

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

by J. Mark Beach

IF THE TWENTIETH century saw the battle for the Bible, perhaps the twenty-first century is beginning to witness the battle for justification—specifically, the battle for the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone. The literature surrounding justification continues to proliferate at a steady pace. The *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, signed on Reformation Day (31 October) 1999 by representatives of the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation, has been the occasion of much recent discussion.¹

Prior to this, within the ranks of North American dispensationalism, the 1980s and '90s witnessed the “Lordship salvation” controversy. The question at the center of this controversy had to do with whether justifying faith *necessarily* produces the good works of obedience; or, stated differently, whether one can possess Jesus as Savior without also embracing him as Lord. Some evangelicals denied the necessity of Christ’s Lordship in the life of the believer in the work of salvation, positing the idea that justification by faith alone does not necessarily bring forth any consequent fruits of sanctification.²

Meanwhile, in 1994, the joint document, *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium*, was published,

¹ This document was preceded by “Justification by Faith,” published in *Origins* 13 (October 6, 1983): 277-304, which was the product of a group of Lutheran and Roman Catholic theologians in the United States. Among recent publications that interact with “The Joint Declaration,” see, for example, Anthony N. S. Lane, *Justification by Faith in Catholic-Protestant Dialogue: An Evangelical Assessment* (Edinburgh; New York: T & T Clark, 2002); Mark Husbards and Daniel J. Treier, eds., *Justification: What’s at Stake in the Current Debates* (DownersGrove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

² The principal proponents of this view, that is, that salvation may be enjoyed absent Christ’s Lordship, were Zane C. Hodges and Charles Ryrie; the chief opponent of this view was John F. MacArthur’s *The Gospel according to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books/Zondervan, 1988); *Faith Works* (Dallas: Word, 1993). A general survey is provided by R. Alan Day, *Lordship: What Does It Mean?* (Nashville: Broadman, 1993).

affirming the need for evangelicals and Roman Catholics to work together in the common cause of Christian mission inasmuch as they are brothers and sisters in Christ.³ The controversy surrounding this document largely turned on the question of justification by faith alone, for the document made the joint affirmation that believers are “justified by grace through faith because of Christ,” and added: “Living faith is active in love that is nothing less than the love of Christ.” The document did not however affirm faith *alone*. In that failure many evangelicals believed that the Protestant doctrine of justification had been forfeited. This caused a heated controversy within the conservative ranks of evangelicalism.⁴

Within the circle of conservative North American Calvinism and Presbyterianism, Norman Shepherd’s views on justification and good works have also been the source of some rancorous dispute and debate. Inasmuch as Shepherd rejects the idea that good works merely follow after justification, and since he argues that faith is always accompanied by its fruits, he finds suspect the locution “justification by faith alone.” Faith is never *alone* as the instrument of justification, for Shepherd. Moreover, since faith is logically prior to justification, and since faith is never alone but always accompanied by the fruits of faith (that is, penitential good works)—so that these accompanying fruits qualify faith as true (justifying) faith—the consequence is that, for Shepherd, the fruits of faith (good works) are likewise logically prior, not merely subsequent, to justification. Shepherd’s doctrine of justification, then, appears to preload good works into the faith that would take hold of Christ, or stated differently, it seems that Shepherd refuses to distinguish justifying faith as an act of accepting Christ, so that believing sinners seek refuge in Christ and enjoy union with him, from faith as a theological virtue. For Shepherd, faith produces works of love and these works of love qualify faith to be the instrument for the believer’s union with Christ. The Belgic Confession (Art. 24), however, argues that believers are justified by

³ Printed in *First Things* (May 1994): 15-22. It was first available through BASIC Truth Ministries, P.O. Box 504M, BayShore, NY 11706. Also see “The Gift of Salvation” in *First Things* (January 1998): 20-23.

⁴ One of the most outspoken critics of *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* has been R. C. Sproul; see his *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

faith in Christ, “even before we do good works.” Therefore, as the exclusive instrument of justification, faith cannot be defined by good works, for the good works of faith must be sanctified by God’s grace. “Otherwise,” according to the Belgic, “they could not be good, any more than the fruit of a tree could be good if the tree is not good in the first place.”⁵

Even prior to these controversies a new scholarly consensus within New Testament studies was emerging in the reassessment of Paul and Palestinian Judaism, sometimes referred to as the New Perspective on Paul.⁶ This broad reassessment argues in opposition to the once dominant Protestant view, which viewed Second Temple Judaism, in its departure from the Old Testament, as a

⁵ See Norman Shepherd, *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing), 2001; idem, “Justification by Faith Alone,” *Reformation and Revival Journal* 11 (Spring 2002): 75-90. In critique of Shepherd see David VanDrunen, “Justification by Faith in the Theology of Norman Shepherd,” *Katekōmen* 14/1 (Summer 2002); Cornelis P. Venema, review of *The Call of Grace*, by Norman Shepherd, *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 13 (2002): 233-250; O. Palmer Robertson, *The Current Justification Controversy* (Unicoi, Tennessee: The Trinity Foundation, 2003); and also W. Robert Godfrey, “Westminster Seminary, the Doctrine of Justification, and the Reformed Confessions,” 127-148, in *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine: Systematic Theology at the Westminster Seminaries: Essays in Honor of Robert B. Strimple*, David VanDrunen, ed. (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2004). Godfrey notes the influence of Daniel P. Fuller’s book *Gospel and Law: Contrast or Continuum?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), as a significant move away from both dispensationalism and covenant theology, and so, with reference to the latter, also a move away from the Reformed understanding of justification. He points to responses to Fuller in *Presbyterion* 9 (Spring-Fall 1983). Quotations of the Belgic Confession are taken from *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1988).

⁶ Among the vast literature on the New Perspective, the most accessible introductory accounts are E. P. Sanders, *Paul, Past Masters*, ed. Keith Thomas (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); and N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997). For a weightier account, see E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977); in critique, see Seyoon Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective: Second Thoughts on the Origin of Paul’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid, eds. *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001-2004).

species of “works religion.” New perspective proponents, on the contrary, maintain that the apostle Paul, in articulating his teaching on justification, was not waging a polemic against a legalistic Judaism, for such did not exist. On the contrary, Second Temple Judaism was a religion of divine grace, for a person was introduced into God’s gracious covenant in the way of election to salvation, and that privileged status was forfeited only by serious and sustained transgression. The apostle’s polemic against the Judaism of his day, then, was not a matter of a grace religion (Christianity) opposing a works religion (Judaism); instead, it was a matter of an inclusive religion (Christianity), being inclusive of Jews and Gentiles, in opposition to an exclusive religion (Judaism), for Judaism required Gentiles to become Jews in order to know salvation.

This analysis, however, is a shallow portrait of the Protestant Reformer’s understanding of Second Temple Judaism, and an even more shallow portrait of their conception of divine salvation—as if the sole test for a doctrine of salvation to qualify as gracious is whether God takes the initiative in establishing the covenant, so that he creates the covenant community. By the standards of confessional Calvinism, or the Reformed consensus expressed in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed confessions, the doctrine of salvation encompasses not only the divine initiative in bringing persons into a covenant of love, grace, and fellowship with God, but also in keeping them in that covenant relationship. A religion of works can take on many forms, and in fact comes in all sizes, shapes, and colors, so to speak. If corrupted and guilty human beings are welcomed into God’s covenant by divine initiative, but must subsequently labor from their own resources and ability in order to abide in the covenant and under God’s favor—and that apart from God’s persevering grace in their lives—then divine grace in the work of salvation has been forfeited.

The affirmation that God, according to his grace, is the initiator of a covenant relationship, introducing sinful human beings into his favor and fellowship, does not as such qualify as a religion of grace. Multiple factors play into this issue: the nature of human depravity, perseverance in faith, God’s irresistible grace, the efficacious character of the atoning work of Christ, and the import of unconditional election. It might well be the case that Second Temple Judaism is not a religion absent divine grace, but the mere presence of a covenantal scheme and the divine initiative in the

work of salvation does not render it a religion of grace per se. In fact, following the documentation of the new perspective, it seems more accurate to characterize Second Temple Judaism, speaking anachronistically, as a species of Pelagianism or semi-Pelagianism, for although God's grace is the origin of the covenant relationship and even the impetus for bringing persons into that covenant, it does not preserve them in the same. Instead, covenant members, while called to faith, persevere in the covenant arrangement by their works. Whatever label is assigned to it, Second Temple Judaism, as presented by E. P. Sanders and others, remains a form of legalism or a religion of works (despite the features of divine grace manifest in it). It therefore does not qualify as a religion of grace, and the apostle's contentions with its proponents in his epistles fits the Reformation portrait.

Many of the articles that follow in this issue of the *Mid-America Journal of Theology* examine certain features of the justification controversy, or treat matters that are related to contemporary debates surrounding justification. The first article, however, by William Vander Beek is unrelated to these debates. He offers an exegetical and biblical-theological analysis of the import of the Word of God in the epistle to the Hebrews.

Cornelis Venema's article analyzes and evaluates N. T. Wright's exegesis of Romans 5:12-21, especially with respect to the doctrine of justification that has historically been elicited from those verses, as well as his exegetical method. He finds Wright's exegesis and method disappointing and unconvincing in significant ways.

F. V. Fesko rebuts the deconstruction of Calvin's doctrine of justification by some recent writers. Among other things, Fesko demonstrates that Calvin held to the logical priority of the remission of sins and imputation of Christ's righteousness, or justification, to sanctification and good works.

In this issue we also present a treatment of justification from the seventeenth-century Reformed theologian, Leonard van Rijssen. This article, translated from Latin by J. Wesley White, and coming from Rijssen's polemical manual on Reformed theology, demonstrates the kind of debates that enveloped the doctrine of justification in a former age, and shows itself to be instructive for the church today.

Under "Notationes," John Y. May contributes an essay on faith, which is likewise relevant to certain debates surrounding the doctrine of justification, since the burden of the Reformed

confessional view is that justification is by faith alone. What is the nature of justifying faith? Indeed, what is faith? And what does it do?

In this issue of the journal we introduce a new section entitled “Homiletica and Homiliae,” that is, homiletics and sermons. The aim here is to explore the heritage of Reformed homiletics and sermonizing. In subsequent issues, the editors hope to publish both older and contemporary Reformed sermons, along with essays and reflections on the homiletical task. In this issue we offer a sermon on 2 Peter 1:5 by Peter du Moulin, a devout Calvinist and Anglican, who treats a topic of abiding concern for believers: a fruitful life of faith.