

SAYING “JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE” ISN’T ENOUGH

by J. Wesley White

Introduction

IF ANY DOCTRINE deserves to be called “the central dogma” of the Reformed Church, it is the doctrine of justification by faith alone. The four professors of Leiden in their Synopsis of Pure Theology wrote, “The topic of justification in theology is easily foremost and most saving. If it be obscured, adulterated or overturned, it is impossible for purity of doctrine to be retained in other *loci* or for the true Church to exist.”¹ John Calvin called it “the principal ground on which religion must be supported.”² Zacharias Ursinus wrote that “if [this doctrine] is overthrown, the other parts of our faith easily fall to pieces.”³ Thus it is apparent that this doctrine was one of the most central to Reformed theologians.⁴

¹ Cited in Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. G.T. Thomson, rev. & ed. Ernst Bizer (London: Wakeman Great Reprints), 543. See also the quote from Walaeus in the same paragraph.

² John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), trans. Henry Beveridge, 2 vols. (Repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), III.xi.1.

³ Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G.W. Willard (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956), 324-5.

⁴ For similar statements see Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, Vol. II, trans. Bartel Elshout, ed. Joel R. Beeke (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1993), 341; Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Vol. 2, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994), XVI.i.1; Herman Witsius, *Economy*

The doctrine of the Reformed Church on this topic is often summarized by the Latin phrase *sola fide* (faith alone) or “justification by faith alone.” However, it is important to understand that even this phrase is liable to misinterpretation and must be carefully explained. Johannes Wollebius explained that the full sense of the phrase “we are justified by faith’ is a metonymy and equivalent to ‘we are justified by Christ’s merits apprehended by faith.’”⁵ This is what Reformed theologians intended to convey when they said “justification by faith” or “justification by faith alone.”

It is therefore important for historical and theological understanding that we carefully understand not only the slogan but also its fuller exposition and definition. This is true for two reasons. First, there are some inherent difficulties in understanding the doctrine. Witsius noted, “As this subject is the foundation of all solid comfort, so it is full of mysteries and perplexed with many controversies.”⁶ This first point is even more the case because man’s fallen nature, as VanderKemp noted, always seeks to imagine that his own righteousness is either a part or all of his righteousness before God.⁷

The second reason why we must carefully define what we mean by *sola fide* is because of heretics. Ursinus remarks that this article is the one that is “most frequently called in question by heretics.”⁸ Brakel even goes so far to say that “when new errors appear on the horizon, even when they initially do not pertain to justification at all, they in time will eventually culminate in

of the Covenants between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity, trans. William Crookshank (London: R. Bynes, 1822, Reprinted Den Dulk Foundation, 1990), II.viii.1.

⁵ Johannes Wollebius, *Compendium Christianae Theologiae* (Oxford, 1658), I.xxx.8.

⁶ Witsius, II.viii.1.

⁷ See Johannes VanderKemp, *The Christian Entirely the Property of Christ in Life and Death Exhibited in Fifty-Three Sermons on the Heidelberg Catechism*, Vol. 1, trans. John M. Harlingen (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1997), 489.

⁸ Ursinus, 324.

affecting this doctrine.” Brakel concludes from this phenomenon that we “must therefore be all the more earnest to properly understand, defend, and meditate upon this doctrine.”⁹ As with most doctrines, the attacks of heretics forced the Church to make their formulations of doctrine even more explicit.

The problem that is encountered in this topic is that all will say that they believe in justification by faith. Thus Louis Le Blanc writes,

Scripture teaches in many places and ways that we are justified through and by faith such that no Christian can have doubt on this point. But theologians do not agree among themselves about the way this is to be understood and in what sense the Holy Spirit attributes the justification of the sinner to faith.¹⁰

Thus no professing Christian would deny that justification is by faith. The real question is, “What exactly does that phrase mean?” Similarly, various Reformed opponents could use the term “by faith alone” (if they were allowed to define the terms). For example, the Socinians defined faith as “trusting and obeying Christ.” They defined the works excluded from justification as “meritorious works.” With that understanding, they could say the words “justification by faith alone” but actually mean “justification by trust in and obedience to Christ and not by perfect obedience to the law.”¹¹ In light of this situation, the Reformed had to explain very carefully what they did and did not mean by the phrase “justification by faith alone.”

In this article, we wish to examine what Reformed theologians meant by each term in the phrase “justification by faith alone” and provide an overview of the debates that surrounded each term. We intend to show that there is a clear demarcation between the Reformed view and that of their opponents. Second, we shall briefly illustrate the utility of such an analysis for

⁹ Brakel, 341.

¹⁰ Louis Le Blanc, *Theses Theologicae* (London: Moses Pitt, 1675), 279.

¹¹ For citations and further explanations see below in the section “by faith.”

clarifying debates in our own day by examining the views of Norman Shepherd on the doctrine of justification.

First Term: Justification

The meaning of the word “justification” was at the heart of the debate between Rome and the Reformed. The Reformed asserted that “this word is very frequently and ordinarily used in a declarative sense, and signifies to account, declare, and prove someone just.”¹² The understanding of this word as declarative determined the whole structure of the doctrine, and so Reformed theologians generally began their discussion of this topic with a careful analysis of this word.¹³ Indeed, although the Reformed recognized that there were different senses of the word “justification,” yet, as Turretin says along with most other Reformed theologians, “we maintain that it is never taken for an infusion of righteousness.”¹⁴ Thus, for the Reformed, the word is declarative and not transformative.

In contrast to this, the Romanists generally claimed that the word was not declarative but transformative, or, to put it another way, that it involved a change of the thing itself (*realis*) rather than of status. Thus Martin Becanus (d. 1624), a Roman Catholic apologist, wrote in the first paragraph of his disputation on justification, “Justification is nothing other than a transformation or change (*mutatio*) by which an ungodly person becomes righteous just as a cure is a transformation by which someone who

¹² Witsius, II.viii.2.

¹³ For example, Witsius, II.viii.7-15 and Turretin, XVI.i. Leonard Rijssen in his *Summa Elencticae Theologiae* (Edinburgh: George Mosman, 1692) began his chapter on justification with several theses including a definition of justification. He then seeks to defend the definition by arguing this question, page 222, “Does the word ‘to justify’ in the topic of justification mean ‘to infuse holiness’? Or rather ‘to acquit of guilt’? No to the former and yes to the latter against the Papists.” His arguments are nearly identical to what we find in Calvin, III.xi.3. See also Heppie, 543-4.

¹⁴ Turretin, XVI.i.5.

is sick becomes well”¹⁵ Justification, then, for Rome, means basically “to make righteous” and not “to declare righteous.”¹⁶

Since justification is actually a transformation of the sinner from being righteous to unrighteous, it is not surprising that Rome condemns “justification by faith alone.” We find this condemnation in *The Council of Trent*, Sixth Session, Canon IX:

If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone, meaning that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification, and that it is not in any way necessary that he be prepared and disposed by the action of his own will, let him be anathema.

But, we might ask, if justification is simply a transformation, then how can they affirm justification by faith at all? The Council answered this question in Chapter VIII of the same session:

But when the Apostle says that man is justified by faith and freely, these words are to be understood in that sense in which the uninterrupted unanimity of the Catholic Church has held and expressed them, namely, that we are therefore said to be justified by faith, because faith is the beginning of human salvation, the foundation and root of all justification.

Thus we see that Rome was also ready to affirm justification by faith. In light of Canon IX, we might say that they could even affirm “faith alone” (as long as they could qualify it as not meaning “that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification, etc.”).¹⁷ So even though Rome could say

¹⁵ Martin Becanus, *Manuale Controversarium* (Franciscum Metternich, 1696), I.xvi.1. See also Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Patrick Lynch (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1974), IV.16.

¹⁶ The view of Becanus is directly contradicted by William Bucanus, “What is the form of justification? Not *metabolē*, mutation, or any motion of alteration, whereby righteousness is attained by the shunning of evil and endeavoring to do good for this is proper to sanctification.” Cited in *A Body of Divinity or the Institutions of the Christian Religion*, trans. Robert Hill (London: Pakeman, Roper, and Tomlin, 1659), 371.

¹⁷ See James Sadolet, “Letter by James Sadolet, a Roman Cardinal, to the Senate and People of Geneva; in which he endeavours to bring them back to the

“justification by faith,” they meant it in a radically different sense than did the Reformed.

Second Term – By Faith

The Reformed View – “By Faith” Means “By Christ”

The disagreement between the Reformed and their opponents becomes even more apparent when we come to the discussion of “by faith.” Since the Reformed defined justification as a declaration that someone is righteous, it is important to understand that this “righteousness” on account of which we are justified is not ours but Christ’s.¹⁸ Thus Edward Leigh called the Reformed view simply “justification by Christ” both to indicate the positive content of the doctrine and contrast it with that of their opponents.¹⁹

Campegius Vitringa gave a helpful overview of this point in his *Doctrina Christianae Religionis* by an examination of the various words that are used in the Hebrew and Greek to explain this doctrine. Of course, the word *dikaiousunē* means “righteousness” and *dikaioō* means “to justify,” but he distinguished *dikaiousunē* from *dikaiōma* which he defined as “that on account of which someone is justified or that on account of which someone is absolved by the judge and this or that good is adjudicated to him.” He then went

allegiance of the Roman Pontiff,” in *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, volume one, part one, eds. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet, trans. Henry Beveridge (1844; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), page 9: “Moreover, we obtain this blessing of complete and perpetual salvation by faith alone in God and in Jesus Christ.” For Calvin’s response to Sadolet’s use of “faith alone,” see his “Reply by John Calvin to Letter by Cardinal Sadolet to the Senate and People of Geneva,” in *Selected Works of John Calvin*, vol. 1, 42-43.

¹⁸ We are therefore justified by “an alien righteousness” or “the righteousness of another.”

¹⁹ Edward Leigh, *A System or Body of Divinity* (London: William Lee, 1662), 716.

on to cite Romans 5:19 to show that Christ’s *dikaiōma* is that on account of which we are declared to be righteous.²⁰

Other Reformed theologians also emphasize adamantly that it is Christ’s righteousness that is the basis of the declaration that we are righteous. Piscator wrote,

To speak properly, that which is in a man is not said to be imputed to him but that which is without a man. And faith is in a man, but Christ’s satisfaction which faith apprehends is without a man; whereby it comes to pass that it is imputed unto man by faith. That is to say, it is accounted his so that man is esteemed in this place as if he had performed the satisfaction for himself.²¹

The Westminster Confession states simply that justification occurs by “imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto believers.”²² Similarly, Johannes Heidegger writes, “[Our righteousness] does not cease to be a legal righteousness, since [it differs] from evangelical not essentially...but as regards the circumstances alone, Christ being put in the sinners’ place, fulfilling the *dikaiōma* of the law.”²³ Thus it is not our own righteousness that is declared to be our righteousness (or justification) but the righteousness of Christ that becomes ours through faith. This point is determinative for their understanding of justifying faith.

²⁰ Campegius Vitringa, *Doctrina Christianae Religionis Per Aphorismos Summatim Descripta* (Franeker: Franciscus Halma, 1714), 210-5.

²¹ John Pisactor, *A Learned and Profitable Treatise of Man’s Justification* (London: Thomas Creed, 1599), 30. See also Le Blanc, “Among Protestant theologians it is certain that faith, although living and active, is not that righteousness by which we stand before the severe judgment of God or even a part or the beginning of that righteousness (251).” See also Thesis 54 on the same question on page 260.

²² *Westminster Confession of Faith*, XI.1.

²³ Cited in Heppe, 548, see also the rest of the discussion Heppe, 546-50 and for additional examples see Bucanus, 367; the controversy in Rijssen, 228; Jerome Zanchius, *Confession of the Christian Religion* (London: John Legat, 1599), XIX.9; Turretin, XVI.iii; Witsius, II.viii.38; VanderKemp, 473-4; and Brakel, 360.

The Opponents' View – Faith Itself is our Righteousness

Since, for the Reformed, Christ's righteousness was the righteousness on account of which we are justified, it could not be faith itself that was our righteousness before God. Thus Mastricht emphasized that "this faith of ours may in no sense be our *dikaiōma* or part of it or depend on our strength."²⁴ The *Westminster Larger Catechism* asks,

How does faith justify a sinner in the sight of God? Answer. Faith justifies a sinner in the sight of God, *not because of those other graces which do always accompany it, or of good works that are the fruits of it, nor as if the grace of faith, or any act thereof, were imputed to him for his justification; but only as it is an instrument by which he receives and applies Christ and his righteousness.*²⁵

However faith may be involved in justification, the Reformed consistently denied that the righteousness on account of which we are declared righteous (justified) is our faith.²⁶

In contrast to this, the opponents of the Reformed asserted that it was faith itself that was our righteousness before God. Thus Rijssen set up the debate by asking, "Is faith itself, whether alone or including love, accepted by God as our righteousness? No against the Remonstrants."²⁷ Turretin also explained that this is a major dividing point between the Reformed and their opponents: "All our opponents agree in this—that faith justifies properly and by itself and so is our very righteousness—but with some differences."²⁸ Edward Leigh also emphasized the importance of

²⁴ Cited in Heppel, 555.

²⁵ Q. & A. 73 (emphasis mine).

²⁶ The main text used to prove the opposite is Rom. 4:3 with Gen. 15:6. See Turretin's response in XIV.vii.10. He said that it is "imputed organically because it is the instrumental cause which apprehends the righteousness of Christ." Thus it is similar to the passages such as Luke 7:50 that teach that "faith saves." Turretin commented on this verse, "Faith is said to save us, not by meriting something in order to justification, but only receptively and organically because it was the instrument receptive of the benefit" (XIV.vii.17).

²⁷ Rijssen, 223.

²⁸ Turretin, XVI.vii.3.

explaining the meaning of “by faith” clearly because, “The Papists, Socinians, and Remonstrants all acknowledge that faith justifies, but they mean by this obedience to God’s commandments and thus make it a work and do not consider it as an instrument receiving Christ and His promise.”²⁹

The Remonstrant and Socinian views were very similar in that they believed that faith itself was graciously counted as our righteousness before God. Thus, for them, it was not Christ’s righteousness that was the basis of the declaration that we are righteous. When we read the definition of justification in *The Racovian Catechism*, we might be tempted to think that there is nothing wrong with it: “What is justification? It is when God accounts us for just, which he does when he forgives our sins and endues us with eternal life.”³⁰ But the problem occurs because the Socinians did not say that we are accounted righteous on the basis of Christ’s righteousness imputed to us. The faith by which we are justified, according to the Socinians, includes both confidence in Christ and *obedience to God’s commands*. Thus the *Catechism* asks, “Do you then include obedience under faith? Answer. Yes, for . . . Christ has promised [eternal life] only to those who obey Him.”³¹ Thus, for the Socinians, faith itself was that righteousness on account of which we are justified.

Similarly, the Remonstrant view also considers faith itself as our righteousness.³² Arminius’ successor, Simon Episcopius,

²⁹ Leigh, 730. He goes on to say, “A Papist, a Socinian, and a Protestant will say, ‘We are justified by faith,’ but ‘as a disposition,’ says the Papist; ‘as a condition,’ says the Socinian; ‘by applying’ says the Protestant.” See also Bucanus, 378; VanderKemp, 490-1.

³⁰ *The Racovian Catechism* (Broer Janz, 1652), 152-3. This is the chapter on justification.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 140-141. Here the catechism explains faith.

³² This is what the Synod of Dort condemned in the Second Main Point of Doctrine, Rejection of Errors IV: “Who teach that what is involved in the new covenant of grace which God the Father made with men through the intervening of Christ’s death is not that we are justified before God and saved through faith, insofar as it accepts Christ’s merit, but rather that God, having withdrawn his demand for perfect obedience to the law, counts faith itself, and

provided a good overview of the Remonstrant view in his *Disputationes*.³³ In his dispute on justification, he wrote that it is not therefore “correct to say that it is Christ’s righteousness whether active or passive ... [that] is imputed to us but it is the basis for imputing faith itself as righteousness for those who believe in Christ.”³⁴ This, of course, does not mean that it is in itself worthy of such a reward or merits it, but it is “a condition that the New Covenant demands and requires without which God does not want to impute righteousness and forgive sins.”³⁵ Thus the Remonstrants also considered faith itself as the righteousness on account of which we are justified.³⁶

Since both groups held that faith itself was the righteousness by which we are justified, they opposed the Reformed view that justifying faith was an instrument by which we take hold of the merits of Christ. Accordingly, the Socinian, Smalcius, boldly wrote, “Away with this dream of receiving the merit of Christ through faith!”³⁷ And Episcopius wrote, “[Faith] cannot properly be called an instrument but a condition that the New Covenant demands and requires without which God does not want to impute righteousness and forgive sins.”³⁸ Thus we see that while the opponents of the Reformed did claim that faith justified, they explained it an entirely different sense than the Reformed. Christ’s righteousness, for them, was not the righteousness by

the imperfect obedience of faith, as perfect obedience to the law, and graciously looks upon this as worthy of the reward of eternal life.”

³³ Simon Episcopius, *Disputationes Theologicae Tripartitae in Operum Theologicorum, Pars Altera* (Amsterdam: Johannis Henrici Boom, 1665). The *Disputationes* are found in the Parte Secunda, 386-460. The Disputation on Justification is found on page 454.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Disputation XXII.4.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, XXII.6.

³⁶ We hardly need to add here that the Romanists considered our faith as the righteousness by which we are justified. See Turretin, XVI.vii.14 where he “prove[s] against the Romanists that faith does not justify dispositively or meritoriously as the beginning and roof of righteousness.”

³⁷ Cited in Johannes Hoornbeeck, *Socinianismi Confutati Compendium* (Lugduni Batavia: Felicem Lopez, 1690), 726.

³⁸ Episcopius, XXII.6.

which we are justified, and faith was not an instrument receiving Christ’s merits.

The Reformed View of Faith – An Instrument

Since the Reformed taught that it was Christ’s righteousness that is the basis for the declaration that sinners are righteous, what was the role of faith? Quite simply, it was an instrument which receives Christ. Thus we go back to Wollebius’ definition, “The phrase ‘we are justified by faith’ is a metonymy and equivalent to ‘we are justified by Christ’s merits apprehended by faith.’”³⁹ Ursinus gave a helpful explanation of this in his *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*:

The act which belongs properly to faith is to apprehend and apply to itself the righteousness of Christ; yea, faith is nothing else than the acceptance itself or the apprehension of the merits of Christ.... When we say ‘we are justified by faith only,’ the sense is that it is not by meriting but only by receiving.... If we were justified on account of our faith, then faith would no longer be the acceptance of the righteousness of another, but it would be the merit and cause of our own righteousness; neither would it receive the satisfaction of another, for it would no longer stand in need of it.⁴⁰

Thus we see how the two elements went together. The ground of our acceptance before God was the righteousness of another; therefore, faith could only justify by receiving that righteousness. “Faith [is] said to justify because it receives and embraces the righteousness offered in the Gospel.”⁴¹

³⁹ Wollebius, I.xxx.8.

⁴⁰ Ursinus, 331.

⁴¹ Calvin, III.xi.17. See also Leigh, 730; Rijssen, 225; Wollebius, 204; Bucanus, 379; and Heppe, 553-55.

The Third Term – “Alone”

The Reformed Argument for and Definition of “Alone”

The proper understanding of the term “alone” flows logically out of what has been already said. Thus Zanchius concluded from the definition of “by faith”:

Since to be justified by faith in the sight of God is nothing else but to be accounted righteous by the remission of sin and the righteousness of Christ apprehended by faith and this only is true righteousness; whereas, whatsoever inherent righteousness there is in us and whatsoever good work we do is such as cannot stand in the sight of God...it most plainly appears that our belief concerning justification by faith alone is most certain and most true.⁴²

Since it was Christ’s righteousness that was the ground of the verdict of “righteous” in God’s court, none of our works could contribute to it. Christ provided for us a positive verdict in God’s court; therefore, there was nothing left to do but receive it. This is the first reason why the Reformed said that it was faith alone that justified.

The other side of the argument was that the Apostle Paul excludes absolutely all works from our justification. Leigh summed up that argument this way:

We are justified only by faith, for what else do all those negatives in Scripture mean: “not by works” (Rom. 9:11, Gal. 2:16, Tit. 3:5), “not of works” (Rom. 11:6, Eph. 2:9), “not according to works” (2 Tim. 1:9), “without works” (Rom. 4:6), “not through the law” (Rom. 4:13), “not by the works of the law” (Rom. 3:20), “without the law” (Rom. 3:27), “not but by faith” (Gal. 2:16)?⁴³

⁴² Zanchius, XIX.7.

⁴³ Leigh, 731.

All these verses formed the backbone of the argument that it is “by faith alone” that we are justified. This argument was so universal and well established that Witsius could say:

I know not by what right the very learned man [Dr. Cave] takes it for granted that by the works of the law, which Paul excludes from justification, are understood works before conversion, done without faith, by our own strength, which popish fiction the Protestant champions have so often and so solidly refuted, that it is amazing [that] a Protestant is found who again patronizes it.⁴⁴

One of these “Protestant champions,” no doubt, was Calvin who rebuked those who would say that only certain types of works are excluded from justification when he wrote, “But they observe not that in the antithesis between Law and Gospel righteousness, which Paul elsewhere introduces, all kinds of works, with whatever name adorned, are excluded (Gal. 3:11-12).”⁴⁵ This is the key to the argument for faith alone. All works of whatever kind are excluded from our justification.⁴⁶

This meant, first, that it was only faith that was the instrument of justification. Thus the German theologian Crocius wrote, “Even if faith is never alone but is supported by good works as its fruits, yet it alone grasps Christ’s merits and so alone justifies, even without the concurrence and assistance of works.”⁴⁷ Piscator made the same point against Bellarmine when he wrote,

⁴⁴ Herman Witsius, *Conciliatory or Irenical Animadversions*, trans. Thomas Bell (Glasgow: W. Lang, 1807), VIII.5.

⁴⁵ Calvin, III.xi.14. Consider also Piscator’s debate with Bellarmine who claimed “that by the works which are opposed to faith and excluded from justification are understood works which go before faith and which are done by the only strength of free will and not all absolutely” (31). Piscator responded that Paul “speaks of works in general, whether they be done by the strength of free will or by grace (32),” and also “in Gal. 2 he speaks in general of the works of the law (37).” See the whole chapter for this discussion, 30-41.

⁴⁶ Brakel, 360: “The exclusion of works from justification cannot be stated in a more clear and absolute sense than the apostle does in these and in other texts.” See also, 360-3, 373-6.

⁴⁷ Cited in Heppe, 561.

Although faith justifies after the manner of a cause, yet it justifies alone. For it justifies as an instrumental cause apprehending Christ's satisfaction, for which only we are justified. And there is no other instrumental cause whereby Christ's satisfaction is apprehended.⁴⁸

Thus faith alone meant that although the Holy Spirit works love as well as faith in the one justified, love never concurs with faith or contributes any efficacy to faith in justification.⁴⁹ Faith takes its efficacy from Christ's righteousness, and faith alone takes hold of Christ's righteousness.

Secondly, even faith as a work is excluded from our justification. This is an application of what we have already said about the righteousness of Christ and that faith itself is not that righteousness by which we are justified, and is further confirmed by the exclusion of all works whatsoever from our justification. Burmann explained the point this way: "Indeed, faith is so opposed to works in this matter that it even excludes itself, if it is considered as a work. Although regarded by itself it is a work, in justification it is not regarded after this manner but purely as an instrumental work."⁵⁰ Likewise, Ursinus wrote that "all works are excluded from our justification, yea even faith itself in as far as it is a virtue or work."⁵¹ The exclusion of all works thus defines the role of faith in justification. Faith does not justify because it does

⁴⁸ Piscator, 91. We also note that Piscator did not teach that faith justified because it produced obedience: "Although God's grace whereby a man is justified leads him by faith unto good works, yet it is not in that respect that man is said to be justified by faith . . . but he is said to be justified by faith because by faith he lays hold of Christ's satisfaction for which only he is justified" (34).

⁴⁹ Witsius made the same point when he said: "The whole comes to this, that no faith justifies, but that which is living and fruitful in good works. . . . But that those acts of love, holiness, and conversion concur with faith to justification and are included in justifying faith, as such, is a strange way of speaking to reformed ears, nor agreeable to scripture, which always, in the matter of justification, sets faith in opposition to all works whatever" (II:viii.53). See also Turretin, XVI.viii.6.

⁵⁰ Cited in Heppe, 554.

⁵¹ Ursinus, 331.

something or because it is a work or obedience, but it justifies simply by receiving Christ and His righteousness.

The Response of the Socinians, Remonstrants, and Romanists

The opponents of the Reformed could not deny that the Bible states that we are justified by faith without works. Consequently, they tried to explain such passages in a different sense than the Reformed. They did this in two ways. First, they tried to define faith in a way that included obedience. Second, they defined the works that Paul excludes from justification as only certain types of works and not all works.

First, the Socinians argued that faith included obedience to the commands of Christ. In the Racovian Catechism we have the question:

What is that faith which is of necessity attended with salvation? Answer. It is a confidence through Christ on God; whence it appears that faith in Christ comprehends two things. First, we confide not only in God but also in Christ. Next, we are obedient unto God, not in those things only which He has commanded in the law delivered by Moses and are not abrogated by Christ, but also in those things which Christ has added to the law. Q. Do you then comprehend obedience under faith? Yes.⁵²

We have already noted how the Socinians did believe in a forensic justification by faith, but we see here that they included obedience and works in faith. Episcopius said in a similar way that good works are not taken away in justification because faith “by its nature contains them in itself and includes them.”⁵³ In contrast to the Reformed, who always emphasized that the obedience that flowed from faith was one thing and justifying faith another thing, the Remonstrants and Socinians sought to make them virtually the same thing or give them a relationship of part to the whole.⁵⁴

⁵² *Racovian Catechism*, 140-1.

⁵³ Episcopius, XXII.10.

⁵⁴ Witsius in *Economy* strongly stated that they are two different things: “It is also false that faith and new obedience are one and the same thing. I own that

But ultimately the question of faith alone turned on the question of whether Paul excludes all works or only certain types of works from justification. Typical of the arguments of the Reformed opponents is that of Becanus. In writing of the “adversaries” use of Eph. 2:8-9 and Rom. 3:28, he responded:

They conclude from these that we are justified by faith. How? Because the Apostle opposes works; therefore, when he says that someone is justified by faith without works, he excludes all works besides faith. Therefore, he also excludes the acts of fear, hope, love, and repentance. I respond that works are twofold. Some precede faith; others follow. The Apostle excludes the first sort and not the second.⁵⁵

This is also the way that the Socinians argued. After the *Racovian Catechism* asserts that obedience is part of faith, we read:

But why does Paul the Apostle oppose faith to works? Answer. In those places where he opposes faith to works, he speaks of such works as contain perfect and perpetual obedience which was by God required under the law but not of such works as comprehend that obedience which God requires of us who believe in Christ.

In that way, the opponents of the Reformed thought they could overthrow the Reformed doctrine of justification by faith alone. They attempted to define the works that Paul excludes from justification as “certain types of works” rather than “all works.”

faith is a virtue or grace, commanded by the law of God and that a believer, by his very believing obeys God. I likewise confess that we are to look upon nothing as a true and living faith, which is not fruitful in good works. But yet faith is one thing, and the obedience flowing from it quite another, especially in the matter of justification, of which we now speak, where Paul always contradistinguishes the obedience of all manner of works to faith” (II.viii.48).

⁵⁵ Becanus I.xvi.14. Ott, on the other hand, says that they are ceremonial works: “When St. Paul teaches that we are saved by faith without works of the law (Rom. 3:28)...he understands by faith, living faith, active through love. By the works of the law he means the works of the law of the Old Testament, for example circumcision” (IV.18).

These attempts fell basically into two categories. The first category was to make “works” mean “ceremonial works.” The second category was to make “works” mean a particular type of moral work, whether works done before regeneration, according to the rigor of the law or not done out of faith. Calvin referred to this second category in the *Institutes* when he said, “The Sophists, who delight in sporting with Scripture and in empty cavils, think they have a subtle evasion when they expound works to mean such as unregenerate men do.”⁵⁶ As he continued the discussion, he then referred to the first category, “Here they have an ingenious subterfuge, one which, though not of their own devising, but taken from Origen and some ancient writers, is most childish. They pretend that the works excluded are ceremonial, not moral works.”⁵⁷ His response is based on a discussion of Galatians 3:10-12, “Unless they are themselves raving, they will not say that life was promised to the observers of ceremonies, and the curse denounced only against the transgressors of them.”⁵⁸ This debate was at the heart of the argument over justification by faith alone. Reformed theologians commonly used these two categories to prove their own view and refute their opponents’ view.⁵⁹

The Reformed opponents, then, could certainly admit justification by faith and oftentimes even “faith alone,” but, in all cases, they had to define it according to their own terms. Thus the Remonstrants and Socinians could easily say that we are justified by faith alone as the only condition of the new covenant, but they could not say “faith alone” if it meant that we are “we are justified by Christ’s merits apprehended by faith.”⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Calvin, III.xi.14.

⁵⁷ Ibid., III.xi.19.

⁵⁸ Ibid. See also his commentaries, particularly on Galatians and Romans.

⁵⁹ For example, Brakel, 360-3; Bucanus, 381; Turretin, XVI.ii.10-12; VanderKemp, 495-7.

⁶⁰ Wollebius, I.xxx.8.

An Analysis of Norman Shepherd's Doctrine of Justification by Faith

With these categories in mind, we now move to show how an understanding of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century debates can still be fruitful for analyzing controversies in our own day. Inasmuch as Norman Shepherd's views on justification have generated significant discussion and debate in recent times, it is fitting to consider his opinions on this topic.

Like his Reformed predecessors, Shepherd claims to hold to "justification by faith alone," though he recognizes that his view conflicts with what he calls "a commonly received understanding of justification by faith alone."⁶¹ Thus we shall examine his view from his writings and try to determine what he means by "justification by faith alone."⁶²

Shepherd on "Justification"

We find Shepherd's definition of justification in his "34 Theses on Justification": "Justification is an act of God, by which He forgives sinners, acquitting them of their guilt, accounts and accepts them as righteous, and bestows upon them the title of

⁶¹ Norman Shepherd, "Justification by Works in Reformed Theology" in *Backbone of the Bible: Covenant in Contemporary Perspective*, ed. by Andrew Sandlin (Nacogdoches, TX: Covenant Media Press, 2004), 119. It should be observed that Shepherd is very concerned that the phrase "justification by faith alone" be understood in a certain way. See Norman Shepherd, "Justification by Faith Alone," *Reformation and Revival Journal* 11/2 (2002): 76f.; 86-89.

⁶² We sidestep Shepherd's attempt to frame the debate in terms of a works/merit paradigm versus a faith/grace paradigm. Since Shepherd does not deny but believes that sin merits hell, that Christ's atonement merits the forgiveness of our sins—that is, that it has intrinsic moral value toward that end—he has not escaped some idea of merit. Consequently, the real debate is not about the existence of merit but what does merit mean and what merits what? See Turretin's discussion of merit, *Institutes*, XVII.v.1-45; also the quotations in Hepppe, particularly from Cocceius, pp. 281-290. Thus, we are of the opinion that when the rhetoric has subsided the issue will always come down to how we exegete the Scriptures and define our terms.

eternal life.”⁶³ We see here that Shepherd holds to a forensic definition of justification. It should be observed, however, that in this definition he does not say that God accepts sinners as righteous *only for the sake of the righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to them*. Here his view stands in marked contrast to the consensus Reformed view. But in his sixth thesis he writes:

The ground of justification or the reason or cause why sinners are justified is in no sense to be found in themselves or in what they do, but is to be found wholly and exclusively in Jesus Christ and in his mediatorial accomplishment on their behalf.

This can be taken to mean that the righteousness of Jesus Christ is imputed to us as our righteousness, but it can also be taken to mean that the only reason why sinners can be declared to be righteous people is because of Christ’s atonement—that is, apart from or without Christ’s full obedience being imputed to believing sinners for their righteousness before God. This latter construal of the above thesis seems far more likely when we read in Shepherd’s later writings the following: “The ground of justification—the *basis on which forgiveness is possible*—is the suffering and death of our Lord.”⁶⁴ Moreover, Shepherd’s original definition of justification is reaffirmed in this later writing in slightly different words, “Justification is the forgiveness of sins so that we are accepted by God as righteous and receive the gift of eternal life.”⁶⁵ Once more we find that something is missing in

⁶³ Norman Shepherd, “Thirty-Four Theses on Justification in Relation to Faith, Repentance, and Good Works” (Document online: http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/norman_shepherd/the_34_theses.htm).

⁶⁴ Norman Shepherd, “Justification by Faith in Pauline Theology” in *Backbone of the Bible*, 89 (emphasis mine).

⁶⁵ Ibid. Shepherd contends in “Justification by Works in Reformed Theology” that the early Reformed believed that justification was simply the forgiveness of sins. Turretin, however, gives a more helpful explanation of why we find the language that Shepherd cites among Reformed writers: “This is not, however, to deny that the orthodox sometimes define justification as simply the remission of sins. But they speak this way against the Papists who do not want justification to pertain only to the remission of sins but also to the internal

Shepherd's conception of justification when placed alongside the classic Reformed definitions. Since Shepherd does not venture to include in his definition of justification an explicit statement to the effect that believing sinners are declared righteous on the basis of the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, we are forced to ask what is the positive righteousness or fulfillment of God's law that grounds justification? To be sure, for Shepherd, Christ's sacrificial work on the cross removes the guilt of sin, but why should God accept us as righteous? By whose righteousness are we justified? By our own? By Christ's? Shepherd's definition of justification leaves things unclear and full of ambiguity. Are we declared righteous because Christ's righteousness is now ours? Or does God declare us to be righteous based on *something in us* in addition to the forgiveness of our sins wrought by Christ? We discover the answer to this question by an examination of Shepherd's explanation of "by faith" and "alone."

Shepherd on "By Faith"

When we examine Shepherd's understanding of the words "by faith" in the locution "justification by faith alone" we discover that, for Shepherd, *our faith* is that on account of which we are declared righteous (justified). For example, in his article, "Law and Gospel in Covenant Perspective," Shepherd makes these claims:

Faith for Adam was what true faith always is, a living and active faith....

The method of justification for Adam before the fall is exactly what it is for Paul after the fall: 'The righteous will live by faith' (Rom. 1:17).⁶⁶

renovation of the soul and the infusion of righteousness. The orthodox properly maintain that justification consists only in remission of sins under which they also include a right to life against those who maintain the whole of justification to be summed up exclusively, not in a right to life, but in an infusion of righteousness." Cited in Francis Turretin, *Compendium Theologiae Didactico-Elencticae ex Theologorum Nostrorum Institutionibus Theologicis auctum et illustratum* a Leonardo Rijssenio (Amsterdam: George Gallet, 1695), 150.

⁶⁶ Norman Shepherd, "Law and Gospel in Covenantal Perspective," *Reformation and Revival Journal* 14/1 (2005): 76.

These statements are quite noteworthy. For Shepherd, Adam (even before the fall) was justified—that is, declared righteous and accepted by God—by a living and active faith; and what was true for Adam in paradise before the fall is likewise true for all believers after the fall. This is not an equivocation. Shepherd believes that both before and after the fall we are justified by a living and active faith with the exception that after the fall we must have our sins forgiven.⁶⁷ The difference between the two is *not* that Adam is justified by faith as his own righteousness and that believers, post-fall, are justified by the righteousness of Christ imputed to them.⁶⁸ Rather, just as Adam certainly was not justified by the righteousness of another, so we are not justified by the righteousness of another. Consequently, faith itself was Adam’s righteousness before God and faith itself is our righteousness before God. The only change for faith, post-fall, is that now it includes “faith in the blood of Jesus.”⁶⁹

This is confirmed from the way Shepherd explains the important phrase concerning Abraham, namely that “his faith was credited to him as righteousness.” Shepherd explains the righteousness of Abraham this way:

In fact, Genesis 15:6 says that Abraham’s faith was so significant that it was credited to him as righteousness! If so, then

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ The difference here is not merely that of denying the active obedience of Christ being imputed to believing sinners. It is an issue of the definition of faith and works. This is clear from the quotes we offered above from Piscator. Piscator was a Reformed theologian who denied that the active obedience of Christ was imputed to believing sinners but still claimed, in contrast to Shepherd, that Christ’s obedient death, satisfying for sins, *fulfills all righteousness for the sinner*. Thus Christ’s satisfaction for our sins is imputed to us for righteousness; and in this way we are accounted just or righteous and worthy of eternal life. Or stated differently, we are rightly said to be formally righteous or just by imputed righteousness, and this brings us everlasting and full righteousness. Like the consensus Reformed view, Piscator understood faith to be an instrument apprehending the righteousness of Christ, and that all works whatsoever were excluded from our justification. See fn. 20, 44, and 47 above along with his whole book on justification cited there.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

righteousness was a condition to be met, and faith met that condition.⁷⁰

In contrast to Shepherd, we would never find the Reformed claiming that Abraham's faith justified him because his "faith was so significant." On the other hand, and in contrast to the Reformed, Shepherd does not say, as the Reformed did, that this phrase is a metonymy for its object, that is, faith is credited for righteousness because of its object, namely, Christ.⁷¹ Here Shepherd stands far apart from the Reformed consensus.

For Shepherd, the significance of faith constituting our righteousness on account of which we are justified before God is carried over or applies to Christ himself. He too was declared righteous because of his faith. Speaking of our salvation, Shepherd says,

All of this is made possible through the covenantal righteousness of Jesus Christ. His was a living, active, and obedient faith that took him all the way to the cross. This faith was credited to him as righteousness.⁷²

Obviously, Christ's faith is not a faith that takes hold of the righteousness of another. Jesus' faith was credited to him as righteousness because *his faith* was *itself* his actual righteousness before God. Shepherd uses the language of Gen. 15:6 and, contrary to Scripture, applies it to Jesus Christ. Shepherd does this because he believes that faith itself is a person's righteousness before God.⁷³ This is how Adam in paradise is righteous before God; this is how all human beings are righteous before God. Once more, Shepherd's view stands at odds with and is far removed from the Reformed position.

It is fitting at this point to add a word about Shepherd's constant use of the adjectives *living*, *active*, *abiding*, and *obedient* as modifiers of faith. Shepherd emphasizes that we are justified by a

⁷⁰ Norman Shepherd, *The Covenant of Grace*, 15.

⁷¹ See fn. 25 above.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 19.

⁷³ See also what he says about "the fullness of faith" in *Ibid.*, 39 and 50.

living, active, obedient, and abiding faith. When confessionally committed Protestants hear Shepherd saying this, they are likely to think that this refers to the good works that inevitably *flow from* faith. But this is a mistake, for that is not Shepherd’s conception.

For the Reformed, the good works that flow from faith meant that when Christ is embraced for justification, he is also embraced for sanctification, so that those who are declared to be righteous on account of the righteousness of Christ will also be transformed into righteous people by the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit.⁷⁴ Thus, Reformed theologians have always emphasized that justifying faith is one thing and the obedience that flowed from it is something distinct from faith, even though faith and obedience are inseparably connected.⁷⁵ Shepherd’s position takes a different path. For Shepherd, *obedience is a part of the faith that justifies*. That is why Shepherd can say that Adam and Christ are justified by faith. Faith includes obedience; therefore, the faith of Christ and pre-fall Adam can be credited to them for righteousness. Since this method of justification is the same for us, obedience is also a part of the faith whereby we are justified. Thus we see that Shepherd says “faith alone,” but he considers our faith as our righteousness and includes obedience in it. What, then, does he mean by “alone”?⁷⁶

Shepherd’s Definition of “Alone”

When we examine Shepherd’s writings, we find that he lines up with the Socinians and Romanists in his explanation of the works that are excluded from our justification. In his article “Justification by Faith in Pauline Theology,” under the section “The Works Excluded from Justification,” Shepherd explains very clearly what works he believes Paul excludes from our justification.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ See the Westminster Confession of Faith XI:2, XIII:2, XVI:3.

⁷⁵ As we see in the careful qualification of Witsius, fn. 48 and fn. 53 above.

⁷⁶ Shepherd, “Justification by Faith Alone,” 82-89.

⁷⁷ This has not changed since 1978. See Thesis 24 in his “34 Theses.”

Shepherd is aware that many believe that the works that Paul excludes from justification “includes everything that God commands in his word, all works of any kind, whether good or bad, whether done in faith or unbelief.”⁷⁸ He rejects this view.

So, what does Paul mean by “the works of the law”? First, Shepherd says, he means the Mosaic covenant as a way of life.⁷⁹ Second, “by works of the law Paul means obedience to a *limited selection of laws* found in the Scripture.”⁸⁰ He goes on to say, “People who are seeking to be justified by the works of the law are sinners who do not confess their sin but pretend to be righteous.”⁸¹ This is similar to the view of Becanus and other Romanists who claimed that “works of the law” were works done before regeneration and faith.⁸² Shepherd then goes on to explain that they are “works done in the strength of human flesh in order to obtain the justifying verdict of God.”⁸³ As with other statements of Shepherd, we might interpret this last statement as excluding all works, but he specifically denies this in the previous sentence, “These works of the law were not good works; they were not the obedience of faith wrought by the power of God.”⁸⁴ The works

⁷⁸ Norman Shepherd, “Justification by Faith in Pauline Theology,” 94. Shepherd claims (on the following page) that such a view is in conflict with Reformed theology. On the contrary, as we have seen above, from Calvin and the rest, Reformed theologians had no problem asserting that all works whatsoever are excluded from justification and that faith was a living and active faith. Here we might ask how Shepherd’s failure to reject all works relative to justification squares with thesis 6 cited earlier. His position seems to come to this: sinners can never have a faith-as-righteousness on their own. The exclusive reason why believing sinners are capable of having a faith-as-righteousness is because of the redemptive work of Jesus Christ for them. In other words, nothing man ever did can make him attain to a state where he is justified by faith, but Jesus Christ supplies that which is necessary for attaining that state. Again, this means that there was absolutely no way for man to bring about his own forgiveness.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 95-6.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 97 (emphasis mine).

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁸² See note 54 above.

⁸³ Shepherd, “Justification by Faith,” 99.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

that Shepherd terms “the obedience of faith” are not excluded but constitutive of faith; and, as we saw earlier, faith, for Shepherd, is our righteousness before God.

Shepherd provides an illustration that is helpful for understanding his view from Micah 6:7-8 (“Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, *or* with ten thousands of rivers of oil? shall I give my firstborn *for* my transgression, the fruit of my body *for* the sin of my soul? He hath shewed thee, O man, what *is* good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” – AV). The difference between works of the law and of faith is the difference between bringing sacrifices and rivers of oil (works) and doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with your God (faith). Note also that the sacrifices and rivers of oil only become “works” because they are not accompanied by faith, that is, justice, love, and humility. Consequently, our good works are not excluded from justifying faith or from our justification. Instead, good works are included in our justification and in justifying faith.

Conclusion on Shepherd

First, the classic Reformed theologians said that the righteousness on account of which we are justified is the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Shepherd claims that it is our faith-as-righteousness, though we can only have this righteousness because our sins are forgiven in Christ. Second, the Reformed said that faith was only an instrument and, then, too, the only instrument for receiving Christ *and all his righteousness*. Shepherd claims that faith is the righteousness on account of which we are declared to be righteous and includes obedience just as it did for pre-fall Adam and for Jesus Christ. Third, the Reformed said that all works of every kind are excluded from our justification. Shepherd claims that only certain types of works are excluded from justification and that good works—the obedient acts of faith—are certainly not excluded. Consequently, we may easily conclude that Shepherd lines up with opponents of the Reformed

in the doctrine of justification, and so it is evident that Shepherd does not hold to the Reformed view of justification by faith alone.⁸⁵

Conclusion

Simple formulae such as “justification by faith alone” are helpful pedagogical tools and rallying points for particular doctrines. However, we hope that we have demonstrated that believers must also be cautious that their use of such formulae does not become a substitute for careful exegesis and clear definitions. As with other doctrines, simple phrases can be used with entirely different meanings. This has always been true, and thus we need to pay careful attention to how these words are defined.⁸⁶

Further, when we carefully examine the original debates in which a doctrine was codified, we will have a much better understanding of the meaning of the terms they used. This is true whether we refer to the Church Fathers in their battle for the doctrine of the Trinity and the two natures of Christ or the distinctive doctrines of the Reformation. In the case of the doctrine we have just discussed, we have seen that the brief phrase “justification by faith alone” is a summation of a broader

⁸⁵ It is therefore not surprising to hear Shepherd say in *The Call of Grace*, “Is there any hope for a common understanding between Roman Catholicism and evangelical Protestantism regarding the way of salvation? May I suggest that there is at least a glimmer of hope if both sides are willing to embrace a covenantal understanding of the way of salvation” (59). We would take it a step further and say that if Shepherd’s views were adopted, there would be no reason at all why there could not be a common understanding since at key points their views are, in substance, the same. To be sure, Shepherd holds to a forensic justification, but as Hoornbeeck long ago noted, “however much Socinus asserts in this matter with the orthodox that justification is a judicial act by which the believing sinner is absolved, we know that the sum of this matter is not situated in this but in the material and form, and in both Socinus advances the opposite” (727).

⁸⁶ For example, obviously anyone who claims to be a Christian can say that Christ is the “Son of God,” but the Arians and Jehovah’s Witness mean something entirely different than an evangelical does. For a helpful and careful discussion of this issue, see Turretin, III.xxiii.

understanding that “we are justified by Christ’s merits apprehended by faith.”⁸⁷ This explanation was necessary in the context of the sixteenth and seventeenth century for both pedagogical and polemical purposes. The Reformed teachers wanted their congregations to understand that it is only the righteousness of Jesus Christ that is the righteousness by which believers are justified, that faith is only an instrument, and that all works whatsoever are excluded from justification. Similarly, the Reformed had to oppose those who used the same terms but meant something entirely different by them.

The same care should be taken today. As we have seen, an examination of the sources sheds much light on what we ourselves mean by “justification by faith alone.” The same careful Scriptural definition can help our congregations understand what we mean by this phrase, even if we do not use all the quotations and detailed argumentation with them as we might in a discussion with other pastors or the academy. Second, such an analysis helps us understand more clearly our own debates today. We also must debate those who use the same words as the Reformed confessions but assign new and/or entirely different meanings to them. An examination of the older debates helps us to frame the debate properly in our own day and determine whether various theologians are saying the same thing as the Reformed confessions and the Reformed consensus. As we have seen in the case of Norman Shepherd on justification, his views do not conform to the classic Reformed position. In our use of the classic sources, we are simply saying that God has given us Church officers and teachers so that “we [might] all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God ... [and that] we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine” (Eph. 4:13-14, with context). Since God has given teachers to the Church for such a purpose, it becomes us to make good use of them.

⁸⁷ This is Wollebius’ definition, II.viii.1.

