

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. (2 Corinthians 10:3-6)

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When Protestants Err on the Side of Rome: John Piper, “Final Salvation,” and the Decline and Fall of *Sola Fide* at the Last Day

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It is, as John Robbins explains,

fatal to Christianity, for it makes the conclusion inescapable that we are justified by faith and works. Augustine defined faith as knowledge with assent. So should you. Practice is the result of faith, not part of faith. Faith is the cause; practice is the result. Bonhoeffer’s statement is precise and true: Only he who believes is obedient; only he who is obedient believes. If a person does not believe, he cannot be obedient, no matter how “good” his behavior is; and if a person believes, he will be obedient, as James says. To put it in more technical language, sanctification is a necessary consequence of justification; and justification is a necessary precedent for sanctification. But justification and sanctification are not the same. To confuse them is to be ignorant of the Gospel.¹

Piper has more in common with Rome than with the Reformation on these essential issues, but his error is subtler, more dangerous, because he’s a professing Protestant who’s aware of Rome’s denial of justification by faith alone, and thus attempts to distance himself by creating a false dichotomy of a

justification that is by faith alone, but a “final salvation” that requires “love and obedience—inherent righteousness—” and good works as public, legal evidences in “Christ’s courtroom” for believers to be judged worthy of Heaven. This makes him at odds with the words of Christ himself: “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, *and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life*” (John 5:24). Piper affirms Protestant doctrine but nuances the terms in a way that opposes historic Protestantism, resulting in a neo-legalist retreat to Rome.

Fatal Flaw #2: To Be, Or Not to Be Saved

Timothy Kauffman exposed another fatal flaw in Piper’s teaching, because it begs the question: “Is there such a case as a person receiving present justification and not maintaining right standing with God through good works?”² Piper claims the answer is no, but his own words betray him:

Jesus says that doing the will of God really is necessary for our final entrance into the kingdom of heaven. “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 7:21). He says that on the day of judgment he really will reject people because they are “workers of lawlessness.” “Then will I declare to them, ‘I never

¹ John W. Robbins, “The Counterfeit Gospel of Charles Colson,” *The Trinity Review*, January/February 1994, <http://www.trinityfoundation.org/journal.php?id=187>.

² Timothy F. Kauffman, “Piper on Justification,” *The Bible Thumping Wingnut*, October 31, 2017, <http://bible>

thumpingwingnut.com/2017/10/31/piper-on-justification/, January 31, 2018. See also Timothy F. Kauffman and Tim Shaughnessy, “John Piper on Final Justification by Works,” *The Trinity Review*, November/December 2017, <http://www.trinityfoundation.org/journal.php?id=331>.

knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness” (Matt. 7:23). He says *people will “go away into eternal punishment” because they really failed to love their fellow believers*: “As you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me” (Matt. 25:45-46).

There is no doubt that Jesus saw some measure of real, *lived-out obedience to the will of God as necessary for final salvation*. “Whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:35). So the second historic answer to the question, how is Jesus the path to perfection? has been that he enables us to change. He transforms us so that we really begin to love like he does and thus move toward perfection that we finally obtain in heaven.³

Writes Kauffman:

Piper’s 2006 work was written to instruct Christians on the need to obey Jesus’ commands (*What Jesus Demands from the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006, 17). We agree that Christians are to obey Jesus. One rather disconcerting observation, however, is found in Demand #21, in which Piper explains that Jesus will send some believers to hell “because they really failed to love their fellow believers.” We cited this same example above to show that Piper means “final justification” when he speaks of “final salvation.” We return to it now to demonstrate that Piper’s wavering on justification is due partly to [Daniel] Fuller’s tutelage, and partly to his own confusion.

To arrive at his conclusion that Jesus will send some believers to hell, Piper combines Matthew 7:23 “depart from me, ye that work iniquity” and Matthew 25:41-46, “Depart from me, ye cursed ... Inasmuch as ye did it not...”. Piper thus shows that Jesus will send some people ““away into eternal punishment’ because they really failed to love their *fellow believers*” (Piper, *Demands*, 160). The two passages say nothing of the sort. ...

Piper assures us that that could never happen: “None who is located by faith in God’s invincible favor will fail to have all that is necessary to demonstrate this in life” (Piper, *Demands*, 210). If so, then in what way does Jesus “really” send some of our “fellow believers” to hell on the Last Day?⁴

We will see later how Piper undermines the glorification of believers with his claim that Jesus “transforms us so that we really begin to love like he

does and thus move toward perfection that we finally obtain in heaven.” He also twists *Matthew 7:21-23* into requiring good works from believers for them to attain heaven: “Jesus says that doing the will of God really is necessary for our final entrance into the kingdom of Heaven.... There is no doubt that Jesus saw some measure of real, lived-out obedience to the will of God as necessary for final salvation.” Ironically, Christ condemns precisely what Piper advocates in this passage. Christ condemns these professing believers *because* they present their works as their hope of “attaining heaven” at the last judgment: “Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’” (vv. 22-23). Due to his failed attempts at harmonizing his view of “final salvation” with Scripture, Piper misinterprets “doing the will of the Father” as the evangelical obedience that believers will have to demonstrate at final judgment. But Christ reveals what the will of the Father is in *John 6:40*, and it has nothing to do with presenting good works at the final judgment: “And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day.” What’s “required for heaven,” in other words, is faith *alone* in Christ’s righteousness *alone*.

Fatal Flaw #3: The Analytic Justification of the Believer

Piper’s view of final salvation contradicts the heart of the Protestant doctrine of justification, for the latter is not only forensic but also *synthetic*. It is not the believer’s own righteousness (he has none, compare *Romans 3:10-20*), but rather Christ’s righteousness, which is *extra nos* (foreign, or outside of us), that is imputed to him; as opposed to Rome’s *analytic* or subjective justification, in which, according to the Council of Trent, “we are not only reputed, but are truly called, and are, just, receiving justice within us, each one according to his own measure,”⁵ and *requires* inherent righteousness and good works at the last judgment, which is what Piper affirms, that “love and obedience—inherent righteousness—is...required for heaven.”⁶ As R. C. Sproul explains the differences,

³ John Piper, *What Jesus Demands from the World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 160. Emphasis added.

⁴ Kauffman, “Piper on Justification.”

⁵ *The Council of Trent*, “On Justification,” Chapter VII.

⁶ Taylor, “John Piper’s Foreword.”

note how indistinguishable Piper's view of final salvation is from Rome's view of justification:

The Roman Catholic view of justification is known as analytic justification because in order for God to justify a person in the Roman system, that person must be righteous by definition. Righteousness must inhere within the individual. This righteousness may be rooted in the grace of God, but it must become a personal, inherent, and experiential righteousness through the cooperation of good works....

In the biblical view, we cannot be justified unless the alien righteousness of Christ is added to us in imputation. Unlike the analytic view of justification, our works do not combine with this righteousness in order to make us intrinsically righteous. Our right standing with God is never based on our own holiness. Because the perfect righteousness of Christ is added to us, or more precisely, declared to be ours, the Protestant view is called "synthetic" justification.⁷

James Buchanan defines justification as "a legal, or forensic, term, and is used in Scripture to denote the acceptance of any one as righteous in the sight of God."⁸ When God justifies a sinner, He *legally* pardons him and reckons him righteous, so "there is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit" (*Romans* 8:1). Synthetic justification is final, irreversible, and definitive even at the last judgment, for the believer has already been legally and eternally pardoned on the Cross of Christ, "who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree" (*1 Peter* 2:24). Why else did Christ proclaim, "It is finished!" (*John* 19:30)? Because "he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life" (*John* 5:24). Although Piper affirms forensic justification,⁹ he contradicts it because in his view believers *cannot* be forensically justified now; instead, they must wait *until the final judgment* for God to evaluate their personal works of holiness and be publicly, legally declared worthy of entering heaven. Piper uses legal language to describe the believer's admittance to heaven after they first

"demonstrate" their analytic righteousness publicly in the "judgment hall of Christ":

Our deeds will reveal who enters the age to come, and our deeds will reveal the measure of our reward in the age to come.... It sounds to many like a contradiction of salvation by grace through faith. Ephesians 2:8–9 says, "By grace are you saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God — not of works lest anyone should boast." Salvation is not "of works." That is, works do not earn salvation. Works do not put God in our debt so that he must pay wages. That would contradict grace. "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ" (*Romans* 6:23). Grace gives salvation as a free gift to be received by faith, not earned by works.

How then can I say that the judgment of believers will not only be the public declaration of the measure of our reward in the kingdom of God according to our deeds, but will also be the public declaration of our salvation — our entering the kingdom — according to our deeds?

The answer in a couple sentences is that our deeds will be the public evidence brought forth in Christ's courtroom to demonstrate that our faith is real. And our deeds will be the public evidence brought forth to demonstrate the varying measures of our obedience of faith (cf. *Romans* 12:3; *1 Thessalonians* 1:3; *2 Thessalonians* 1:11). In other words, salvation is by faith, and rewards are by faith, but the evidence of invisible faith in the judgment hall of Christ will be a transformed life. Our deeds are not the basis of our salvation, they are the evidence of our salvation. They are not foundation, they are demonstration.¹⁰

Again, Piper favors Rome's analytic justification because he claims that the deeds of believers "will be the public evidence brought forth in Christ's courtroom to demonstrate that our faith is real.... The evidence of invisible faith in the judgment hall of Christ will be a transformed life." These deeds are *legally* demonstrated in "Christ's courtroom" as proof and are rendered a final *legal* judgment of the believer's worthiness to enter Heaven. Piper has abandoned synthetic justification because believers are already

⁷ R. C. Sproul, "Synthetic Justification," *Ligonier Ministries*, n.d., <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/synthetic-justification/>, January 31, 2018.

⁸ Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification*, 115.

⁹ "...this reality of forensic righteousness, which is imputed to us on the first act of saving faith (as the seed of subsequent persevering faith), is different from transformative sanctificat-

ion, which is imparted by the work of the Holy Spirit through faith in future grace" (John Piper, "What Do You Believe About Justification by Faith Alone?", *Desiring God*, January 23, 2006, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-do-you-believe-about-justification-by-faith-alone>, January 31, 2018).

¹⁰ Piper, "All Appear Before the Judgment Seat of Christ."

fully justified before God *solely* on account of Christ's active and passive obedience, and therefore no longer subject to another judgment or evaluation of their worthiness to enter Heaven. Piper contradicts himself by claiming that "God is already one hundred percent for us," yet still subjects believers to a final judgment where they could be denied entrance to Heaven due to a lack of personal holiness, or "because they really failed to love their fellow believers."¹¹ Even when he further contradicts himself by claiming that the latter will never happen, Piper nevertheless impugns the justice of God by advocating a form of double jeopardy, in which he adds a second judgment of believers on top of the judgment that Christ already satisfied on their behalf on the cross, as do all legalistic systems that advocate an initial and final justification or salvation. Piper cannot legally eat his justified cake now and still have it at the last judgment. By contrast, Jonathan Linebaugh rightly explains that

justification is God's final judgment. As Wilfried Joest writes, "there is no second decision after justification." In the language of the Reformation, the "sole and sufficient basis" for our justification before God's eschatological tribunal is Jesus Christ (*solus Christus*), freely given (*sola gratia*) to sinners in the word (*solo verbo*) that creates the faith (*sola fide*) to which Christ is present. In Jesus, God's future word has invaded the present in such a way that, by faith, we know the future: "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justified. Who is to condemn? It is Christ who died" (Rom 8:33-34).¹²

It's therefore impossible for believers to be fully justified by faith alone in Christ's righteousness alone, but then be placed on a lifelong probationary period requiring evangelical obedience until the final judgment when they are legally pronounced worthy of Heaven by a public demonstration of their works. The latter nullifies the former. Linebaugh further expounds the Biblical link between justification and judgment:

Here's an important rule of theology: Talk about justification is talk about final judgment. As Peter Stuhlmacher, on the basis of numerous published

investigations of the Old Testament and early Jewish literature, writes, "The place of justification is (final) judgment." (For those interested in such things, scholars like Simon Gathercole and the late Friedrich Avemarie have shown that inattention to eschatological judgment as the context of justification in early Jewish literature is a major deficiency in the interpretation of the soteriology of Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism in the tradition of E.P. Sanders' 1977 *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.) When Paul introduces justification in Romans it is within a discussion of the day when "God's righteous judgment will be revealed" (2:5). This day is the day of judgment, the time when "[God] will repay each one according to their works" (2:6). Hence the first "doctrine of justification" in Romans: "the doers of the law will be justified" (2:13). The future tense of the verb and the contextualization of this justification as taking place on the day of judgment (2:5-10, 16) suggests that for Paul, as for his Jewish forbearers and contemporaries, justification occurs at the final judgment.¹³

This is the clear teaching of the Bible and historic Protestantism. Piper's view on the other hand falls under the apostle Paul's rebuke to the bewitched Galatians: "Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? *Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?* Have you suffered so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain?" (3:2-4).¹⁴

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¹¹ Piper, *What Jesus Demands*, 160.

¹² Jonathan Linebaugh, "The Good News Of Final Judgment by Tullian Tchvujian," *The Spiritual Life Network*, August 12, 2013, <http://www.thespiritlife.net/facets/devotional/57-exchanged/exchanged-publications/4079-the-good-news-of-final-judgment-by-tullian-tchvujian>, December 3, 2017.

¹³ See note 12.

¹⁴ This is an excellent point made by Patrick Hines, pastor of Bridwell Heights Presbyterian Church PCA. See his critiques of Piper on Sermon Audio, https://www.sermonaudio.com/search.asp?speakeronly=true&currsection=sermons&keyword=Patrick_Hines; and his new podcast, *The Protestant Witness*, at ThornCrown Ministries, <https://thorncrownministries.com/the-protestant-witness/>.