



Stand or Fall?

Contemporary challenges to the reformed doctrine of justification

Though you may not have heard of it, the CBA is a strong force in your life, particularly if you are an avid reader of popular Christian books. The Christian Booksellers Association is the trade organization of Christian retailers in North America. Each year, the CBA holds a convention in the United States which brings publishers and retailers together. At this convention are found the men and women who are the major league gatekeepers who essentially get to decide what appears on the shelves of mainstream Christian bookstores, in their flyers and online advertising.

Some years ago, the White Horse Inn radio program did a survey at one of those conventions where a number of questions pertaining to the doctrine of justification were put forward. The results were extremely disappointing. For instance, seventy-one percent agreed with the Roman Catholic notion that justification is the process by which we become holy. However, only fifty-four percent agreed with the teaching of Romans 4:5, namely that *“salvation is for those who do absolutely nothing to help save themselves, but simply trust in a God who justifies sinful people.”* If we go by these survey results, we shouldn’t be surprised that the doctrine of justification is so often ignored, forgotten, or misunderstood by Christians in our day.

But what about us? Are we any better? Do we have a firm grasp on this biblical doctrine? Martin Luther rightly called this doctrine the one by which the church stands or falls. Therefore, in what follows, I will briefly sketch this doctrine and then we’ll look at two contemporary challenges.

Justification described

At its heart, justification is about how a person gets right with God. Naturally, the implication is that we start off with a person who is in the wrong before God. This person is in a courtroom facing God the judge. Justification basically means that the judge of heaven and earth declares that we are right with Him on the basis of what Christ has done for us. Justification is not a process (as the Roman Catholics teach), but a one-time declaration. Once we have been declared justified, we are always justified.

So, it is an acquittal, but it is also more than that. Not only does the judge pronounce us “not guilty,” He also goes one step further and says that we are positively righteous. Everything that Christ has done is given to us and so God looks at us as He looks at his own Son – He sees men and women who have kept his perfect and holy law.

This justification is necessary because we’re sinners. Since we are sinners, the basis of this justification must be entirely and solely in Christ. The only instrument or means by which we receive this justification is faith, trusting and resting in Christ. This is why we say that we believe that justification is by grace alone, through faith alone, and on the basis of Christ’s suffering and obedience alone.

Finally, though it is not properly part of justification, we also have the wonderful truth that after declaring us righteous, the judge adopts us for his children and heirs. In other words, this is the sort of courtroom you will never find on earth with earthly judges and judicial systems. God’s courtroom and the justification that takes place there is entirely unique. For all who believe in Christ, this is all part of the biblical good news.

Narcissism

There are a number of challenges to this doctrine that could be mentioned. Many of them are patently theological in nature and are being discussed in other Reformed circles. However, I would like to focus on cultural challenges that are directly facing us. We began by noting that this doctrine is not well understood or well accepted in broader Christian circles. The reasons for this may be theological in nature, but my reading of the situation is that it may have more to do with worldliness. In other words, this is a matter of Christians becoming too much like the culture around them. By calling attention to some of these challenges, my hope is that we can guard ourselves against losing the precious good news of the doctrine of justification.

The first contemporary cultural challenge is narcissism. Perhaps you've heard or read about the Greek myth of Narcissus. He was a Greek hero famous for being a very attractive man. There are several versions of the myth, but in one of them he had an identical twin sister with whom he would hunt. They dressed similarly and did everything together. Narcissus fell into an incestuous relationship with his sister and then, for some reason, she died. Afterwards, Narcissus saw her reflection in a pool of water and became obsessed with it. He only realized that it was his own image after he tried to kiss it. Narcissism is named after this Greek hero and is simply defined as an obsession with self.

In many ways, our culture promotes and exalts narcissism. *Time Magazine's* person of the year for 2007 was "You." Through the phenomenon of YouTube and other things on and off the Internet, the individual self was crowned person of the year. The July/August 2007 issue of *the Atlantic* reported on a recent university study which showed that narcissism is on the rise and is especially acute among those born after 1982. The researchers speculated that technology, especially that which is based on the Internet, has a lot to do with this trend. They also warned that narcissists *"have trouble forming meaningful relationships, tend to be materialistic, and are prone to higher levels of infidelity, substance abuse, and violence."*

But how does our contemporary turn to narcissism challenge the doctrine of justification? Justification involves what the Reformers called an *"alien righteousness."* In other words, the righteousness we have before God belongs to another; it belongs to Christ. We have to look outside of ourselves to be right with God. Narcissism, on the other hand, directs us to keep looking inside ourselves for everything. When we think about it carefully, that kind of naked narcissism is just another variation on the original lie told to Adam and Eve: *"You shall be as God."*

But it can be more subtle than that. For narcissism also teaches us that there is value in others – we have to look for the value in others so that we can exploit and manipulate them for our own benefit. With all their selfishness, narcissists can still be (and often are) very sociable people. Other people are the means that they use to serve themselves and their interests.

For believers, this can become highly problematic. We say that it is Christ's righteousness which brings us into a right relationship with God. However, we can embrace that in a narcissistic and entirely self-serving way. We need to ask ourselves some hard questions: do we serve God only because of what we can get out of it? Do we embrace Christ merely because we think we can manipulate and exploit Him like we do other people? Or do we serve God because we earnestly desire his praise and glory to be magnified? Martin Luther once reflected on these questions. He pondered whether he would still continue to serve and glorify God if he knew that God was going to condemn him anyway. That's something to think about. Narcissism tells us to serve God merely because of what we can get from Him – to manipulate and exploit God out of pure self-interest. The Bible tells us to serve God because it's the thing we were created for – we were created for his glory.

Busyness

Today, everybody is busy. In fact, if you are not busy (so the thinking goes), you must be lazy or perhaps retired – but even retired people should be busy. Our culture, inside and outside the church, demands that we have a plate full of things to do and not enough time in which to do them.

For many today, busyness is a badge of honour, a measure of one's status. Every week, our local newspaper features a story about a prominent business person. In a side bar, you can read about how many e-mails this person gets each day and other such indicators of their busyness. In our culture, and this includes the church, people are defined by what they do and what they accomplish.

This challenges the gospel of justification because that gospel says that there is nothing *you can do* to earn favour with God. You will never make God owe you anything. As a believer, there is nothing you can do to make God love you more or less. We have to be careful because when we define ourselves in terms of what we do and when we find our identity in our accomplishments, we're not far from denying the gospel. One author has called it "*justification by busyness*." Though we would never say it, the mindset works something like this: if I can work just a bit harder, then I will be successful – God will regard me positively and love me more. That only gets complicated by a desire to impress others with our busyness. In that case, God is being idolatrously reworked into the image of the people around us.

Meanwhile, the biblical gospel of justification tells us that there is nothing we can do to earn favour with the true and living God revealed in the Bible. It's only when we are weak and powerless that we are strong. We're only saved because we have a Saviour who has come down to us. Now more than likely we don't connect our obsession with busyness to a denial of the gospel, but let's be aware that this could be our ultimate destination. We have to find our identity and the basis of our relationship with God, not in what *we do*, in who Christ is and what *He has done* for us apart from us.

The biblical gospel of justification is counter-cultural in every day and age. It goes against the grain of our fallen human nature. That nature always gravitates towards the exaltation of self. Therefore, it takes not only the divine gift of faith to embrace this doctrine, but also its close cousin, humility. We need to pray that God would give us these gifts and continue giving them to us and our children so that, embracing our justification in Christ alone, the church would continue to stand.

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