



The enjoyment of justification

Having considered the nature and ground of justification, we must still take up the important question as to how we may enjoy or receive the grace of free justification.

Q. 61. Why do you say that you are righteous only by faith?

A. Not that I am acceptable to God on account of the worthiness of my faith, but because only the satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ is my righteousness before God, and I can receive the same and make it my own in no other way than by faith only. (Heidelberg Catechism)

Through faith alone

The question of the enjoyment of the grace of free justification can be expressed in different ways. One way to express it is to ask, how does the righteousness of Christ become mine? How do I come to benefit from Christ's work on my behalf? If justification is God's gracious gift, how am I able to receive or appropriate this gift as my own?

The answer of the Reformation to this question is commonly expressed in the phrase, *sola fide*, "through faith alone." Justification, as the free gift of God's grace in Christ, is received through the exclusive instrumentality of faith. This does not mean that the faith which embraces Christ, as we shall see in subsequent articles, is ever a *lonely* or unproductive faith. It is a faith that works through *love*, as Paul says in Galatians 5:16. A "*dead faith*" — that is, one that is not fruitful in a life of good works — does not bring salvation (James 2:14). We may not sever the connection between justification and sanctification; these two aspects of God's grace toward us in Christ may no more be pulled apart than the two natures of Christ be torn asunder (Calvin). But, when it comes to the means by which we obtain the grace of justification, a right standing with God, we must insist that this takes place by faith alone, and not by works.

This is the consistent testimony of the Word of God. For example, in Romans 3:28 the apostle Paul declares, "*For we hold that a man is **justified by faith, apart from the works of the law***" (emphasis mine). Or again in Romans 5:1, "*Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand.*" As you may know, Luther, when translating this verse, inserted the German word, *allein*, "alone," in order to make the point clear. We would call this a "dynamically equivalent" translation, but perhaps it was unwise for Luther to insert it.¹ He captured the point of the text, though. That's the sense of it. We are justified by faith alone. Only in this way can we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Similarly, we read in Galatians 2:16, "*(we) know that a man is not justified by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.*"

The whole argument of chapter four of the book of Romans emphasizes this contrast between "by faith" and "by works." The apostle Paul opens the chapter by citing the example of Abraham, the father of all believers. It was by faith, a faith which was "*reckoned to him for righteousness*," that Abraham was justified. Before he was circumcised, before he did anything in obedience to the law — when he was, before God, merely a sinner — he was reckoned, apart from works, righteous.

Thus, our justification comes through faith (*per fidem*). It is important to notice that the Scriptural language is not that we are justified *on account of faith* (*propter fidem*), as if faith itself were virtuous or the basis for our justification. No, our justification is *on account of Christ* (*propter Christum*) whom we can receive as our own in no other way than by faith only. John Murray, for

this reason, argued that we shouldn't speak of faith as the "instrumental cause" of justification; this tends to suggest incorrectly that faith somehow is a partial basis for our justification. Rather, we should speak of the "instrumentality" of faith, recognizing that faith only serves as an instrument to receive the grace of God in Christ. Now perhaps you are tempted to say, "That's a distinction without a difference." However, Murray's point was to stress how faith brings nothing before God to commend us to His favor. Faith is merely the hand by which we receive what God grants to us in Christ. Faith is, as Calvin described it, a "passive" kind of act; it is content to rest in the work of Another. Faith is an "empty vessel" whose entire life and sustenance is from God's grace in Christ. The language of faith always sings, *"Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling"* (Augustus Toplady).

But one of the questions that is pressing at this juncture is, why is it the peculiar office of faith, and not of works or any other virtue, to lay hold of God's grace in justification? What is it about faith that makes it such a fitting instrument? Now we have to be careful in answering this question, because the answer cannot be simply and solely because faith is worked in us by the Spirit through the gospel. Faith is not the sole instrument of justification simply because it is a gift of God's grace. For we know that our good works are also gifts of God's grace (Ephesians 2:10). Every virtue in us is a gift given us of God's grace. Thus, that cannot be the reason why faith is the exclusive and proper instrument of justification. No, faith is this instrument because it is that attitude or disposition of the heart which finds its sufficiency in Another. Faith humbles us before God, and exhibits a readiness merely to accept the righteousness which is ours in Christ. Such faith is unalterably opposed to all boasting before God, to the idea that there is anything in me that would commend me to Him. This antithesis between faith and works is concisely expressed in Romans 4:16: *"For this reason it is by faith, that it might be in accordance with grace."*

The Reformers groped for the right words to give expression to this. Calvin, as we noted above, spoke of faith as a "passive" thing, as a "vessel" that finds its filling in Christ. Faith is the sinner's acknowledgment before God that Christ alone is our righteousness. We have nothing of our own to commend us to God. Horatius Bonar put it nicely when he wrote: *"Faith is not work; faith is not merit; faith is not effort. It is the cessation of all of these. And the acceptance in place of them of what another has done, done completely and forever."* Faith understands what the great theologian Warfield emphasized when he remarked, *"We are justified, not so much by faith, but by Christ, and faith is our acknowledgment of this."*

This is the uniform testimony of the Word of God. Believers enjoy the grace of free justification when they embrace through faith alone the righteousness of Christ. Justification is by faith alone (*sola fide*) for the same reason that it is on account of Christ alone (*solo Christo*). For faith is content to discover in Christ alone the righteousness that makes us acceptable to God and worthy of His divine favor. Faith desires to boast only in Christ.

Three concluding observations

But now I would like to draw our consideration of the doctrine of justification to a close. I will do so in the form of three concluding observations. These observations are in the form of suggestive remarks. They are by no means intended to be exhaustive. They are offered to prompt your thinking about these things.

First, so far as the subject of "evangelicals and catholics together" is concerned, it may well be possible in this terrible time in which we live — with its "culture wars," its governmentally-sanctioned policy of abortion on demand, its abandonment of biblical morality — that we can be "co-belligerents" with Roman Catholics. And it may well be that we have fallen short of the example set for us by the Reformers in our readiness to speak, meet, and talk with those who represent the Roman Catholic Church. To paraphrase a remark of John Calvin, we should be ready to cross the seven seas, if necessary, to speak with representatives of the Catholic church, if it would serve the cause of Christ and testify to the truth of the gospel.

But we may not craft joint statements that leave unaddressed, or misleadingly stated, the crux of the dispute between Protestant and Catholic. We may not agree to a statement that does not

evangelically bear testimony to the gospel of free justification by grace alone, on account of Christ alone, through faith alone. Unless the statement represents a true consensus of doctrine, we should be wary of statements that compromise the truth that Christ alone is our righteousness before God. Our testimony to the gospel of Jesus Christ, as those who profess to be members of true churches, must include an unyielding testimony against the false church that crowds Christ out; that covers Him over with all kinds of human inventions; that compromises at the most crucial point by affirming merit and a righteousness which is our own, which is in part, though not exclusively, the ground upon which we can stand before God.

What I am arguing for is this: though we may talk to and work with Roman Catholics in various ways as co-belligerents, we may not sign joint statements that generate confusion, that unnecessarily divide the evangelical church and compromise her testimony. The price paid for such compromising statements is too high.

Second, we need to examine whether our own preaching bears clear and eloquent testimony to the doctrine of free justification. To be sure, I can't speak from any first-hand acquaintance with your preaching. But I sometimes wonder, why is the doctrine of justification so misunderstood, so often neglected, so little preached in our day? Perhaps you remember the quip of Martin Luther who, when asked, "*Why do you preach on justification again for the twentieth time?*" replied, "*Well, they have forgotten it after the nineteenth!*" Something like that same spirit ought to grip us as preachers of the gospel. This is our solemn duty: to preach Christ and Him crucified, and then to preach Him again! Remember, you are a friend of the Bridegroom. You have a duty before God to bring before the people of God the indictment that is set forth in His Word; to remind them that in themselves they are guilty and lost sinners; to point to Christ alone as our righteousness from God; to summon those who hear the gospel to believe and trust in Christ alone for salvation.

I rue the fact, for example, that in many Reformed churches the liturgical act of "reading the law" has fallen on such hard times. Admittedly, this act can be carried out more effectively and meaningfully than is often the case. This is not a liturgical observation so much as it is a theological one. But I fear for the church and the minister that will not read the law of God. Why? Because such a church or minister is in danger of losing the doctrine of justification. For this is a doctrine that has everything to do with what Christ has done for us, in fulfilling the law's obligation and suffering its curse on our behalf. How then could you be a friend of the Bridegroom, if you should neglect to tell the bride how the law serves as a "pedagogue" to bring her to Christ? Of course, you are not to preach the law simply as a hammer that crushes (Luther). But you may (and must) preach it as an overture to God's mercy in Christ, as a prelude to the gospel that restores the soul. That's the question we must ask ourselves as preachers: if I take the measure of my preaching, have I been a true friend of the Bridegroom, who not only preaches the law but brings the glory of Christ in all of His sufficiency as the One who answers to our need as sinners? Have I preached in such a way as to summon believers to boast only in the Lord and His righteousness?

And *third*, we need to remember what Calvin in his *Institutes* so wonderfully sets forth as the double benefit of this doctrine. According to Calvin, the doctrine of free justification has two great benefits. One benefit of this doctrine is the peace and comfort that it alone can give otherwise troubled sinners. If you are once gripped by the prospect of having to stand some day before God to be judged, you will want to be sure that every halfpenny of your sins' wages has already been paid. You will want to be confident that Christ fell short in nothing with respect to the law's obligation on your behalf. You will want to be absolutely sure of this. Now, I am not denying for a moment that Christians experience times of doubt and seasons of despair. But the only solid peace we shall ever obtain with regard to our standing before God must be based upon this doctrine. Deny the doctrine of free justification, argues Calvin, and you will be like a leaf blown and tossed about by the wind before God. For the wonderful consolation of this doctrine is that it gives us what the apostle Paul speaks of in Romans 5:1 — peace with God.

But the other benefit of this doctrine is that it gives credit where credit is due. God's honor is not divided between Himself and us. Christ is not presented as half a Savior, whose work we need to complete by our satisfactions, by our stay in purgatory, by our climbing and running and working. A true friend of the Bridegroom, Christ, understands this if he understands anything: what it is to be

jealous for the glory and praise of the Bridegroom in the church. That's what drives you to preach: to declare Christ's praise, the praise of His righteousness, in the assembly of His people!

Incidentally, this observation brings us back to my first concluding observation. Why should we be so anxious to avoid "half" formulations of the truth, to make a premature peace with the Roman Catholic Church? Because we are recalcitrant people who are spoiling for a fight? Not at all. Rather, it is because we want to follow in the pathway of Luther and Calvin, and all the others who have gone before us, by guarding jealously the glory of Christ. It is because we can think of nothing more repugnant to our Christian testimony and calling, than to compromise with a "gospel" that shortchanges the work of Christ. We are not willing, in other words, to be party to any statement of the gospel that falls short in giving exclusive praise to Christ. That's what the doctrine of justification is all about: let him who boasts, boast in the Lord!

Cornelis P Venema

© 2014

www.christianstudylibrary.org

¹ However, cf. R.C. Sproul, who in his *Faith Alone. The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), p. 168, points out that Charles Hodge identifies instances of the insertion of "only" in the translation of this verse in translations prior to the Reformation of the sixteenth century.