

# THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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## Calvin on the “Pernicious Hypocrisy” of Justification by Faith and Works

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That some serious slippage has occurred away from the classical Protestant doctrine of justification *sola fide* has been well documented in many religious publications. Certain teachers — Douglas Wilson, Steve Schlissel, and Steve Wilkins,<sup>1</sup> to name only three — have risen within confessing Reformed communions who, in concert with the errant teaching of Norman Shepherd,<sup>2</sup> do not endorse the doctrine of justification as enunciated by their historic church confessions and, instead of doing the honorable thing and leaving their communions,<sup>3</sup> are corrupting the one true law-free Gospel<sup>4</sup> and causing division within their communions

<sup>1</sup> Steve Wilkins is the pastor of the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Monroe, Louisiana. The 2002 General Assembly of the Reformed Presbyterian Church (RPCUS) denounced as heresy the teachings of the Auburn Avenue Theology as well as the theology of Norm Shepherd and the “New Perspective” on Paul.

<sup>2</sup> The Reformed Church in the United States (RCUS) at its 258<sup>th</sup> Synod found without dissent on May 13, 2004, the teachings of Norman Shepherd on justification to be “another gospel” and called upon him “to repent of his grievous errors.”

<sup>3</sup> Douglas Wilson is the exception here, having started his own denomination, the Confederation of Reformed and Evangelical Churches (CREC).

<sup>4</sup> By the term “law-free Gospel” I intend that “a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law” (*Romans* 3:28) and that a “man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ...because by observing the law no one will be justified” (*Galatians* 2:16). I do not intend by the term “law-free Gospel” that the Gospel delivers the Christian from the obligation to obey God’s moral law as that law comes to expression in the Ten Commandments, in their summary in the two love commandments of Holy Scripture, and in Christ’s pattern of life. The *Westminster Confession of Faith*, XI.2 states: “Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification: yet is it not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no

with their teaching that the Christian’s justification is not by faith alone in the all-sufficient work of Jesus Christ but is rather the eschatological end result of the believer’s *faithfulness* to Christ, which faithfulness includes his imperfect works of obedience.

These teachers have rejected the clear Pauline teaching that justification is an act of God’s free grace alone by which the moment a penitent sinner places his faith in Christ God forgives him of all of his sins forever and hence also to his weak and imperfect “good works”<sup>5</sup> the perfection of the obedience of his Son Jesus Christ (see *Acts* 13:38-39; *Galatians* 2:16; *Romans* 1:16-17; 3:21-22, 28; 4:4-15; 2 *Corinthians* 5:21; *Ephesians* 2:8-10), thereby constituting and declaring him righteous in his sight. These teachers, either minimizing or denying altogether the imputation of Christ’s active obedience to the believer, teach that justification is not a purely forensic declaration but a transforming activity in which the believer’s obedience also plays a significant role in his justification. This corrupted doctrine of justification includes within it the lie of Satan that Christ’s righteousness is not enough in itself to justify and that

dead faith, but works by love.” Clearly the Christian lives under the law of God as the covenant way of life. But just as clearly his obedience to God’s law is *no* part of the ground of his justification; Christ’s obedience alone is the ground of his justification.

<sup>5</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, XVI. 5, 6 (emphasis supplied) states: “...as [our best works] are wrought by us, they are defiled, and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection, that they cannot endure the severity of God’s judgment. Notwithstanding, the persons of believers being accepted through Christ, their good works also are accepted in him; not as though they were wholly unblamable and unprovable in God’s sight; but that he, looking upon them in his Son, is pleased to accept and reward that which is sincere, *although accompanied with many weaknesses and imperfections.*”

obedience on the part of the believer is also necessary for his full and final justification before God. It ignores *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Question 73, which states:

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 justification, but only as it is an instrument by which he receives and applies Christ and his righteousness.

More tragically, it ignores the Apostle Paul's inspired warning that those who to any degree intermingle with their faith in Christ and his obedience their own obedience as the ground of their final justification before God

- stand under apostolic condemnation (*Galatians* 1:8-9);
- have made Christ's cross-work of no value to them (*Galatians* 5:2);
- have alienated themselves from Christ (*Galatians* 5:4a);
- have set aside (*Galatians* 2:21) and have fallen away from grace (in the sense that they have placed themselves once again under the Law as the way of salvation [*Galatians* 3:10; 5:4b]); and
- have abolished the offense of the cross (*Galatians* 5:11) because they are trusting in a "different gospel [from Paul's] that is no gospel at all" (*Galatians* 1:6-7); indeed, their false "gospel" requires them to "continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law" (*Galatians* 3:10) perfectly as the ground of their justification before God.

While multitudes of voices and myriads of letters and essays have attempted to call these erring teachers back to the "old way," so far no one has been able to convince them that their position is flawed and dangerous to their own spiritual health and well-being and the spiritual health and well-being of those who follow them. But I have thought for some time now that perhaps a "pen from the past" — the pen of the one who knew better than any man of his time the errors of the Roman Catholic view of justification, which view these contemporary teachers are now in essence inculcating and propagating — might induce them to rethink their position and repent of it.

In the sixteenth century John Calvin termed the doctrine of justification by faith alone in Jesus Christ "the main hinge on which religion turns" (*Institutes*, 3.11.1), "the sum of all piety" (*Institutes*, 3.15.7), and "the first and keenest subject of controversy" between Rome and the Reformation ("Reply to Sadoletto"). He treats justification by faith in his *Institutes*, Book 3, Chapters 11-19. Here Calvin first defines what he means by justification:

...he is justified who is reckoned in the condition not of a sinner, but of a righteous man; and for that reason, he

stands firm before God's judgment seat while all sinners fall. If an innocent accused person be summoned before the judgment seat of a fair judge, where he will be judged according to his innocence, he is said to be "justified" before the judge. Thus, justified before God is the man who, freed from the company of sinners, has God to witness and affirm his righteousness [*Institutes*, 3.11.2];

...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 [*Institutes*, 3.11.2].

He then declares that the ground of our justification is Christ's righteousness alone:

Therefore, 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 [*Institutes*, 3.11.2];

...since God justifies us by the intercession of Christ, he absolves us not by the confirmation of our own innocence but by the imputation of righteousness, so that we who are not righteous in ourselves may be reckoned as such in Christ [*Institutes*, 3.11.3].

...the best passage of all on this matter [2 *Corinthians* 5:18-21] is the one in which [Paul] teaches that the sum of the Gospel embassy is to reconcile us to God, since God is willing to receive us into grace through Christ, not counting our sins against us. Let my readers carefully ponder the whole passage. For a little later Paul adds by way of explanation: "Christ, who was without sin, was made sin for us," to designate the means of reconciliation. Doubtless he means by the word "reconciled" nothing but "justified." And surely, what he teaches elsewhere — that "we are made righteous by Christ's obedience" — could not stand unless we are reckoned righteous before God in Christ *and apart from ourselves* [*Institutes*, 3.11.4, emphasis supplied].

Calvin then addresses the error of virtually all of professing Christendom, namely, the "pernicious hypocrisy" that we obtain righteousness before God by faith in Christ plus our own works of righteousness:

...a great part of mankind imagine that righteousness is composed of faith and works [but according to *Philippians* 3:8-9] a man who wishes to obtain Christ's righteousness must abandon his own righteousness.... From this it follows that so long as any particle of works-righteousness remains some occasion for boasting remains with us [*Institutes*, 3.11.13].

...according to [the Sophists, that is, the medieval Schoolmen of the Sorbonne, the theological faculty of the University of Paris], man is justified by both faith and works provided they are not his own works but the gifts of Christ and the fruit of regeneration. [But] all works are excluded, whatever title may grace them... [*Institutes*, 3.11.14].

...Scripture, when it speaks of faith-righteousness, leads us...to turn aside from the contemplation of our own works and look solely upon God's mercy and Christ's perfection [*Institutes*, 3.11.16].

[The Sophists] cavil against our doctrine when we say that man is justified by faith alone. They dare not deny that man is justified by faith because it recurs so often in Scripture. But since the word "alone" is nowhere expressed, they do not allow this addition to be made. Is it so? But what will they reply to these words of Paul where he contends that righteousness cannot be of faith unless it be free? How will a free gift agree with works? With what chicaneries will they elude what he says in another passage, that God's righteousness is revealed in the Gospel? If righteousness is revealed in the Gospel, surely no mutilated or half-righteousness but a full and perfect righteousness is contained there. The law therefore has no place in it. Not only by a false but an obviously ridiculous shift they insist upon excluding this adjective. Does not he who takes everything from works firmly enough ascribe everything to faith alone? What, I pray, do these expressions mean: "His righteousness has been manifested apart from the law"; and, "Man is freely justified"; and, "Apart from the works of the law?" [*Institutes*, 3.11.19]

As we were made sinners by one man's disobedience, so we have been justified by one man's obedience. To declare that by him alone we are accounted righteous, what else is this but to lodge our righteousness in Christ's obedience, because the obedience of Christ is reckoned to us as if it were our own [*Institutes*, 3.11.23].

These contemporary teachers seem to have forgotten the nature of the Judge and the nature of the Final Judgment to which Calvin then quite properly calls our attention in *Institutes* 3.12 — one of the most powerful and awesome chapters in the entire *Institutes*. We must never forget, Calvin writes, that the doctrine of justification is

...concerned with the justice not of a human court but of a heavenly tribunal, lest we measure by our own small measure the integrity of works needed to satisfy the divine judgment.... [T]here are none who more confidently, and as people say, boisterously chatter over the righteousness of works than they who are monstrously plagued with manifest diseases, or creak with defects beneath the skin.... [God's justice is] so perfect that nothing can be admitted except what is in every part whole and complete and undefiled by any

corruption. Such was never found in any man and never will be. In the shady cloisters of the schools anyone can easily and readily prattle about the value of works in justifying men. But when we come before the presence of God we must put away such amusements! For there we deal with a serious matter, and do not engage in frivolous word battles. To this question, I insist, we must apply our minds if we would profitably inquire concerning true righteousness: How shall we reply to the Heavenly Judge when he calls us to account? Let us envisage for ourselves that Judge, not as our minds naturally imagine him, but as he is depicted for us in Scripture: by whose brightness the stars are darkened; by whose strength the mountains are melted; by whose wrath the Earth is shaken; whose wisdom catches the wise in their craftiness; beside whose purity all things are defiled; whose righteousness not even the [holy] angels can bear; who makes not the guilty man innocent; whose vengeance when once kindled penetrates to the depths of Hell. Let us behold him, I say, sitting in judgment to examine the deeds of men: Who will stand confident before his throne? "Who...can dwell with the devouring fire?"..."Who...can dwell with everlasting burnings? He who walks righteously and speaks the truth." But let such a one, whoever he is, come forward. Nay, that response causes no one to come forward. For, on the contrary, a terrible voice resounds: "If thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, Lord, who shall stand?" [*Institutes*, 3.12.1].

And our own consciences, Calvin observes, will someday bear witness to the truth of the exceeding sinfulness of our works and our inability to contribute to our justification before God by anything we do:

...if the stars, which seem so very bright at night, lose their brilliance in the light of the Sun, what do we think will happen even to the rarest innocence of man when it is compared with God's purity? For it will be a very severe test, which will penetrate to the most hidden thoughts of the heart.... This will compel the lurking and lagging conscience to utter all things that have now even been forgotten.... Outward parade of good works...will be of no benefit there; purity of will alone will be demanded of us. And therefore hypocrisy shall fall down confounded, even as it now vaunts itself with drunken boldness.... They who do not direct their attention to such a spectacle can, indeed, for the moment pleasantly and peacefully construct a righteousness for themselves, but one that will soon in God's judgment be shaken from them, just as great riches heaped up in a dream vanish upon awakening. But they who seriously, and as in God's sight, will seek after the true rule of righteousness, will certainly find that *all human works, if judged according to their own worth, are nothing but filth and defilement*. And

what is commonly reckoned righteousness is before God sheer iniquity; what is adjudged uprightness, pollution; what is accounted glory, ignominy [*Institutes*, 3.12.4, emphasis supplied].

Let us not be ashamed to descend from this contemplation of divine perfection to look upon ourselves, without flattery and without being affected by blind self-love. For...while man flatters himself on account of the outward mask of righteousness that he wears, the Lord meanwhile weighs in his scales the secret impurity of the heart. Since, therefore, a man is far from being benefited by such flatteries, let us not, to our ruin, willingly delude ourselves. In order that we may rightly examine ourselves, our consciences must necessarily be called before God's judgment seat. For there is need to strip entirely bare in its light the secret places of our depravity, which otherwise are too deeply hidden. Then only will we clearly see the value of these words: "Man is far from being justified before God, man who is rottenness and a worm," "abominable and empty, who drinks iniquity like water."...[T]he rigor of this examination ought to proceed to the extent of casting us down into complete consternation, and in this way preparing us to receive Christ's grace [*Institutes*, 3.12.5].

What we need to exhibit before God's judgment seat, Calvin avers, is true humility, not the insistence of false teachers that in addition to Christ's perfect obedience our imperfect works are necessary for our final justification before God:

...what way do we have to humble ourselves except that, wholly poor and destitute, we yield to God's mercy. For if we think that we have anything left to ourselves, I do not call it humility. And those who have hitherto joined these two things together — namely, that we must think humbly concerning ourselves before God and must reckon our righteousness to be of some value — have taught a pernicious hypocrisy.... If you would, according to God's judgment, be exalted with the humble, your heart ought to be wounded with...contrition. If that does not happen, you will be humbled by God's powerful hand to your shame and disgrace [*Institutes*, 3.12.6, emphasis supplied].

The burning question in the sixteenth century for the Reformers was "How can I find a gracious God?," or as Job asks: "...how can a mortal be righteous before God" (*Job* 9:2; see also *Job* 25:4). The Church of the Medieval Age had taught for centuries that right standing before God was achieved through the Spirit's inward work of grace in the human heart. More specifically, it taught that men achieve Heaven through the sacrament of baptism that removes original sin and regenerates, then through inner renewal by works of penance that address post-baptismal sins, and then by the grace of sanctification that is never complete in

this life, which necessitates that Christians go to purgatory after death to make expiation for their sins. That Church, including the deliverances of Vatican I and II, is still with us today, with no change in its false soteriology<sup>6</sup> from that time to our own, declaring again as recently as its 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* that "justification is...the sanctification and renewal of the interior man." And now an essentially similar soteriology has begun to make its appearance within conservative Protestantism.

The proponents of this "neonomism" within Protestantism should take seriously what Calvin (as did all the sixteenth-century magisterial Reformers) came to understand from his careful study of Scripture, namely, that

- the only man with whom the infinitely holy God can have direct fellowship is the perfect God-man, the only mediator "between God and man, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5), and that it is only as sinful people place their trust in Christ's saving work and are thereby regarded by God as "in Christ" that the triune God can have any fellowship with them;
- the only way to protect the *solus Christus* ("Christ alone") of salvation is to insist upon the *sola fide* ("faith alone")

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<sup>6</sup> Roman Catholicism declares, because it holds to the early ecumenical creeds, that it is an orthodox church and should be viewed as such by all. The problem here is that these early creeds (Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed, Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, Definition of Chalcedon, and Athanasian Creed) are not *evangelical* creeds, that is, creeds that explicate soteric matters. They were all framed in the context of the Trinitarian debates in the fourth and fifth centuries and are underdeveloped respecting and virtually silent on matters of soteriology. Herman Bavinck in *The Doctrine of God*, (Baker, 1951), 285, notes: "...the Reformation has brought to light that not the mere historical belief in the doctrine of the Trinity, no matter how pure, is sufficient unto salvation, but only the true heart-born confidence that rests in God himself, who in Christ has revealed himself as the triune God." That is to say, there is no saving value in holding to an orthodox view of God as Trinity if one is at the same time also holding to an unorthodox view of the saving work of the Trinity.

Consequently, when the counter-Reformation Council of Trent by its Decrees and Canons rejected the doctrine of justification by faith alone and anathematized those who believe this doctrine, Rome in effect formally declared its own apostasy from the apostolic Gospel. Rome has never to this day repudiated Trent; to the contrary, it has time and again reaffirmed Trent. So by no stretch of the imagination are the core beliefs of Roman Catholicism and Reformation theology on the Gospel, that is, on the doctrine of justification by faith alone, the same today. They differ radically on the Gospel itself with Roman Catholicism teaching the heresy of justification by faith plus works and Reformation theology teaching the Biblical truth of justification by faith alone in Christ's perfect obedience, which justifying faith will be accompanied, as James 2:14-26 teach, by good works that form no part of the ground of justification but are "the fruits and evidence of a true and lively faith" (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, XVI.2).

alone”) of justification, and the only way to protect the *sola fide* of justification is to insist upon the *solus Christus* of salvation;

- saving faith is to be directed to the doing and dying of Christ alone and never and in no sense to the so-called good works or inner experience of the believer;
- the Christian’s righteousness before God today is *in Heaven* at the right hand of God in Jesus Christ, and *not on Earth* within the believer;
- the ground of our justification is the vicarious work of Christ for us, not the gracious work of the Spirit in us;
- the faith-righteousness of justification is not personal but vicarious, not infused but imputed, not experiential but forensic, not psychological but legal, not our own but a righteousness alien to us, and not earned but graciously given through faith in Christ, which faith is itself a gift of grace;
- all which means that justification by faith is to be set off over against justification by *any and all of our works*, for justification is grounded in Christ’s alien preceptive and penal obedience in our stead, and we receive by faith alone his perfect obedience.

My intention in this essay has been to let Calvin speak to the contemporary Reformed community as if he were still alive. I trust that I have done that. I trust also that most, if not all, of my readers already believe that “justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ, imputed to us, and received by faith alone” (*Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Question 33), but I would urge *all* my readers — including Norman Shepherd, Steve Schlissel, Steve Wilkins, Douglas Wilson, N. T. Wright, *et al.* — to re-examine themselves with respect to whether they are trusting solely in the preceptive and penal obedience of the only righteous One, even Jesus Christ, for their forgiveness and needed righteousness before God. For make no mistake about it: The Day will come, as Calvin reminded us, when all of us will stand naked before God, and in that Great Day of his Assize in whom or in what we trusted for our salvation will be all-important. Unable to “answer him once in a thousand times” all of us in that Day will be stripped of all the things in which we may have placed our confidence in this world. We will stand before the Throne of God in that Day in utter poverty in ourselves — without title, without money, without property, without reputation, without personal prestige, *without meritorious works of our own*. And unless we have been forgiven of our sins by faith alone in Christ and have been enrobed solely in his imputed righteousness, God will consign us to eternal perdition for our sins. In other words, unless we have

completely repudiated *all* of our own efforts at salvation and have totally trusted the Savior’s righteous life and sacrificial death alone for our salvation, we will be condemned. For *by no works of righteousness* that we will ever do will we be justified before God (see *Titus* 3:5). *Our so-called works of righteousness simply will not cut it!* Christ’s perfect obedience alone is our only hope for Heaven. It alone is enough. We must trust *him* if we would be justified, for it is by faith alone in Christ’s obedient doing and dying that sinners are justified freely before the high tribunal of Heaven. Every other way of salvation, however well-intended, will fail, and those who trust in any other way will be cast into Hell forever.