Paradise and a son torn from them by the murderer's hand. It cost the Jews their beloved city and their children who were carried away by rapacious armies. But even that could but dimly portray the cost of sin. It cost God a sacrifice so great that it contained all the accumulated treasure of eternity. He gave his Son over to the murderer's hand. This is the only context—the Biblical context—in which to deal with the doctrine of human depravity.

### *Election*

The Bible gives election its proper framework when it presents it as election "in Christ" (*Ephesians* 1:4).

Salvation is wholly due to God's initiative in Jesus Christ. He chose, sought, and found his people. We did not choose, seek, and find him. Our salvation is grounded in his prior decision to save his people through Jesus Christ. God elects, the Son saves those chosen by the Father, and the Spirit gives the gift of faith to his people. Therefore, the "full assurance of faith" does not rest on the slender thread of our own fickle decisions or our own sinful acts. Our faith or works can never be a contribution to or cause of our election, since God elected Jesus Christ and his people in him long before we came to faith. Election is the cause, not the result, of our faith.

### *The Divine and Human Christ*

Since it was from man that justice required perfect righteousness, God the Son had to become a man. That righteousness which God can accept must be a human righteousness, "For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead" (*I Corinthians* 15:21). But because sinful man could not obey the law, the Second Person of the Trinity became incarnate in Jesus Christ. What neither God nor man could do alone (for God could not suffer and die, and man could not live a perfect life), the God-man Jesus Christ accomplished.

Upon a life I could not live

And upon a death I did not die

I stake my whole eternity.

### *Final Judgment*

The doctrine of final rewards and punishments is illuminated by the cross of Christ. "He who by faith is justified shall live" (*Romans* 1:17). In the one who was raised because of our justification (*Romans* 4:25) and who bodily ascended to glory at God's right hand we are given a clear preview of eschatology. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (*Romans* 8:1). The saints shall be "glorified together" with Christ. While he who believes is justified unto life eternal, he who believes not is condemned already. The wrath of God abides on

him (*John* 3:36). We are not left to speculate about all the fantastic and unbiblical ideas that some people propound in the doctrine of the hereafter. God has shown us the nature of Hell and death, for in the cross of Christ "the wrath of God is revealed from Heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men" (*Romans* 1:18). Christ's cry of dereliction, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" was his descent into Hell. He did not descend into Hell after his death; rather, he went, as he said, with the thief, to Paradise. As we follow the bruised and lifeless body of the Savior to the tomb, we see clearly what are the wages of sin—*death*. Death is no phantom, but it is God's judgment on sinful man. It is as concrete and as real as the execution and burial of Jesus Christ. No one spoke more of the final judgment and horribleness of Hell than Jesus Christ.

### *Justification Exposes Errors*

If the doctrine of justification by faith alone illuminates all other doctrines, it exposes errors at the same time. It is a divine plumb line to test every doctrinal structure. It is a principle that must call all our creeds, ideas, and traditions into radical question. Perhaps this is one reason why the professing church has pushed the Reformation doctrine into the background. If it is allowed to stand in the forefront, it is too revolutionary and might upset the status quo. *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda\** is a confession that the Reformation was not completed with Luther and Calvin. The sanctuary of truth must yet be cleansed from all the errors that were smuggled in during the Dark Ages. We have no reason to suppose the restoration was completed by the Reformers. Error is like an octopus. It has many tentacles, but one heart. Most of the books written to expose the errors of certain cults or false systems tediously fight with all the tentacles of the doctrinal octopus. Few effectively slay it at the heart with the sharp sword of justification by faith alone.

Look how Luther dealt with the papacy. Others before and after him spent their energies crying out against the abuses of Rome. Said Luther:

Doubtless this one article [justification], by little and little, as it began, had overthrown the whole papacy, with all her brotherhoods, pardons, religious orders, relics, ceremonies, invocation of saints, purgatory, masses, watchings, vows, and infinite other like abominations. . . . We moreover did teach and urge nothing but this article of justification, which alone at that time did threaten the authority of the Pope and lay waste his kingdom. . . . Images and other abuses in the church would have fallen down of themselves, if they [the sects] had but diligently taught the article of justification (*Commentary on Galatians*, Middleton ed., 218, 219).

Luther cut through the complicated maze of medieval theology and reduced all theology to the principle of *sola fide*. The Christian church today is inundated with *isms* of every stripe and hue. We could spend forever and aye fighting the tentacles of error, but we need to get to the heart. All error is united in its common opposition to the principle of justification by faith alone. All error obscures the bright light of the Gospel. What the church and the world desperately need is the truth of justification by faith alone without the encumbrance of the popular errors which have obscured it.

## *Romanism*

The doctrine of justification by God's mercy alone, on the ground of what Christ has already done, and through the vicarious righteousness of Christ that is imputed through faith alone, is a radical "No" to Romanism. While Roman theologians may sometimes use the words of the Reformation or the Bible, this does not mean that the words have the same content. According to the Romanists, "justification by grace" means to be righteous in the sight of God because the soul is inwardly adorned with grace (*gratia infusa*). "Justification by Christ" means to be made righteous by the actual indwelling of Christ's pure life which is substituted (internally) for the impure life of the sinner. "Justification by faith" means that faith itself as a *qualitas* makes the believer righteous in the sight of God.

While ignorant Protestants may applaud the changes taking place in Rome, in reality nothing has changed at all. The organization which has proved itself capable of adopting the institutions of paganism and adapting them to its own use can also adopt the slogans of Protestantism and adapt them to its own use.

The Reformation principle of justification by faith alone always points to the saving realities that are completely outside of man. *Grace* is pure mercy that is outside of man in the heart of God. The righteousness that justifies is outside of man, for it is the obedience which Jesus Christ performed two thousand years ago. In justification this righteousness is not infused, but *imputed*. It is not in man, who is on Earth, but in Christ, who is in Heaven. Faith justifies, not because it has any intrinsic merit, but solely because it is the only instrument that accepts and can accept the imputed gift. Justification by faith alone means that I live in the favor of God by the righteousness which is found in another. It means to be accepted as righteous because another is righteous. In every way it leads me "to the Rock which is higher than I."

What happens in Romanism is that everything is internalized. The words *grace*, *righteousness*, *justification*, *substitution* may remain, but they no longer have the objective meaning. The work of the Holy Spirit *in us* is substituted for the work of Christ *for us* as the cause of pardon and acceptance. The inward renewal of the believer is put in the place of the imputed righteousness of Christ. God's transforming act *in man* displaces God's redemptive act *for man*. The focus of attention is not outward, but inward; not in Heaven at the right hand of God, but "in the cave of the heart" and in "the new interior life." What remains objective in Romanism is not the work of Christ, but the work of the Antichrist and his priests, which Rome calls the church.

We deal with Rome at the head of all the religious *isms* because she is the "mother" of "the abominations of the Earth" (see *Revelation 17:5*). It is this system which most perfectly epitomizes all false religions. Every devious *ism* can find its true home here, for the common denominator of all false

religion is its preoccupation with the interior life of the worshiper.

## *Pentecostalism*

The truth of justification by faith alone judges and condemns the Pentecostal-charismatic movement. No one can believe justification by faith alone and at the same time consistently subscribe to the basic principles of Pentecostalism.

We do not deny that there may be true Christians who subscribe to the Pentecostal thesis. Some people's minds are wonderfully confused. But there are four points that must be raised about Pentecostalism in the light of justification:

1. When God justifies the sinner for the sake of Christ alone, he does this by ascribing to the believer all that Christ did in his holy obedience on our behalf. All that Christ is, all his unconquerable righteousness with all that it merits and inherits, belongs to the needy sinner whom the Holy Spirit joins to Christ in saving faith. This is the gift that comprehends and swallows up all else.

Now, if our Pentecostal friends confess with us the magnitude of this gift of justification, why do they talk about the experience of being baptized in the Spirit as if it were something higher and better than what every believer in Jesus possesses?

The present gift of the Holy Spirit is only the "down payment" (Ephesians 1:13, 14) of what we inherited through Jesus Christ. The grace of justification is like the water in the whole ocean. The inward experience is like the little shell holding some of that water. A gift which can be reduced to the dimension of the experience of a sinful mortal is not very big after all.

2. When Pentecostalism teaches a religious experience after justification and conversion, it implies that the free gift of Christ's righteousness to the believer does not suffice to bring the in-filling, or baptism, of the Holy Spirit.

But justification means that since Christ's righteousness is imputed to the believer, God must not only regard him but treat him as righteous. Is

not a justified man righteous with God? Does not God delight in and love to embrace a righteous man? The apostle Paul says that the Spirit comes with the blessing of justification (Romans 4:1-4; 8:1-10; Galatians 3:1-14; Ephesians 1:24; etc.). A justification before God which does not bring the Holy Spirit *abundantly* (Titus 3:5-8) is not justification at all and would merit very little talking about—which is generally the case among charismatic enthusiasts.

3. If the reception of Christ's imputed righteousness by faith alone does not bring with it the abundant gift of the Spirit, other steps or techniques must be resorted to in order to obtain "Heaven's best." Here the door is opened to a new kind of legalism. People become obsessed with getting the Spirit by their own acts of "absolute surrender," "total dedication," "eradication of the self," or "putting Jesus on the throne of your life." The attention is turned from the Gospel message that Christ has actually won the Spirit for the believer by his own acts of absolute surrender, total dedication, and the putting away of sin which took place on Calvary (Acts 2:33; Galatians 3:13, 14; John 7:38, 39).

Paul reminded the foolish Galatians that the Spirit *came* (Galatians 3:2) and *continues to be given abundantly* (Galatians 3:5, literal translation) by the hearing of faith. Gospel preaching is proclaiming how the Spirit comes to men by the conquering acts of Jesus Christ on man's behalf. Galatianism proclaims how men may earn the Spirit.

4. The overwhelming preoccupation of Pentecostalism is the inward life of the believer. Its predominant testimony is to the inward experience of the Spirit rather than to the historical action of God in Jesus Christ. For this reason, Pentecostal spirituality is in fundamental harmony with Roman Catholic spirituality. Pentecostalism has been able to bridge the gulf between Romanism and apostate Protestantism, but the traffic across that bridge is mostly one way. Every religious experience which is a denial of justification by faith alone finds its home in Rome.

## *Subjectivism*

The doctrine of justification by an imputed (outside-of-me) righteousness directs us to find salvation in a saving event which is completely outside of us. Just as we were constituted sinners by what Adam did in an historical event, so the believer is justified unto life eternal by what Christ did in an historical event (Romans 5:18, 19). John Bunyan testified:

As for thy saying that salvation is Christ within, if thou mean in opposition to Christ without, instead of pleading for Christ thou wilt plead against him; for Christ, God-man, without on the cross, did bring in salvation for sinners; and the right believing of that justifies the soul. Therefore Christ within or the Spirit of him who did give himself a ransom, doth not work out justification for the soul in the soul, but doth lead the soul out of itself and out of what can be done in itself, to look for salvation in that Man that is now absent from his saints on Earth. . . .

And indeed they that will follow Christ aright must follow him without, to the cross without, for justification on Calvary without—that is, they must seek for justification by his obedience without—to the grave without, and to his ascension and intercession in Heaven without; and this must be done through the operation of his own Holy Spirit that he has promised shall show these things unto them, being given within them for that purpose. Now the Spirit of Christ, that leads also; but whither? It leads to the Christ without (*The Riches of Bunyan* [New York: American Tract Society, 1850] 142, 143).

This doctrine of justification is a radical "No" to religious subjectivism. We have already considered two major forms of religious subjectivism—Romanism and Pentecostalism—but it must also be said that the neo-evangelical movement has drowned in it too. Neo-evangelicals who internalize or psychologize the Gospel have no good reason to oppose Pentecostals or Romanists, for the theology is the same.

We are not trying to minimize the necessity of regeneration, the indwelling of the Spirit, and holiness. What we are against in the name of the Gospel is a distortion of these things which makes them utterly false. For instance:

**New Birth:** The new birth is a radical change wrought in the soul by the Holy Spirit, which turns the chosen one from unbelief to assent to the truth of the Gospel. The sinner now agrees that Christ alone is the basis of salvation. He lives a new life of faith in the Son of God—continually confessing his sinfulness, always relying on Christ's merits, and habitually obeying his commandments. If we are going to advocate this kind of new birth, this can only magnify the glory of Christ's imputed righteousness.

But what often happens is that the "born again" experience (regeneration is never experienced, but its effects are) is put in the place of the imputed righteousness of Christ. Conversion becomes in itself the grand saving event or the "finished work" which guarantees eternal security. Baptism becomes the grand memorial and celebration of this new life within. The Biblical doctrine of salvation and security in an "alien righteousness" is utterly against this popular and perverted concept of new birth.

**Christ Within.** The present age requires clear discernment on the part of God's people because the same words and expressions can be and have been given totally different meanings. We have seen how Rome can use the slogans of the Reformation and yet mean something totally different. The same thing happens with the expression "Christ in our hearts by faith." People get the idea that Christ comes into their hearts so that their inward experience itself becomes "the hope of glory." Instead of directing their whole attention to the majestic, incomparable Person of Christ as exalted Lord in the throne room of God's heavenly temple (Hebrews 8:1, 2; Revelation 11:19), they focus on the human heart as the real throne room of the Lord of glory.

A certain crusade leader proudly introduced his latest convert in the city of Denver: "Tell him about your experience, Harry," said the leader. "Jesus Christ has become so real to me," beamed Harry as he clutched his very over-sized belly, "because I've got him right in here." This sort of talk is dishonoring to the majesty and glory of the Christ who presides at the right hand of God.

***The Spirit-filled Life.*** The truth of justification by faith alone means preoccupation with Christ's experience and not our own. This is what frees us from egocentric concerns so that we may live lives of holiness (Isaiah 53:11).

It sets us at liberty to live for God's glory rather than our own. Much of the current enthusiasm for the "Spirit-filled life" bears little resemblance to the Spirit-filled witnessing which is recorded in the New Testament. The dissimilarity lies in a totally different understanding of the Holy Spirit's work. William Childs Robinson makes this comparison in his book, *The Reformation: A Rediscovery of Grace* (Eerdmans):

Indeed, the enthusiasts so emphasized the sovereign freedom of the Spirit as to sever the connection between the mission of the Spirit and the historical Christ. Their emphasis fell upon the subjective experience of the Spirit in the individual rather than upon the Spirit's mission of enabling the believer to appropriate the redemption wrought by Christ in his incarnate life. . . . God's objective revelation of himself is the work of Christ; God's subjective revelation that of the Spirit. The Spirit speaks not of himself; he takes of the things of Christ and shows them unto us, thus glorifying him (John 16:13-24). In severing this connection, enthusiasm left itself with no objective criterion and exposed itself to the danger of unregulated spirituality. Instead of the saving knowledge of God revealed in Jesus Christ, it offered sundry varieties of religious experience. For, "where the Holy Spirit is sundered from Christ, sooner or later, he is always transmuted into quite a different spirit, the spirit of religious man, and finally the human spirit in general." As Luther pointed out, the Holy Spirit is called a witness, because he witnesses to Christ and to no other. The Apostles declare, "We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord" (2 Corinthians 4:5). . . .

The true Holy Spirit comes from God, from the ascended Christ, and brings in his hand to shed abroad in our hearts the love of God revealed in the death of Christ for sinners. Consequently it is not enough for a preacher to be a religious genius who fancies that by the recital of his own or some others' current experiences he can awaken the dormant

possibilities of religion in the heart of the hearer. Nor is it sufficient to have a philosopher of religion presenting himself as an example of faith or as a possessor of human understanding, or even using the crucifixion of Jesus or the stoning of Stephen as a stimulus to bring an existential decision to a student. While these may give the appearance of devotion to Christ they do not locate the glory of salvation in his atoning work for us. Rather, "the historical revelation of Christ is treated as the stimulus to a subjective spiritual experience in the individual, not as itself the content of that experience. The spiritualist individual experiences his conversion and the resultant spiritual glow rather than Jesus Christ and him crucified," so that "when he bears testimony, it is to speak of his new found peace and happiness rather than to confess that Jesus is Lord."

Representatives of this school frequently declare that it is not the birth in Bethlehem but the re-birth in their hearts which counts, not the cross on Golgotha but their own dedication to live for eternity rather than time, not his bodily resurrection but their own faith in immortality. But true preaching from the Holy Spirit who came at Pentecost leads the hearer back through all his experiences to the source of all true and proper experiences; that is, to Jesus Christ. It calls him to no other faith than faith in the Christ who was born in Bethlehem, who died for our sins on Calvary, who rose from the dead on the third day (172, 173).

We wish that these penetrating comments by Dr. Robinson could be read and re-read by every neo-evangelical. What he says is the heritage of the Reformation. It is the truth of justification by faith alone.

### *Dispensationalism*

Our dispensationalist friends do acknowledge the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Our earnest appeal is that the truth of justification by faith alone, which dispensationalists profess, be allowed to call every system and doctrinal edifice into radical question.

The dispensationalist is comfortable when the doctrine of justification is just one of a number of doctrinal beliefs. But it is a different matter entirely when justification by faith alone becomes so central and all-embracing that it becomes the hermeneutical principle that determines our view of everything else.

No one who genuinely and consistently holds to the apostolic and Reformation principle of justification by faith alone can be a dispensationalist. It is as simple as that, and for the following reasons:

1. The New Testament everywhere testifies that Christ is the fulfillment of Old Testament hopes and promises, "that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus" (Acts 13:32, 33). "For all the promises of God find their Yes (fulfillment) in Him" (2 Corinthians 1:20). In Jesus Christ, God has made an end of sin, abolished death, given Israel peace, wisdom, wealth, and righteousness. In him the old order has passed away and all things have become new (2 Corinthians 5:17). The Old Testament declares, "Behold, the days come . . .," and, "it shall come to pass. . . ." But the New Testament points to Christ and says: "The hour . . . now is . . . ." "This day is this Scripture fulfilled in your ears."

Unless we believe that all that God promised to the Jews has *really* been fulfilled in Jesus Christ, we admit to unbelieving Jews that Jesus is not the true Messiah. Of course, when Jesus comes again, there will be an open disclosure of his victory to the whole world. It has already been accomplished in him. We believe it and possess it all by faith. But it will be openly revealed at the end of the world.

2. Paul tells the foolish Galatians in the plainest of terms that justification by Christ alone (Galatians 2:17) is the blessing which God had promised the seed of Abraham (see Galatians 3). Any Jew who is justified by the righteousness of Jesus Christ has received all that God has promised to Abraham and his posterity.

3. The Gentile Galatians knew that the promises of God were to Abraham and his seed. They desperately wanted to become part of Abraham's family. They were led to believe that this coveted

status could be conferred on them by way of circumcision. Paul was indignantly amazed. He told them that this was a denial of the Gospel. He declared that Christ was the Seed to whom all the promises were made (Galatians 3:16, 19). He is the Seed of Abraham—that is to say, the Israel of God personified. To belong to Christ is to belong to Israel: "if you are Christ's, then are you Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:29). To be in Christ is to be in Israel: "Know you therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham" (Galatians 3:7). Could words be plainer?

How could Christians, above all people, encourage Jews to look to some political events in Palestine for the fulfillment of Old Testament promises instead of pointing to their glorious fulfillment in the Person and work of Jesus Christ? Justification by faith in Christ is the blessing of Abraham. All who have it are children of Abraham without distinction. And these and none else are "the Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16). That is why the truth of justification is a radical "No" to dispensationalism. Dispensationalism could only grow in a climate where the doctrine of justification is not central and all-embracing.

In its method of separating the Old Testament from the New Testament, dispensationalism has its roots in the movement called Enthusiasm. Says Dr. Robinson:

In the interests of the continuity of the Church, the evangelical church likewise opposes the enthusiasts who separate the Old Testament believers from the New Testament faith. . . . Luther's *Introduction to the Old Testament* shows that this part of the Bible was also a book of faith about such believers as Abraham and David. Bucer accepted the patriarchs, who held to the promises, as men of faith; while for Zwingli and his successor Bullinger, "Abraham participated in the one eternal covenant and rejoiced." God has only one people; our faith is a unit with that of Abraham; the New is the further unfolding of the Old Covenant. Calvin shows that all those whom God has adopted into the society of his people are in the very same covenant, for even the Old Testament saint was offered the hope of



immortality, founded on the mere mercy of God and confirmed by the mediation of Christ (*Institutes* II, x, 1-4) (171).

## *Perfectionism*

The crucial doctrine of Perfectionism is that it is possible for the believer, even before his death, to attain perfection. . . . that the believer is able completely to transcend the pollution of sin. In this respect there is considerable agreement between Perfectionism and Catholicism (G.C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans], 49, 53).

Perfectionism may assume a number of forms—some more moderate, like that in the teaching of John Wesley, and some quite radical, like the doctrine of sinless perfection found among some sects. There is the holiness doctrine, which advocates a "second blessing" wherein the "old man," or sinful nature, is crucified in the believer in a second crisis experience subsequent to conversion. There is the "absolute surrender" doctrine of Andrew Murray, which proposes that this is the way to receive the baptism in the Holy Spirit. There are those who advocate victory-life piety without taking due cognizance of the reality of indwelling sin in all believers. And there are those who talk about the indwelling of Christ or the Spirit in substitutionary terms—i.e., as if the Spirit takes over in such a way that he actually lives the victory life for the Christian.

The Reformation, with all its great creeds and confessions, is hostile to perfectionism because it stands on the primacy, centrality, and all-sufficiency of justification by faith alone. It does not deny the necessity or reality of holiness, but it also takes cognizance of the reality of indwelling sin in all believers.

Life cannot be fulfilled in the historical process, and the believer confesses that his completeness is realized only in Christ (Colossians 2:10). The self-condemning utterances of prophets and apostles throughout the Bible (Ecclesiastes 7:20; Psalm 143:2; Philippians 3:11-14; Romans 7:14-25; James 3:2; 1 John 1:8) are not excuses for sin, but

confessions of sin; and the entire church militant must join them in the confession that human nature is sinful. The Biblical truth of *righteousness by faith alone* means that in this life we are not righteous before God by regeneration, baptism of the Spirit, lives of new obedience, or by any inward experience or actual work. We are righteous with God only by faith—and "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). To be inwardly perfect does not belong to the righteousness of faith, but it is the righteousness of good works, of the law (Romans 8:4). To be righteous by faith until Jesus comes implies that in ourselves we will be sinners until Jesus comes, for the righteousness of faith is only for sinners.

"Justification by faith (not perfectionism) is really the only answer to the moral perplexities of the doctrine of original sin" (W.H. Griffith Thomas, *The Principles of Theology: An Introduction to the Thirty-nine Articles*, 193). It is justification which guarantees our glorification at the end of the world (Romans 5:1, 2; 8:30).

Flesh and Spirit must wage a bitter and unrelenting conflict (Galatians 5:17), and hope yearns for the reality of full redemption and righteousness when Christ shall come (Romans 8:23; Galatians 5:5; Hebrews 11:40).

Perfectionism denies the all-sufficiency and centrality, if not the primacy, of justification by faith. It inevitably becomes preoccupied with the inward life. Contrary to the image it seeks to project, perfectionism is not the negation of sin, but the perpetuation of it. In trying to fulfill life and history here and now, it robs the believer of his hope in the there and then.

## *Optionalism*

There is a teaching, very widespread in some circles, which says that if a person once professes to be a Christian, he cannot be lost even if he utterly denies the faith in subsequent word or conduct. This idea makes such a separation between justification and sanctification—and between justification and belief—that it proposes that an unsanctified or

unbelieving man can still be justified. We call this optionalism because it makes a life of holiness—and even belief—optional for professed Christians.

If without adding "by faith," the Bible taught that justification was by grace on the grounds of Christ's righteousness, there might be some grounds for optionalism. But a proper consideration of the instrumental "by faith" utterly rules out this possibility.

Justification by faith means that only the one who believes (present tense) is justified. In most instances the Greek word for *believe* is in the present tense. He who does not presently believe has no grounds at all for supposing that he is presently justified. A Christian is a believer. He is not a man who once believed.

Optionalism not only denies justification by faith alone, but teaches that faith is not a divine gift, and the perseverance of the saints is false.

We must therefore insist that justification is *by faith alone*. As Luther says, he that believes possesses all things, and he that does not believe possesses nothing. Hebrews 11:1 calls faith the "title deeds" ("substance"). Without a present faith, there is no "title deed" to justification. We do not deny—we insist—that there is security for the believer. We deny that there is security for an unbeliever.

We have continually drawn attention to the objective (outside-of-me) nature of God's gracious act in justifying the sinner. The saving action of God took place "outside of me" in the finished work of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the doctrine of justification by *imputation* teaches us that our salvation, righteousness, security, and everlasting life are all outside of us in the Person of Christ. But the error which we are here discussing internalizes "the finished work," and it internalizes security. In much of the literature and teaching which we have examined, optionalism equates the new-birth event with the finished work of Christ and leads people to put their faith in this internal experience as the guarantee of their security. The basis for their assurance is some memory of a conversion experience. It is not the promise, which they do not believe.

## *Legalism*

Legalism bases acceptance with God, ultimately if not initially, on something within man. Fulfillment of the command of God (law) becomes the means to salvation. Like sin, legalism is easier to see in others than in ourselves. Because it is the spirit of sinful man, we are never entirely free from it except by grace.

Legalism can assume a great variety of forms:

First, there is that overt kind of legalism which says that justification is not *by faith alone*, but by obedience to certain commandments. Some say it is by obedience to the Ten Commandments, while others say it is by obedience to the command of baptism or other evangelical duties.

A more subtle variety of legalism is that which makes obedience to "evangelical" laws the means of salvation. Instead of really preaching the Gospel of what Christ has done in winning salvation, it preaches the "gospel" of things man must do—like repentance, confession, surrender, faith, baptism, etc. It is not wrong for advocating the necessity of some of those things, but because it alters the order of salvation. It leaves the impression that salvation comes into existence when *we* take the initiative and *do* these things. Salvation becomes the divine response to human action. This brand of legalism preaches how man comes to God. God does nothing for the poor sinner until he takes the necessary steps. Far different is the Gospel, which proclaims that the sinner may repent, believe, and be baptized only because his salvation has already been accomplished by Jesus Christ.

Then there is a *pneumatic legalism*, which advocates receiving the Spirit by the fulfillment of all sorts of steps and conditions. The condition for receiving the Spirit is perfect righteousness. Legalism places this condition on the back of the believer, whereas the Gospel places it on the shoulders of Jesus Christ.

Legalism has its roots in sinful ignorance—(ignorance of the exalted holiness of God's law on the one hand, and ignorance of the defiled and radical corruption of human nature on the other

hand). The truth of justification by faith alone exposes this sinful ignorance. It proclaims that the law of God is so strict in its claims that only the obedience of him who was filled with all the fulness of the Godhead bodily could satisfy its justice on our behalf. In the light of the inestimable obedience of Jesus Christ, the best we could ever offer the law would be, as Luther said, "rotten stubble and straw."

## *Antinomianism*

Antinomianism means *against-the-law-ism*. It views God's law itself as the real enemy. (Legalism is, paradoxically, a type of antinomianism.) Antinomianism proposes that since the believer is saved by grace alone, he must henceforth have no dealings with the moral law. The age of the Spirit, it is said, has superseded the age of law.

Antinomianism is the essence of the sinful human condition: "Sin is lawlessness," said the apostle John (1 John 3:4), and Paul declares, "the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be" (Romans 8:7).

Antinomianism in one form or another is undoubtedly a principal error in today's churches.

Conscientious obedience to the objective Word of God is often branded as legalism. As an unprecedented flood of lawlessness, crime, and moral corruption is sweeping away the foundations of society, the church itself appears like a shorn Samson before the Philistines. How can a church which has become riddled with antinomian sentiments have any real word of the Lord for a sinful, permissive society? Instead of standing unflinchingly for the moral absolutes of the Ten Commandments, the professing church is often found accommodating God's law to current social norms.

It is perilous to discuss sin. When Eve entered a dialogue with the devil about the forbidden tree, she surrendered her only vantage ground. The mere fact that she entered the dialogue was compromise. What business has the Church to talk with the ungodly about the pros and cons of adultery and homosexuality? If God's Word does not clearly

define sin, each man is left to define it for himself. Man—especially religious man—attempts to take the place of God himself as lawgiver and judge of all. That is why antinomians turn out to be legalists. Arminians tend to be antinomians for they believe that Christ died for all men. The logic of their core belief implies that God will punish none.

Antinomianism needs to be recognized in its varied and deceptive plumage. It does not always blatantly say, "Christ has died for our sins so that we can live as we please since he will not punish anyone." That would be too obviously wrong for some Christians to swallow. The lethal pill may be chocolate-coated, sugar-coated, and honey-coated; but it is a lethal pill just the same.

To start with, we have to agree with the Puritan Walter Marshall, who said that legalism is the worst form of antinomianism. Legalism always pretends to honor the law of God. Yet it does not honor the moral law, but dishonors it. The law of God demands perfect righteousness, and this is satisfied by nothing less than the holy obedience of Jesus Christ. To present to the justice of God's law anything less than the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ is not *legal* (lawful), but *illegal* (unlawful). It is inevitable that the legalist must try to cut the law down to his own size. This is what the Pharisees did. In trying to cut the law down to their own puny standard, they actually made void the law through their traditions. On the other hand, Jesus magnified the law to terrifying proportions. In the light of his exaltation of the law, we see that only in him is there a righteousness with which the law is well pleased.

But let us not run to the opposite error and brand the spirit of conscientious obedience to the commandments of God as legalism. Calvin was prepared to put his life on the line to keep profane persons from partaking of the elements of holy communion. That was not legalism. A pious Welsh lassie was given over to the stake by the consent of Cranmer and Ridley because she believed that she must obey God and be baptized by immersion. Hers was not legalism.

It is a corruption of the message of grace when people think they have to live like the world and despise a disciplined, well-ordered life just to prove that they are not legalistic. This lack of Christian discipline is its own form of legalism—the legalism of thinking that such indifference to law makes a man pleasing to God.

Subjectivism is another form of antinomianism because it tends to substitute the inward experience of "love" or "the Spirit-filled life" for the objective law of God. Without the objective law of God, love becomes blind sentimentalism or situation ethics. Those who are overconfident about being led by the Spirit are in danger of confusing the human spirit with God's Spirit. Who is harder to convince with "It is written" than the enthusiast who is intoxicated with his experience "in he Spirit"? The objective Word means nothing to him when it contradicts his experience.

The notion that love or the Holy Spirit takes the place of the objective law of God goes hand in hand with the teaching of dispensationalism. Dispensationalism proposes that the age of law has been superseded by the age of grace, and sets one against the other. Oswald T. Allis was right when he wrote that dispensationalism is based on antinomian premises (Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* [Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1972], 37-43).

What does the great doctrine of justification by faith alone say to all these forms of antinomianism?

In the first place, God's grace justifies the sinner on the grounds of the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ (Romans 5:18, 19). This righteousness consists in Christ's obedience to the law of God on our behalf. By his sinless life Christ fulfilled every precept of the law, and by his death he satisfied every penalty on behalf of all who would believe on him. God did not save any man by skirting around his law. He did not send his Son to weaken its force or to create a lower standard. As John Flavell said, never was the law of God more highly honored than when the Son of God stood before its bar of justice to make reparations for the damage done.

In the second place, the believing sinner is personally justified when God imputes to him Christ's perfect obedience to the law. This is the Father's robe of righteousness woven in the loom of Heaven. It is therefore utterly inconceivable that a believer can wear the Father's robe while despising his law. Justification is a *legal* term.

Justification means that the believing sinner, through the righteousness of Christ alone, satisfies the requirements of the law. Salvation is not only salvation *from* sin, but salvation *to* holiness. While it is certain that no man is saved by his holiness it is also certain that he is saved *to* holiness. No one is saved by the keeping of God's commandments, but all who are saved are saved *to* a new life of keeping God's commandments. It is impossible to be justified without being sanctified. Holiness is no blissful euphoria or ecstatic froth and bubble. It is a life of obedience to God.

## *Conclusion*

The popular errors which have overrun the churches and which have obscured the clear light of the Gospel are not so different as they may appear on the surface. As Luther remarked about the papists and the Enthusiasts, they are like Samson's foxes—their tails are tied together although their heads are pointing in different directions.

For instance, Pentecostalism and dispensationalism stand opposed to each other in their understanding of the age of the special gifts of the Spirit. But they have a common bond in their denial of the place which the New Testament gives to justification by faith alone. Pentecostalism denies that it brings the fulfillment of God's promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Dispensationalism denies that it brings the fulfillment of God's promises to the Jews.

The heads of legalism and antinomianism may point in different directions, but their tails are tied together. We have seen that legalism is the worst form of antinomianism. Likewise, antinomianism, which puts the leading of an inward experience in the place of the objective law, must end up as the worst kind of legalism.

Each *ism* which we have examined is a radical departure from the truth of justification by faith alone.

The Biblical doctrine of justification places grace, the saving action of God, justification, perfection, security, and the law outside of man. The one thing necessary in man is faith, a gift from God, which abides in the heart by the working of the Holy Spirit. Christian faith is focused outside of oneself on Christ, both for righteousness to stand before God and for guidance to walk before him. The eye of faith sees only Christ in the sanctuary of Heaven at God's right hand.

Beginning with Rome, we have seen that the *mark* of error is that it casts the truth down to the ground, internalizing it within man himself. Rome internalizes saving grace and saving righteousness. Pentecostalism internalizes Christian witnessing, for it witnesses to inner experience. Neo-evangelical subjectivism internalizes the throne room of Christ and his substantial presence. Perfectionism internalizes the Christian's completeness. Legalism internalizes the basis of acceptance with God. Antinomianism internalizes the law. Optionalism internalizes the finished work of Christ and eternal security.

This is all the spirit of sinful man's substituting himself for Christ. Here is the real spirit of the man of sin, the Antichrist who has cast down the place of Christ's sanctuary and "the truth to the ground" (see Daniel 8:11, 12). It is the wine of Babylon by which the enemy has confused God's people and held them in bondage. Yet the messenger who bears the everlasting Gospel, or the truth of justification by faith alone (Revelation 14:6), is followed by another, who says, "Babylon is fallen, is fallen . . ." (Revelation 14:8). Thank God that the hosts of evil have no power to hold the church captive, for the Gospel of Jesus Christ overthrows the strongholds of error. The sanctuary of truth, so long cast down and defiled by the errors which have been smuggled in, is restored to its rightful place through the pure teaching of the everlasting Gospel.

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