



Justification and a Final Judgment According to Works¹

In recent discussions of the doctrine of justification, the Scriptural teaching regarding a final judgment according to works has frequently been viewed as a kind of 'future justification' of the believer. Since the Scriptures clearly teach that believers will ultimately be judged according to their works, some have proposed that this judgment represents a final chapter in the story of the believer's acceptance before God. On this view, justification occurs in stages. Believers are justified in the present by grace through faith in Christ. But they will also be justified in the future on the basis of their works performed in obedience to the demands of God's law.

The idea that the final judgment represents the last stage in the believer's justification requires careful examination. The Scripture's teaching that believers will be judged according to their works is undeniable. But should this final judgment be viewed as a sort of final justification? And if it is to be regarded as the final chapter in the believer's justification, what becomes of the Scripture's teaching that the believer's acceptance with God is based upon the righteousness of Christ alone, which is received by the empty hand of faith? Does this not imply that justification is finally based upon faith *and* works, the righteousness of Christ being an insufficient basis for the ultimate acceptance of believers?

In order to address these questions, we will begin by noting two recent forms of the idea that the final judgment according to works ultimately justifies the believer before God. After noting these recent views, we will devote the bulk of our attention to the Scriptural teaching regarding a final judgment according to works. Though we will affirm the doctrine of a final judgment according to works, we will also reject as unscriptural and dangerous the teaching that this event represents the completion of the believer's justification before God.

Two Recent Formulations of the Final Judgment as a 'Final Justification'

There are various recent formulations of the doctrine of justification that regard the final judgment as a kind of last stage in the believer's justification. Rather than attempt to sort through all the forms this emphasis takes, we will restrict ourselves to two examples of this trend that have made some inroads into contemporary evangelical churches.

The 'New Perspective on Paul'

The first of these formulations has emerged within the orbit of what is popularly known as the 'new perspective on Paul'. Among writers who advocate a new perspective on Paul, some argue that the final judgment represents a future phase in the justification of those who belong to Christ's church. For example, N. T. Wright argues that the apostle Paul views justification as occurring in three tenses. He teaches that the present justification of the covenant community is founded upon '*God's past accomplishment in Christ, and anticipates the final verdict*'.² In the past event of Christ's cross and resurrection, God has anticipated what he will do at the end of history, namely, vindicate/justify his people. Through faith believers are united with Christ and benefit from this past event. Baptism, which is the present event that incorporates believers into the covenant, effects this present justification in Christ and at the same time anticipates the resurrection of believers in the future. For Wright, the future justification of believers, which will occur in the context of the final judgment, represents the ultimate stage in the believer's justification. This future justification will be on the basis of the whole life of the believer.³

It is difficult to determine what Wright and other proponents of a new perspective on Paul mean precisely by this future justification. The idea seems to be that Paul taught a doctrine similar to what E.

P. Sanders, another influential author of a new perspective on Paul, terms 'covenantal nomism'. Those who are members of the covenant are brought into the community of faith on the basis of God's gracious initiative. However, in order to 'maintain' their position as members of the covenant community, good works are needed as a basis for a yet-future vindication before God. Believers gain entrance into the covenant family by grace. But they maintain their membership and are finally justified or vindicated by their works. Accordingly, at the final judgment the ultimate acceptance of believers will depend upon their works.

The 'Revisionist' Teaching of Norman Shepherd

Another proponent of the idea that the final judgment will complete the believer's justification is Norman Shepherd. Shepherd's doctrine of justification is notoriously difficult to interpret, but it includes the following relevant points.⁴

First, Shepherd insists that justification consists exclusively in the 'forgiveness of sins', which God grants to believers on the basis of Christ's sacrifice upon the cross. Whereas Protestant theology historically taught that the believer's justification is based upon the imputation of Christ's righteousness, which consists of his entire obedience (active and passive), Shepherd restricts the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer's reception of Christ's passive obedience alone. This means that in the act of justification God does not repute believers to have fulfilled in Christ *all* the obligations of the law (penal and preceptive). The justification of sinners does not mean that God regards them as having obeyed all the positive obligations of the law on the basis of Christ's active obedience.⁵

From the perspective of Shepherd's revision of the doctrine of justification, the traditional view dangerously undermines the believer's obligation to obey the law in order to retain his right standing with God. According to Shepherd, the 'downside' of the traditional Protestant doctrine is the problem of 'anti-nomianism'.⁶

Second, in his formulation of the role of faith as the instrument of justification, Shepherd argues that the language of 'faith alone' excludes only those works that are performed in order to 'merit' acceptance with God. This language does not exclude those non-meritorious works that belong to faith as an instrument for receiving the grace of justification. The instrument that justifies a believer is not faith 'apart from' works, but a 'penitent' and 'obedient' faith.⁷ For Shepherd, it is not enough to say that faith alone justifies and then note further that true faith always produces good works as its necessary fruit. Rather, we must emphasize that justifying faith, in its instrumentality for justification, is an obedient or working faith.

And third, Shepherd explicitly teaches that the obedience of faith is a necessary instrument for the 'maintenance' and 'final justification' of believers. Because Shepherd asserts that justification does not include the imputation of the perfect obedience of Christ to those who are justified, and because the instrument of justification is a non-meritorious, obedient faith, he further teaches that the works of believers are instrumental to their continuance in the state of justification. According to Shepherd, the persistent obedience of the believer is '*necessary to his continuing in a state of justification*'.⁸ Indeed, he maintains that we may even affirm that '*the personal godliness of the believer is also necessary for his justification in the judgment of the last day*'.⁹ This is what the apostle Paul means in Romans 2:13, when he declares that '*the doers of the law will be justified*'.¹⁰ At the final judgment, believers will be justified in terms of their faithfulness in the way of (non-meritorious) obedience to God's law. For our purpose, it is important to observe that there is a formal similarity between these two examples of a final justification of the believer. Whatever may be the significant differences between the positions of the new perspective and Shepherd, in each case the final judgment is interpreted as the culminating phase of the believer's justification before God. Because this judgment is a judgment 'according to works', the conclusion is drawn that we should speak of it as a phase in the ongoing story of how believers find acceptance with God. At the final judgment it will be clear that this acceptance is based in some sense upon works, or the obedience of faith, and not upon the work of Christ alone.

The Scriptural and Protestant View of Justification and the Final Judgment

Justification: A Declaration of the Final Verdict

In order to assess the teaching that the final judgment will be a kind of end-time justification of believers, we need to begin by recalling the traditional Protestant view of justification.

In the historic Protestant view justification is a judicial act of God that *irrevocably* declares that believers are right with God and heirs of eternal life. Justification is not, like sanctification, a process that occurs over time as believers are conformed to Christ by the working of his Spirit. Justification is a declarative act of God in which he pronounces believers righteous. This free justification is wholly based upon the work of Christ, whose righteousness is the exclusive basis for God's justifying verdict. When believers come to enjoy the benefit of Christ's saving work through faith, their justification declares, *here and now*, nothing less than the favourable verdict that God will publicly confirm at the time of the final judgment. If the final judgment were to undo or reverse the verdict already pronounced in the believer's justification, the confidence that *'there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus'* would be imperilled (Rom. 8:1; cf. Rom. 4:25; Rom. 8:31-39; Phil. 3:20; Tit. 2:13).

Nowhere in the confessions of the Reformation is this view more clearly stated than in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. In Chapter 7, 'Of Justification,' it is affirmed that *'God doth continue to forgive the sins of those that are justified; and, **although they can never fall from the state of justification**, yet they may, by their sins, fall under God's fatherly displeasure, and not have the light of his countenance restored unto them, until they humble themselves, confess their sins, beg pardon, and renew their faith and repentance'* (section 5, emphasis mine). The language of this Confession unmistakably declares that justification is a once-for-all judicial act, which secures the believer's right standing with God in a manner that is irrevocable. No room is left for the idea of a future justification that constitutes another stage in the course of the believer's justification.

Since this definitive declaration of the believer's standing with God is based solely upon the righteousness of Christ, the works that play a role in the final judgment cannot be the ultimate basis for the favourable verdict this judgment publicly confirms. The Scriptures clearly assert that the only righteousness that is the ground for the justifying verdict of God is the righteousness revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:21-24; 5:1-2,16; Eph. 2:8-9; Phil. 3:9; 2 Cor. 5:21),¹¹ Since believers are justified by faith 'apart from works', the final judgment's contemplation of the works of believers may not be construed as a justification *by works*, even though such works are the necessary fruits of a true faith. Such works are the evidence of a genuine faith, but they are not the basis for the believer's title to eternal life. To regard the final judgment as a final justification would inevitably compel the view that justification, at least in its ultimate phase, is not a free gift of God's grace in Christ.

The Final Judgment according to Works

Though the justification of believers involves a present verdict that cannot be lost, the Scriptures certainly teach that at the final judgment believers will be judged according to their works (e.g. Rom. 2:6; 2 Cor. 5:10; Matt. 25:31-46). Since the final judgment, like justification, is a judicial act, the obvious question arises: doesn't this imply something like a final chapter in the course of the believer's justification? How are we to understand the relation between the believer's justification here and now, and the believer's acquittal in the future setting of the final judgment?

In order to answer this question, we need to be clear as to the reason even the best works of believers cannot constitute the basis for their justification before God. There are three characteristics of these works that must be borne in mind.

First, they are not the kinds of works that could ever justly deserve the verdict of free justification. In the language of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, such works could never be *'the whole or part of our righteousness before God ... because the righteousness which can stand before the tribunal of God must be absolutely perfect and wholly conformable to the divine law, while even our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin'* (Q. & A. 62; cf. Rom. 1:13; 3:9, 20; 10:5; 7:2.3; Gal. 3:10; 5:3; Deut. 27:6; Lev. 18:5).¹²

Second, the good works of believers are themselves the fruits of God's sanctifying grace at work in the hearts of his people. They are those good works that God prepared beforehand for believers to do (Eph. 2:10). And third, the works of believers are only 'good' in so far as they proceed from faith, the same faith that acknowledges no other basis for acceptance with God than the righteousness of Christ. They are the inescapable fruits of a true and living faith (Matt. 7:18; John 15:5; James 2:18, 22), though faith alone is the instrument whereby believers receive the free gift of justification.¹³

Since even the best works of believers are not such as could justify them before God, their reward is not the gift of salvation itself or the title to eternal life (cf. 1 Cor. 3:14-15). Salvation is wholly a gift of

God's grace in Christ (Rom. 6:13) and therefore it cannot be a reward for good works. The reward that God grants to the good works of believers is undoubtedly a genuine feature of what will occur at the final judgment. However, were the believers' final acceptance with God to depend upon who they are or what they have done, the assurance of free justification would be lost and works would become the way of salvation. This would constitute a denial of justification by the instrumentality of *faith alone*.¹⁴

It should also be remembered that God's bestowal of a reward for the good works of believers is *by grace and not merit*. When God rewards the works of believers, he does not reward them in terms of their inherent value, as though, strictly speaking, there would be a sense in which they 'deserve' this reward. Since the works of believers are always imperfect and stained with sin, and since these works are themselves the fruits of Christ's Spirit at work in them, it is not possible to speak of their reward as properly merited. There is no sense in which the reward God grants for such works could be said to be 'due' believers, as though this reward were like a wage that is due a worker who has satisfactorily fulfilled all his duties (cf. Luke 17:10; Rom. 4:4). Indeed, however genuine and praiseworthy the works performed by believers, their acceptance and reward from God depends wholly upon a *prior acceptance of their persons* for the sake of the righteousness of Christ.¹⁵

Summary

Within the context of these emphases, the Scriptures do teach that believers will not be acquitted in the final judgment, or receive the confirmation of their free justification unless their lives give evidence of the genuineness of their faith. God will not vindicate in the final judgment professed believers whose lives belie their profession. In this respect it is permissible to say that believers will only be vindicated in the final judgment within the context of an acknowledgment of their good works, which prove the genuineness of their faith. The good works that true faith produces are a necessary part of what belongs to the salvation of any believer (a genuine *conditio sine qua non*). But they are not the cause for the salvation of any believer. In other words, believers will only be saved when they embrace the gospel with a faith that produces good works. However, this certainly does not mean that we should view the final judgment as a kind of final chapter in the believer's justification, or view works as the basis for their entitlement to eternal life. To do so would be to subvert the gospel of free grace.

The final judgment and acquittal of believers is 'according to' but not, strictly speaking, 'on account of' their good works.¹⁶ It does not constitute a 'final justification' on the basis of works, but a public vindication of true believers whose lives testify to the work of Christ's Spirit in them. Because true faith is 'ever accompanied with all other saving graces' (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter II, section 2), including good works, the final judgment will openly confirm the salvation of those indwelt of the sanctifying Spirit of Christ. The final judgment will show that the faith that alone justifies is not alone in those who genuinely believe in Christ. None of those whom God justifies freely for the sake of Christ are left in the condition in which they were found. The purpose of the final judgment, accordingly, is to vindicate God's righteousness in declaring his justified and sanctified people to be true recipients of his grace. By contrast, the judgment of the unbelieving and impenitent will publicly declare that they remain in their sins and are deservedly recipients of condemnation and death.

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¹ This article is an abbreviated and revised version of Chapter 10 in my book, *The Gospel of Free Acceptance in Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2006), pp. 2.57-92.

² 'The Shape of Justification' (<http://www.thepaulpage.com/Shape.html>), p. 2.

³ 'The Shape of Justification,' p. 2; and N. T. Wright, *What Did Saint Paul Really Say?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 129. Cf. N. T. Wright, Romans, vol. 10: *The New Interpreters Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), p. 440: 'Justification, at the last, will be on the basis of performance, not possession (of the law).' Wright offers this comment as his interpretation of Romans 2:13 ('For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.').

⁴ My short summary of Shepherd's view is based upon the following primary sources: *The Call of Grace* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2000); *Thirty-four Theses on Justification in Relation to Faith, Repentance, and Good Works* (http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/norman_shepherd/the_34_theses.htm); 'Justification by Faith in Pauline Theology,' in *Backbone of the Bible*, ed. P. Andrew Sandlin (Nacogdoches, TX: Covenant Media Press, 2004), pp. 85-101; and 'Justification by Works in Reformed Theology,' in *Backbone of the Bible*, pp. 103-20.

⁵ 'Justification by Faith in *Pauline Theology*,' pp. 87-9.

⁶ *The Call of Grace*, pp. 4-9.

⁷ 'Justification by Faith in *Pauline Theology*,' esp. pp. 90-4.

⁸ Shepherd, *Thirty-four Theses on Justification in Relation to Faith, Repentance, and Good Works*, Thesis 21.

⁹ *Thirty-four Theses*, Thesis 22.

¹⁰ *Thirty-four Theses*, Thesis 20.

¹¹ The Reformation confessions consistently exclude believers' works as the ground or basis for their justification. See e.g., the *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. & A.s 59-62.; *Belgic Confession*, Arts. 22-24; *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter II; *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. & A.s 70-73; and *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Q. & A. 33.

¹² Romans 2:13, which is adduced by new perspective authors and Shepherd as proof for a future justification that depends upon the believer's works, is a passage of special importance. For an extended discussion of this passage, see my *The Grace of Free Acceptance*, pp. 276-85. In my view the context for this verse supports an interpretation that regards the language, 'only doers of the law will be justified', to be a kind of 'hypothesis contrary to fact'. The whole burden of Paul's argument in Romans 2-4 is that justification is by faith 'apart from works', since 'there is no one righteous, no not one' (3:10).

¹³ Cf. *Belgic Confession*, Art. 24: 'These works, as they proceed from the good root of faith, are good and acceptable in the sight of God, forasmuch as they are all sanctified by his grace. Nevertheless they are of no account towards justification, for it is by faith in Christ that we are justified, even before we do good works; otherwise they could not be good works, any more than the fruit of a tree can be good before the tree itself is good.' A similar emphasis upon the distinction between faith, which alones justifies, and the good works that are produced by faith, is found in the following confessional statements: *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. & A.s 64, 91; *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 11, section 2; chapter 15, section 2; and *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. & A. 73.

¹⁴ In this connection, the Reformation confessions introduce a distinction, which is also found in the writings of John Calvin and other Reformed theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, between the *justification of the believer's person* and the *justification of the believer's works*. Cf. *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 16, section 5: 'We cannot by our best works merit pardon of sin, or eternal life at the hand of God, by reason of the great disproportion that is between them and the glory to come; and the infinite distance that is between us and God, whom, by them, we can neither profit, nor satisfy for the debt of our former sins, but when we have done all we can, we have done but our duty, and are unprofitable servants; and because, as they are good, they proceed from his Spirit; and as they are wrought by us, they are defiled, and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection, that they cannot endure the severity of God's judgment.'

¹⁵ Cf. the remark made by Thomas Chalmers to James Buchanan: 'I would have every preacher insist strenuously on these two doctrines — a present Justification by grace, through faith alone — and a future Judgment according to works. All faithful ministers have made use of both, that they might guard equally against the peril of self-righteous legalism on the one hand and of practical Antinomianism on the other.' James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification* (1867; repr. London: Banner of Truth, 1961, pp. 238-9).

¹⁶ The seventeenth-century theologian, Francis Turretin, expresses this point in more technical language than that used in the confessions: 'However, although in this judgment to each one ought to be repaid "according to his works," as to quality, so that it may be well with the good and evil with the wicked; still there will not be the same relation of good and bad works to the reward and punishment. For evil works indeed will be properly the meritorious cause of the punishment which will be inflicted on the wicked; but there is not the same relation of good works...; rather they will be brought forward not as the causes, but only as the consequence, testimonies and effects of faith and of grace which they obtained in Christ... (T)his pardoning sentence will not be so much a justification of them *a priori* (which is made only from faith and is intimated to them in this life in the court of conscience by the Holy Spirit), as the declaration of it *a posteriori* from their works, as the judgments and proofs of faith...' *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1997), 3:63, p. 603. Turretin's point, to use the language of theology, is that we must not confuse the antecedent (faith alone justifies on account of the righteousness of Christ alone) with its consequent (this faith always and necessarily produces fruits by the working of Christ's Spirit), when it comes to the matter of acceptance with God and the reception of salvation as a free gift.