

Justification in Contemporary Discussion by Dr. Cornelis P. Venema

This issue of the *Messenger* includes an insert, which is composed of several

brief articles by our faculty on different aspects of the doctrine of justification.

Some of our readers are no doubt aware that there are a number of debates regarding the doctrine of justification swirling about within the Reformed and Presbyterian community in North America. These debates, as well as ecumenical and biblical reassessments of the Reformation view of justification, suggest that at no time since the sixteenth century has the doctrine of justification been more in discussion or dispute.

We trust that our readers have no doubt where Mid-America and its faculty stand on this subject. We remain convinced that our confessional standards present a clear and ringing testimony to the teaching of Scripture. If you have any doubt regarding our position, we invite you to read what the Reformed confessions declare regarding justification. In the language of the Form of Subscription, which each member of our Faculty is required to sign, we believe that these confessions “do fully agree with the Word of God.” Since some recent formulations of the doctrine of justification within the Reformed community have led to confusion and uncertainty regarding this doctrine, we believe that it has become necessary to state unequivocally what we believe.

What is it that we believe and confess regarding justification? Exactly what the Heidelberg Catechism says in Lord’s Day 23, Q/A 60: “How are you righteous before God? Only by a true faith in Jesus Christ; that is, though my conscience accuse me that I have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God and kept none of them, and am still inclined to all evil, yet God, without any merit of mine, of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never had nor committed any sin, and myself had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me; if only I accept such benefit with a believing heart.”

May our generation of believers be able to express this gospel as clearly and unambiguously as our Fathers in the faith who have gone before us!

The Covenant of Works and Justification

by Prof. J. Mark Beach

It has become popular in some Reformed circles to reject the doctrine of

covenant of works as something less than Scriptural. The allegations come in heaps: the covenant of works introduces works' righteousness into the divine/human relationship; it makes the law greater than the gospel; it sets up a merit-religion; it supposes that humans can earn their way into God's favor; it regards God as unloving towards His unfallen human creatures. Given these sorts of allegations, in opposition to the covenant of works some propose instead a covenant of love, or a covenant of friendship; or some other administrative arrangement that isn't a covenant.

These criticisms are quite remarkable as they bespeak a regrettable ignorance of classic Reformed doctrine. One form of theological error is to set up a false dichotomy, and such we find here. Are we to believe that God's law can be set in opposition to God's love? Are we to believe that the law isn't an expression of God's goodness? Are we to understand that friendship with God is set against obedience to God? Has obedience to God become optional? The contemporary denial of the covenant of works would have us oppose God's love to God's holiness, or His goodness to His justice.

Against these criticisms, the Westminster Confession of Faith points us back to the Creator/creature relationship: "The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto Him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of Him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which He hath been pleased to express by way of covenant" (VII, 1). A couple of things deserve comment here. First, the Creator/creature relationship is distinct from and more fundamental than the covenant relationship. Humans as creatures exist without rights before God, and only obtain rights if He grants such to them. Second, as human creatures we owe God all obedience, apart from any specific covenant stipulation or any other arrangement—we owe *God* all that is due Him *as God*. Without the covenant arrangement in paradise, however, our obedience does not issue into fellowship with God and eternal blessing. God condescended and established a covenant relationship with us in order to bless us. As the Confession states: "The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience" (VII, 2). Here we are shown that the covenant of works is an expression of God's favor toward His human creatures, for in this covenant God displays His loving favor toward Adam, so that in walking in obedience before God, honoring God's holiness and justice, in keeping His law, he, with his posterity, might be ushered into the fullness of fellowship with God and eternal life.

Adam violated the covenant of works, so that now the entire human race is under the curse or negative sanction of that covenant (Rom. 5:12). Instead of eternal life, we are under the sentence of eternal death. God, however, has not left us to our sin and misery. He has intervened with a second covenant arrangement, called the covenant of grace. The covenant of grace announces that God provides the way of salvation in His Son, Jesus Christ, the Surety or Guarantor of this covenant (Heb. 7:22), who suffers the curse of the covenant of works, the penalty for sin, and fulfills the law's positive obligation and requirements on behalf of sinners (1 John 2:2; 2 Cor. 5:21). It is here that the doctrine of the covenant of works intersects with the doctrine of justification by faith alone. By Christ's active and passive obedience, fulfilling the law of God and suffering its penalty, sinners are rescued from their sin (Rom. 4:24, 25). The doctrine of justification declares that sinners are reckoned righteous in God's sight, not on the basis of their *own works* or their *own merits* but on the basis of *Christ's work* and *His merit* (2 Tim. 1:9; Eph. 2:8; Phil. 3:9). Salvation is God's free gift to us, since Christ's works are the basis of every blessing bestowed upon sinners (Rom. 6:23; 8:32). Salvation is not free, however, with respect to God's provision: Christ Himself. For Christ, according to the covenant of grace, meets the requirements of the covenant of works. In this way, God does not abandon His holiness in welcoming sinners to Himself.

The Law-Gospel Distinction

by Dr. Nelson D. Kloosterman

The phrase “law and gospel” has long been understood as a biblical model for understanding how God and humanity relate

throughout history. The Law reveals what man must do as a creature to live in covenant with God. The Gospel reveals what God has done for fallen man, in order to restore him to a right relationship with God. Already you can hear a *contrast* between God demanding and giving, between man’s doing and receiving, and thus between the “law” and the “gospel.”

Today some people are insisting that this pattern of thinking is mistaken. They argue that in reality, the law *is* the gospel, and the gospel *is* the law. After all, they argue, the law expresses divine grace, and the gospel comes with obligations.

These critics are aiming at the wrong target, however. When it comes to our justification, there is an absolute antithesis between doing and believing (and thus between law and gospel)—since we who are dead in sin can *do* absolutely nothing to attract divine acceptance. The real problem is not the distinction between law and gospel, but the *abuse* of that distinction.

The Bible teaches that God’s good and holy law functions in various ways.

Creation: In Paradise, the law was God’s good gift for ordering life and revealing His perfect will. Our heavenly Father gave His children everything needed to serve Him in faithful obedience. Divine permission to eat of every tree was the context of God’s prohibition of eating from the one tree (Gen. 2:16-17). At this point in history, man’s relationship to God’s law was wholly positive and delightful.

Fall: But when Adam and Eve fell into sin, mankind’s relationship to God’s law changed. The universal message and verdict of the law for every human being is: “. . . for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). For every person living in sin apart from Jesus Christ, the law only accuses, condemns, and threatens. It’s as though the sound of Father’s voice terrifies the conscience-stricken sinner, who seeks to cover his ears and to run in rebellion. Apart from Jesus Christ and His forgiving mercy, the continual accusations and threats of the law lead to either despair or hypocrisy.

Redemption: Thankfully, our heavenly Father did not remain silent after our Fall into sin, but spoke the gospel of a coming Savior (Gen. 3:15). Those drawn by His mercy and grace, impelled by the Holy Spirit, come to this Savior and believe. They readily confess their sins and repent from them as the Holy Spirit brings them to faith. The gospel announces that God supplies a Savior who has perfectly obeyed this law and has borne God’s just curse for our disobedience of this law. Through the Holy Spirit generating belief in this gospel, believers are brought again into a positive relationship with God’s law, so that with David (Ps. 19, Ps. 119), and Paul (Rom. 7), they can sing now in joyful praise about God’s law, because the Holy Spirit has written the law of God on their hearts (Jer. 31:33).

In Paradise, God’s law was experienced positively by Adam and Eve, because they were for a time listening faithfully to their Father. After the Fall, and *apart from Jesus Christ*, every person born in sin and totally depraved by nature is hostile toward God and His law; the law *only* accuses and condemns such a person. Once the grace of forgiveness and renewal grips a person’s heart and life, Jesus Christ through His Spirit produces within the believer’s heart a joy and delight in God’s law.

Shall we keep the distinction?

Perhaps now you can see why it is very important to maintain the distinction between “law” and “gospel.” At the point of the sinner’s acceptance by God for the sake of Jesus Christ, the law-weakened-by-flesh (Rom. 8:3) is absolutely antithetical to the gracious life-giving gospel. This distinction helps to express properly the relation between God’s eternal righteousness and our post-Fall depravity, and between God’s life-giving grace and our thankful obedience. To distinguish between “law” and “gospel” is not to deny their essential unity and harmony. This distinction faithfully describes how God’s unified Word was enjoyed in Paradise, was distorted by sin, was restored in the gospel, and endures through eternity. Although its modern critics properly warn of the abuse that can result from this distinction (as though Christians live only under grace, with no obligation to the law of God), we gratefully observe that the Bible’s remedy for this abuse is carefully summarized for us in the church’s confessions.

Justification and Its Distinction From Sanctification

by Prof. Alan D. Strange

The redemption purchased by Christ becomes ours through its

application to us by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:3-14). The Spirit begins His work by regenerating us, enabling us to believe and repent (John 3: 5-8). It is not this inward renewal and all that accompanies it, however, that makes us acceptable in the sight of God. We must be thoroughly holy, as was Adam before the Fall, to enjoy the approbation of God (Ps. 24: 3-5). But how, in the sin that accrues to us after the Fall (Rom. 5:12-21), can we approach a holy God?

Inward renewal addresses the question of our pollution in sin. We are not only defiled by sin, we are also guilty (Rom. 3:9-20); the guilt of Adam's first sin is imputed to all descending from him by ordinary generation (Westminster Shorter Catechism 16, 18). No amount of inward renewal is sufficient to remove this guilt. As James Buchanan wrote, "guilt cannot be extinguished by re-pentance or even by regeneration; for while these may improve or renew our character, a divine sentence of condemnation can only be reversed by a divine act of remission." And this is where justification comes in (Rom 3:21-28; 8:30).

Justification is God's declaring sinners righteous not only "by pardoning their sins," but by "imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them" (2 Cor. 5:18-21; Gal. 2:16; WCF XI:1; cf. BC Articles XXII-III). The instrument of justification is faith alone, whereby the sinner receives and rests upon Christ alone (Phil. 3:9). Even then, faith is not the cause of our justification. Since faith is a gift, the cause of our justification is God's grace (Eph. 2:7-8), grounded in the active and passive obedience of Christ, the only mediator between God and man. The ground of justification is the work of Christ in which he takes our sin upon Himself and fully pays its penalty, giving us in exchange the record of perfect law keeping that is His.

Justification, as John Murray wrote, is to be distinguished from the decree of God and the once-for-all work of Christ for us. It is not even that regenerative work of God in us "but it is an act of God, accomplished in time, wherein God passes judgment with respect to us as individuals." Murray adds, "justification would have been the basic religious question even if man had never sinned because it would be the question: how can man be just with God? How can a man be right with his maker?" Man has sinned, however, and now the question is: "How can man become just with God? There is no more important or ultimate question than our individual relation to God. It is the basic religious question."

Murray is not alone in regarding justification as "the basic religious question." Luther expressed the same sentiment when he affirmed that the doctrine of justification through faith alone, apart from works, was "the article upon which the church stands or falls." While it is quite true that Calvin developed the doctrine of sanctification with a fullness that one never finds in Luther, and that Calvin treated the doctrine of inward renewal (regeneration or sanctification) in the *Institutes* prior to his treatment of justification, Calvin too regarded justification by faith alone as "the main hinge on which religion turns." Calvin said that a man "can meet and satisfy God's judgment" either through "the wholeness of his works" or through faith in Christ. But the first path is not open to sinners (Rom. 4:5-8). Apart from faith, sinners cannot satisfy the law's demand for perfect righteousness: "Justified by faith is he who, excluded from the righteousness of works, grasps the righteousness of Christ through faith, and clothed in it, appears in God's sight not as a sinner but as a righteous man." In summary, Calvin said, "we explain justification simply as the acceptance with which God receives us into his favor as righteous men. And we say that it consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness."

The Reformers never sought to tear apart sanctification from justification as alleged by Rome, which mixed them together. But by distinguishing between justification and sanctification, as does WLC 77, they made it clear that believers can know we are even now fully acceptable to God, since all believers are equally free "from the revenging wrath of God, and that perfectly in this life, [so] that they never fall into condemnation."

The Place of Good Works in the Christian Life

by Prof. Mark D. Vander Hart

At the time of the Reformation one charge often leveled against the

Protestants was that their stress on justification by grace alone, received through faith alone, would lead to indifference and wickedness. The response to this charge was uniformly to say that it is impossible for anyone who is engrafted into Christ by true faith “not to produce fruits of gratitude” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q/A 64).

The benefits of Christ’s work are at least twofold: in justification we are declared righteous, apart from our works, solely on the basis of Christ’s righteousness imputed to us. In the second benefit we are renewed in the image of God in order to live as new creatures for God (Westminster Confession of Faith, Art. XIII). This was anticipated in the Old Testament when God promised a new covenant with His people, a covenant in which the elect will be truly forgiven but also the law of God will be written on the heart, in the inner man (Jer. 31:31-34).

The finished work of Jesus Christ secures our forgiveness in His blood, but Christ also then ascends to the Father and sends the promised Holy Spirit so that by the regenerating work of that Spirit, we are born again. Regeneration of the heart flows out into a life that is transformed. Our Lord declared that a good tree will produce good fruit (Luke 6:43-45). In Luke 7:41-50, Jesus shows that the forgiveness of our spiritual debt (many sins, v.47) prompts a response of love and devotion.

Christ points out that this fruitfulness of love and good works comes only in union with Him (John 15:5). Apart from any works of ours, we are saved by grace alone. In union with Christ’s finished and efficacious work, we do good works, those very things that God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:10; cf. WCF, Art. XVI).

Rather than stifling good works, a right understanding of justification acts as a godly support and encouragement for works that please God. Consider this: if we were to live always wondering where we stood with God, anxiously concerned whether our works could stand under God’s holy scrutiny, we could never stand because even “the very best we do in this life is imperfect and stained with sin” (HC, Q/A 62). If the Christian life were based upon self-love or the fear of being condemned, it would never please God and glorify Him.

Additionally it is not the case that justification is God’s act while sanctification is our act. Some might think that God does “His part,” and now we do “our part.” As Christians live out their lives by a true faith, one that is not dead or vain, sanctification is God’s gracious action in us. Christians will do good works “because Christ by His Spirit is also renewing us to be like Himself, so that in all our living we may show that we are thankful to God for all He has done for us, and so that He may be praised through us” (HC, Q/A 86). True faith lays hold of Christ and all His benefits, but faith is never alone. In fact, true faith arises in the life and experience of Christians precisely because the Holy Spirit has regenerated the heart and begun a transformation of the life. While no Christian achieves experiential perfection in this life, we attribute to God alone the fact that His work in us is effective, and Christians begin to live “according to all, not only some, of God’s commandments” (HC, Q/A 114). This living is not done with reluctance, but the grace that has appeared, bringing salvation to all God’s elect, makes Christians zealous for good works (Titus 2:14). Good works are the evidence that our faith is alive in Christ and not a mere profession of our lips, which is a dead faith (James 2:14-26).

Thus Reformed churches have never hesitated to confess both a right understanding of justification and also the necessity of doing good works (Belgic Confession, Art. XXIV). As the good tree produces good fruit because the tree is made good, those renewed by Christ through His Spirit will begin the new obedience. Good works are never the ground of Christian assurance, for they merit nothing from God. At the same time good works are fruits that help assure the Christian that Christ is renewing us by His Holy Spirit (HC, Q/A 86). Whatever reward God gives for the good we do, is wholly of His grace, a grace that is secured by Christ alone.

Justification and The New Perspective on Paul

by Dr. Cornelis P. Venema

One of the most significant developments in recent studies of the

writings of the apostle Paul is the emergence of what is known as the “new perspective on Paul.” Though advocates of this new perspective differ on a number of points, they generally agree that the “old” perspective of the Reformation is no longer acceptable. According to authors of the new perspective, the Reformed understanding of the gospel, which emphasizes the teaching of justification by faith alone, fails to understand properly Paul’s teaching. If this claim of the new perspective is true, something of a revolution is needed in our understanding of the gospel.

In order to understand why the new perspective argues for a different view of justification, it is necessary to distinguish three prominent features of its understanding of the apostle Paul.

First, the new perspective is shaped by a new view of the Judaism with which Paul was acquainted. E. P. Sanders, a student of “Second Temple Judaism” and an influential advocate of the new perspective, maintains that the Reformers misunderstood Paul’s doctrine of justification because they misunderstood his opposition to Judaism. When the Reformers, for example, opposed the medieval Roman Catholic teaching of justification by works, they read Paul’s epistles as though they were addressed to a similar legalistic error among the Judaizers of the first century. The new perspective rejects this view of Paul’s doctrine of justification by arguing that no such legalism existed within Second Temple Judaism in Paul’s day. Judaism always exhibited a “pattern of religion” (Sanders’ language) that regarded membership in the covenant to be “by grace,” though it was maintained by works of obedience to the law.

Second, the new perspective contends that Paul’s view of the law was shaped, not by his opposition to legalism, but by his opposition to Jewish *exclusivism* or *nationalism*. James D. G. Dunn and N. T. Wright, two prominent authors of the new perspective, insist that, when Paul speaks of the “works of the law,” he is referring to obedience to the “boundary marker” requirements of the law (e.g. circumcision, dietary laws, feast day observances). When Paul says that no one is justified by the works of the law (Rom. 3:28; Gal. 2:16), he is not exposing the boast that obedience to the law would obtain God’s favor. Paul uses this language to reject the policy of Judaizers who were unwilling to admit Gentiles into the covenant people, unless they first submitted to the special obligations of the Mosaic law that distinguished Jews from Gentiles.

And third, the new perspective offers a different view of what Paul means by “justification.” Since Paul was not formulating his doctrine of justification in the face of legalism, and since he was addressing Judaizers who were excluding Gentiles from the covenant community, his doctrine of justification was formulated to identify who belongs to the covenant family. Justification by faith refers to Paul’s teaching that the only “badge” of identity required from God’s people is faith in Christ. Justification is all about who belongs to the people of God, particularly, that God’s worldwide family includes Gentiles as much as Jews. It is not primarily about how guilty sinners can find favor with God. To say that a believer is not justified by “the works of the law,” is simply to say that Gentiles may be included in the covenant without having to become Jews.

Though there are some commendable aspects of this new perspective on Paul, discerning Reformed believers will quickly recognize its serious errors and continue to hold to the “old” Reformation perspective. When Paul speaks of justification, he clearly teaches what the old perspective on Paul taught. Against those who boasted of their covenant privileges and obedience to the law, Paul offers a withering indictment of all sinners, Jews and Gentiles alike (Romans 2-3). By the standard of the law of God, all sinners stand condemned before God (Rom. 3:19-20). Only those who by faith are joined to Christ, crucified and risen from the dead, have a share in His righteousness and are acceptable to God (Rom. 4:25; 5:16-17). For Paul, justification has everything to do with the salvation of guilty sinners whose only hope of acceptance with God is based upon the substitutionary obedience, sacrifice, and righteousness of Jesus Christ (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 23). Only the old or Reformation perspective on Paul captures the heart of the gospel’s message of God’s “amazing grace”—that “Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:6).