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Reformation
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“**P**astor, I’ve been in church all my life and I’ve never heard anyone preach about” (You fill in the blank.) Sound familiar? People tell me they’ve never heard preaching on election, predestination, and human inability. I’m not surprised. But when they tell me they’ve never heard of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, I’m appalled! If this is the doctrine upon which the church stands or falls, then the church is viewing life from a prone position.

If justification can be removed, misunderstood, or at least relegated to obscurity, Satan succeeds. The gospel is lost. What we are left with is “works religion” which damns souls forever, or a subjective, infused grace, which keeps believers confused and frustrated. Our people have no grasp of such texts as Hebrews 10:14, “For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.” As Calvin says, “Unless you first of all grasp what your relationship to God is, and the nature of His judgment concerning you, you have neither a foundation on which to establish your salvation nor one on which to build piety toward God.”¹

Although so many say they’ve never heard a sermon on justification, most evangelical churches and denominations confess the doctrine. They just don’t give it preeminence. As evidence I cite the confession of my own Southern Baptist Convention. In Article 5 of *The Baptist Faith and Message*, we read: “Justification is God’s gracious and full acquittal upon principles of His righteousness of all sinners who repent and believe in Christ. Justification brings the believer into a relationship of peace and favor with God.”²

This two-sentence treatment of justification is subsumed under the general heading of “Regeneration.” This approach confuses inward renewal with an external, legal declaration. It also fails to directly connect the sinless life of Christ and

His atoning death directly with justification. Though I'm not questioning the commitment of the authors of *The Baptist Faith and Message*, I am questioning the wisdom of reducing our doctrinal statement. Compare this dangerously brief treatment with two earlier statements from Baptists in America:

We believe that the great gospel blessing which Christ secures to such as believe in Him is Justification; that Justification includes the pardon of sin, and the promise of eternal life on principles of righteousness; that it is bestowed, not in consideration of any works of righteousness which we have done, but solely through faith in the Redeemer's blood; by virtue of which faith His perfect righteousness is freely imputed to us of God; that it brings us into a state of most blessed peace and favor with God, and secures every other blessing needful for time and eternity.³

Justification is God's gracious and full acquittal of sinners, who believe in Christ, from all sin, through the satisfaction that Christ has made; not for anything wrought in them or done by them; but on account of the obedience and satisfaction of Christ, they receiving and resting on Him and His righteousness by faith.⁴

Both of these statements are superior to the 1963 statement. They do not confuse regeneration and justification. They also explain justification, giving the doctrine its proper place and relationship to other doctrines. The *Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689* considered justification important enough to make it the eleventh of thirty-two articles. The article, "Of Justification," is six paragraphs long! All of these confessions encourage the believer to rest on the finished work of Christ.

Retreat from the objective reality of justification has cre-

ated a modern crisis. A man-centered, inward-looking approach to salvation is now advanced. This has not only injured true evangelism, it has also crippled believers. As a pastor I've seen this inward gaze cause one of two results in a believer's life: (1) Despair. If the believer has a sensitive conscience he realizes when he looks inward that there's still sin in his life. Even at his best, his motives are not completely pure. Such a realization can crush the Christian with doubts and fear. (2) Arrogance. By redefining sin and holiness the believer can be filled with pride. He actually begins to believe he's better than others. Jerry Bridges sums up these two contrasting results:

To lose sight of our unworthiness is to risk exercising our gifts and fulfilling our ministries in a spirit of presumptuous pride, as if God were fortunate to have us on His team. But to focus too much on our unworthiness, to the neglect of God's grace, will effectively immobilize us for His service.⁵

Justification the Cure for Despair

A pastor's view of justification has a tremendous impact on his preaching and his counseling. I am not a psychologist, but a pastor and a minister of the gospel. What I do in private counseling is, in content, no different than what I do in public proclamation. Pastoral counseling is the application of the Word of God to the lives of our hearers. It doesn't matter if they are hearing us corporately or individually.

After twenty years of pastoral ministry it is apparent to me that many believers lack the full assurance of their salvation. This lack paralyzes their service to God. They make frequent mini-pilgrimages to the front of the church "rededicating" themselves. They try every new formula for living the "victorious life" over sin and circumstances. They hang on the words of superspiritual icons hoping for some clue that will free them from bondage. What they need is a good

dose of sound doctrine. Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure*, gives the following diagnosis: “[Depressed Christians] often concentrate on the question of sanctification, but it does not help them because they have not understood justification.”⁶

When talking to believers struggling with assurance of salvation, it is our delight to direct them to an objective reality outside themselves, the perfect righteousness of Christ. Many of these wounded sheep have been told to examine their works, surrender their lives, pray the “sinner’s prayer” again, and, undoubtedly the worst advice yet, “Just don’t worry about it.” Whether or not one is eternally damned should rate as the number one thing to worry about. I never knowingly encourage a person not to engage in self-examination. But self-examination must be done in light of the cross and the finished work of Christ.

Thus, the whole of our Christian life is a constant process of realizing God’s judgment and justification, moving from self-loathing to fixing “our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith” (Hebrews 12:2). It is a process of constantly being stripped of our fig leaves to be clothed with Christ. Joyfully accepting the new heart and the new life that are ours in Christ by the power of the abiding Spirit, we fight earnestly against indwelling sin, never despairing in spite of our failures and weaknesses because our Captain has already won the war to end all wars.⁷

Believers can never be indifferent about sanctification. But they will make no progress in sanctification if they don’t grasp justification first. When a believer can say with understanding, “I want to ‘be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith’” (Phil. 3:9), he has found the cure

for his despair. Richard Sibbes gave these words of comfort, “Grace conquers us first, and we by it conquer all things else; whether it be corruptions within us, or temptations without us.”⁸

Justification the Cure for Self-Righteousness

Just as it is delightful to comfort despairing believers, it’s necessary to afflict self-satisfied professors. Humility is an underrated aspect of Christian character. I have found that as I’ve preached justification by faith alone, many of the comfortable folks begin to get very uncomfortable. That’s not the time to back away, but rather to press the argument harder and further. Folks content in their religiosity, confident of their good works, and oblivious to their pride need to be made uncomfortable. They are in need of the same cure as the despairing, only applied with a different emphasis. Discovering that even the best works are worthy of damnation is humbling. “We carry an evil within us which would cause drought in Paradise itself if it could come there.”⁹

Now, self-satisfied folks don’t often come to their pastor for counsel, but when opportunity presents itself, we must be ready. The believer afflicted with arrogance has lost a clear view of himself and the gospel. God may use a presentation and explanation of the argument of Romans 3:21-31 to humble this arrogance. It is quite possible that part of the problem is rooted in foul, erroneous teaching regarding the Christian life. Maybe they bought into some formula of “victorious living” which has inflated their view of themselves. They need to be reminded that “even the perfected saint in heaven was once a sinner and has a track record that, apart from the grace of justification, would send him to hell.”¹⁰

In counseling both despairing and arrogant church members, it should be considered that they may not really be Christians at all. Perhaps there is good cause for despair, or

perhaps the arrogance is evidence of an unregenerate life. The application of the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone is still needed. Tom Nettles well expresses the place of justification. For the glory of God, and for the sake of our flocks, it should occupy the same place today.

The doctrine of justification was central. This doctrine was defined by Luther's biblical insistence that faith not be viewed as meritorious in any sense. Fallen man can only sin. He can contribute nothing to his right standing before a holy God, nor can he prepare himself for such in any way. . . . Only when the sinner sees himself in hell is he led to find hope in the completed work of Christ alone.¹¹

Pastors, we are called to make this doctrine central in preaching and counseling. Making it central will help insure a true work of grace among the unconverted. It will also aid believers in making real progress in sanctification. Neglecting it will destroy spiritual growth in believers. Even worse, it will leave the deceived comfortable in their deception.

Author

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Endnotes

- 1 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 3, Chapter 11, Section 1 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 726.
- 2 Herschel H. Hobbs, *The Baptist Faith and Message* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1971, revised 1996), 48.

- 3 "The New Hampshire Baptist Confession. A.D. 1833," Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996 reprint) 3:743, 742.
- 4 "Abstract of Principles of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary," James P. Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (James P. Boyce, 1887, republished, no date (North Pompano, Florida: Christian Gospel Foundation), unnumbered final page of volume.
- 5 Jerry Bridges, *Transforming Grace* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991) 157-58.
- 6 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 25.
- 7 Michael Horton, "Filthy Rags or Perfect Righteousness," *Trust and Obey*, Don Kistler, ed. (Morgan, Pennsylvania: Soli Deo Gloria, 1996), 46-47.
- 8 Richard Sibbes, "The Bruised Reed and the Smoking Flax," *Light From Heaven* (Evansville, Indiana: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 1961), 55.
- 9 C.H. Spurgeon, "A Wilderness Cry," *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (Pasadena, Texas: Pilgrim Publications, 1972 reprint), 24:436.
- 10 R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 97.
- 11 Tom Nettles, "A Better Way: Reformation and Revival," *Reformation & Revival Journal*, John Armstrong, ed. (Carol Stream, Illinois: Reformation & Revival Ministries, Spring 1992), 28.