

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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John Piper on Final Justification by Works

By Timothy F. Kauffman and Tim Shaughnessy

Editor's Note: The content of this Review first appeared as two articles – "The Gospel According to Piper," October 10, 2017, and "Piper on Justification," October 31, 2017 by Mr. Kauffman and Mr. Shaughnessy published at <http://biblethumpingwingnut.com/category/semper-reformanda-radio/>. This article is a combination and revision of those posts. Others have also written critically of Piper's teaching of final justification by works,¹ and supporters of Piper's (and Gaffin, Shepherd, Kinnaird, Wilson, and Wright) teaching have criticized the critics.²

¹ See Rachel Miller, "Salvation by Grace Alone through Faith Alone in Christ Alone," October 4, 2017 and "Back to the Reformed Confessions and Catechisms," October 18, 2017, at <https://adaughterofthereformation.wordpress.com/>; R. Scott Clark, "In By Grace, Stay In By Faithfulness?" October 13, 2017 and "Salvation *Sola Gratia, Sola Fide*: On Distinguishing In, With, and Through," October 17, 2017 at <https://heidelblog.net/>; Brad Mason, "Rachel Miller Contra Mundum? The 5 Solas and John Piper, Part 1," October 8, 2017, "Rachel Miller Contra Mundum? The 5 Solas and John Piper, Part 2: 'Salvation,'" October 11, 2017, "Rachel Miller Contra Mundum? The 5 Solas and John Piper, Part 3, Beginning at the End: The Marrow Men," October 16, 2017, "Salvation *Sola Fide*: Martin Luther and the Fruits of Faith," October 16, 2017, "Salvation *Sola Fide*: John Calvin and the Causes of Salvation," October 18, 2017, "Salvation *Sola Fide*: Zacharias Ursinus and the Heidelberg Catechism," October 19, 2017, and "A Plea: Either Defend What Piper Actually Wrote, or Stop Offering Shade," October 23, 2017 at <https://www.heartandmouth.org/>; Sam Powell, "...Let's Just Pipe Down and Let the Experts Handle This," October 9, 2017 at <https://myonlycomfort.com/>; and Paul Flynn, "John Piper's Corruption of the Gospel," October 14, 2017 at <http://megiddoradio.com/2017/10/14/281-john-pipers-corruption-of-the-gospel/> for some examples.

² See Mark Jones, "John Piper Compromising *Sola Fide*?" October 7, 2017 at <https://calvinistinternational.com/>. Jones states: "Here's the problem for these critics of Piper. This isn't really a problem. And if you write blog posts taking issue with Piper on this particular topic, but claim to be Reformed, you

Introduction

In every generation there arise men from within the church who stumble into the Roman Catholic view of justification, and having stumbled, then attempt to import that Roman Catholic error into the Church of God so that the children of God might stumble with them. John Piper is just the latest in a long line of such men, and he will not be the last. Remarkably, on the eve of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, Piper attempts to show that neither the Scriptures nor the Reformers held to final justification by faith alone apart from works. On September 25, 2017, Piper published "Does God Really Save Us by Faith Alone?"³ In the article, he maintains that initial justification is by faith alone, but introduces a concept that is completely foreign to the Bible: the concept of "*final salvation*" on the basis of our *works* and *obedience*. He writes, "In justification, faith receives a finished work of Christ performed outside of us and counted as ours — imputed to us... In *final salvation* at the last judgment, faith is confirmed by the sanctifying fruit it has borne, and *we are saved through that fruit and that faith*."⁴

In Piper's view of final salvation, he makes a distinction between *justification* and *salvation* in which we are

probably need to spend some time getting theological training and then, after that, publishing via peer-reviewed journals, books, etc., before you can be taken seriously. And even then, it's possible that you could have such a built-in bias against someone that you'd find a problem with them for saying 'Jesus loves sinners.'" See also Jordan Harris, "Are the 'Calvinist' Critics of Piper Really Calvinists at All?" October 11, 2017 and "G.K. Beale on the Doctrine of Justification and Future Judgment," October 30, 2017 at <https://faithpresdicksoncity.wordpress.com/>.

³ John Piper, "Does God Really Save Us by Faith Alone?" September 25, 2017, accessed October 31, 2017, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/does-god-really-save-us-by-faith-alone>.

⁴ "Does God Really Save Us by Faith Alone?"

justified by faith alone apart from works at the beginning, but we are saved by faith plus works at the end. He writes,

These *works* of faith, and *this obedience* of faith, these *fruits* of the Spirit that come by faith, are *necessary for our final salvation*. No holiness, no heaven (Hebrews 12:14). So, *we should not speak of getting to heaven by faith alone in the same way we are justified by faith alone*.

Essential to the Christian life and *necessary for final salvation is the killing of sin* (Romans 8:13) and the *pursuit of holiness* (Hebrews 12:14).⁵

Before we address Piper's statements in detail, it is important first to establish that when Piper says, "final salvation," he means "final justification" or "future justification." Thus, when Piper says we are justified by faith alone, and saved by faith plus works, he is teaching that our *initial justification* is by faith alone, but that our *ongoing and final justification* is by faith plus our good works. To Piper, "final salvation" is salvation from judgment on the Last Day. Likewise, to Piper, "final justification" is being justified from judgment on the Last Day. "Final salvation" and "final justification" are the same thing. As evidence of this, we provide Piper's teachings on this very topic:

Final salvation from future judgment is conditional. It will not happen apart from our persevering faith. ... "salvation" refers to our future deliverance from the wrath of God at the judgment and entrance into eternal life.⁶

[Jesus] says that on the day of judgment...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.⁷

Though it may cause confusion, it is possible to use the word "justify" to describe how the fruit of good behavior works in the day of judgment. The fruits can "justify" us in the sense of proving that we are believers and belong to Jesus and have a right standing with God in him. That is how I understand Matthew 12:37, "By your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."⁸

It is not accidental that the title of this book has a double meaning. *The Future of Justification* draws attention not only to where the doctrine itself may be going, but also to *the critical importance of God's future act of judgment when our justification will be confirmed*. How will our obedience function in that Day?⁹

Present justification is based on the substitutionary work of Christ alone, enjoyed in union with him through faith alone. *Future justification is the open confirmation and declaration that in Christ Jesus we are perfectly blameless before God. This final judgment accords with our works*. That is, the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives will be brought forward as the evidence and confirmation of true faith and union with Christ. Without that validating transformation, there will be no future salvation.¹⁰

In final salvation at the last judgment, faith is confirmed by the sanctifying fruit it has borne, and we are saved through that fruit and that faith.¹¹

Piper has for *decades* expressed that "final salvation at the last judgment," "final salvation from future judgment," "future justification" at the "final judgment," and "future deliverance from the wrath of God at the judgment" are the same thing, showing that to him, final salvation is acquittal at the final judgment, or final justification. As his *Christianity Today* summary makes perfectly clear, "future justification" is "this final judgment" which is "future salvation." And to Piper, final salvation—and therefore final justification—is by faith plus works. Thus, when Piper answered the question in "Does God Really Save Us by Faith Alone?" his response is essentially, No, He does not; final justification is not by faith alone.

We introduce our concern with this extended explanation of Piper's historical understanding of initial and final justification as a caution to those who will run to Piper's statements on justification by faith alone, in order to exonerate him of his own words and their plain meaning. It is never helpful to duck and dodge or hem and haw over issues concerning the Gospel. Paul asks the question, "For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?" (*I Corinthians* 14:8).¹² When the Gospel is at stake we must take to the battlefield to defend it, but who will get ready for battle if we give an indistinct

⁹ John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright*. Crossway Books, 2008, 183-184, emphasis added.

¹⁰ John Piper and N.T. Wright, compiled by Trevin Wax. "The Justification Debate: A Primer." *Christianity Today*, June 29, 2009, accessed October 31, 2017, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/june/29.34.html>, emphasis added.

¹¹ "Does God Really Save Us by Faith Alone?" emphasis added.

¹² All Scripture passages are quoted from *KJV* unless otherwise noted.

⁵ "Does God Really Save Us by Faith Alone?"

⁶ John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*. Multnomah Books, 1996, 42.

⁷ John Piper, *What Jesus Demands from the World*. Lifeway Press, 2015, 160.

⁸ *What Jesus Demands from the World*, 161n.

sound. Therefore, it is necessary that we be emphatically clear in our response lest we give an indistinct sound with respect to this Gospel issue.

Final Judgment, Final Justification, & Final Salvation

Let's first consider what Piper says about final judgment, final justification, and final salvation. Piper has put forth the notion of a "final justification" or a "*final salvation* at the *last judgment* [in which] faith is confirmed by the sanctifying fruit it has borne, and *we are saved through that fruit and that faith.*" He has further stated that "*works of faith,*" and "*obedience of faith...are necessary for our final salvation.*" Piper is correct about there being a final judgment which is a judgment of works. Dr. Robert Reymond writes,

Now it cannot be denied that the Scriptures uniformly represent the *final judgment as a judgment of works.* (Ps. 62:12; Eccles. 12:14; Matt. 16:27; 25:31-46; John 5:29; Rom. 2:5-10; 1 Cor. 3:13, 4:5; 2 Cor. 5:10; Gal. 6:7-9; 1 Pet. 1:17; see also Westminster Confession of Faith, XXXIII/i) and that they hold forth the promise of rewards for faithful living (Exod. 20:5-6; Prov. 13:13; 25:21-22; Matt. 5:12; 6:1, 2, 4, 16, 18, 20; 10:41; 19:29; Luke 6:37-38; Col. 3:23-24; 2 Tim. 4:7-8; Heb. 11:26).¹³

But while Piper is correct about there being a final judgment of works, he is wrong to suggest that it has anything to do with our "future justification" or our "final salvation." Rather, the works by which the believer is to be judged are merely the basis for *rewards*. John Murray writes,

We must maintain...justification complete and irrevocable by grace through faith and apart from works, and at the same time, future *reward* according to works. In reference to these two doctrines it is important to observe the following: (i) This future reward is not justification and contributes nothing to that which constitutes justification. (ii) *This future reward is not salvation. Salvation is by grace and it is not as a reward for works that we are saved.*¹⁴

In the Biblical view, this final judgment of works has absolutely nothing to do with our justification or our salvation. The concept of a *future justification* or a *final salvation* that is dependent upon our works or obedience is completely foreign to the Bible and the Protestant tradition,

but it is not foreign to Roman Catholicism. In *Reasoning from the Scriptures with Catholics*, Ron Rhodes writes,

Certainly, Catholics deny that their Church teaches a works salvation. They will talk about how salvation is impossible apart from the grace of God. But though things start out by grace in the Roman Catholic system of salvation...works do indeed get mixed into the picture. By virtue of the fact that *a life of meritorious works is necessary to gain final salvation*, it is clear that in reality, the Roman Catholic view of salvation is works-oriented. *Salvation may involve grace and faith, but it is not by grace alone (sola gratia) or by faith alone (sola fide).*¹⁵

As we will see upon further examination of Piper, Rhodes' assessment of Roman Catholicism—"that a life of meritorious works is necessary to gain final salvation"—is an adequate rebuttal of Piper, as well. What Piper writes is strikingly and eerily similar to what Ron Rhodes rightly identified as the Roman Catholic works-oriented system of salvation. Piper speaks of how salvation is impossible apart from the grace of God, and in fact speaks of *initial justification* as being by faith alone, apart from works: "Only faith obtains the verdict, not guilty, when we become Christians. Works of any kind are not acceptable in the moment of *initial justification.*"¹⁶ But though things start out by grace through faith alone in Piper's system of salvation...works immediately get mixed into the picture, for that is how "one maintain[s] an ongoing and final right standing with God."¹⁷ In Piper's view, *works are "necessary to gain final salvation,"* to use Rhodes' description of Roman Catholicism, and works will be necessary for our "future justification." In Piper's view, *future justification* or *final salvation* may involve grace and faith, but they are not by grace alone (*sola gratia*) or by faith alone (*sola fide*). For Piper to say that "these *works of faith, and this obedience of faith...are necessary for final salvation*" is to say that *works and obedience are necessary for justification and salvation.* This is pure Romanism at its heart and it directly contradicts *Ephesians* 2:8-9: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast." Again, Dr. Reymond writes, "[Salvation] is of faith, [apart from works], in order that it may be according to grace' (Rom. 4:16). If God were to permit the intrusion of human works into the acquisition of salvation *to any degree*, salvation could not be by grace alone."¹⁸

¹⁵ Ron Rhodes, *Reasoning from the Scriptures with Catholics*, Harvest House Publishers, 2000, 121-122.

¹⁶ John Piper, "Does James Contradict Paul?" August 8, 1999, accessed October 27, 2017, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/does-james-contradict-paul>.

¹⁷ "Does James Contradict Paul?" 28:26-34:26.

¹⁸ Reymond, 735.

¹³ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of The Christian Faith*, 2nd edition, Thomas Nelson, 2001, 750.

¹⁴ John Murray, "Justification," *Collected Writings*, 2:221 quoted in Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of The Christian Faith*, 750, emphasis added.

Alien versus Native Righteousness

When Piper speaks of “final salvation,” he is referring to a “future justification” that takes into account a righteousness that is our own inherent righteousness, our own personal moral improvement. It is important to point that out because in the Foreword to Thomas Schreiner’s *Faith Alone—The Doctrine of Justification: What the Reformers Taught...and Why It Still Matters*,¹⁹ Piper appears to deny that our personal righteousness is required for “justification”:

Such faith always “works by love” and produces the “obedience of faith.” And that obedience—imperfect as it is till the day we die—is not the “basis of justification, but...a necessary evidence and fruit of justification.” In this sense, *love and obedience— inherent righteousness—is “required of believers, but not for justification”—that is, required for heaven, not for entering a right-standing with God.*²⁰

In reality, Piper is only denying that personal righteousness is required for *initial justification*, or “entering a right-standing with God.” Regarding our future justification, Piper explicitly says that “*obedience— inherent righteousness,*” is required of believers for heaven, and is, in fact, a righteousness that is considered in our *final justification*. In fact, Piper speaks of our works being brought forward as “compelling evidence” in final justification at the last day and appeals to Jesus’ words in *Matthew* 12:37, “For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.” Piper equates “words” with “works of love.” But upon examination of the passage, Jesus taught that we are justified and saved, wholly and completely at the end by faith, which is to say, by the same righteousness we possessed at the beginning through faith. *He did not teach an initial justification that is comprised of an alien righteousness plus a final justification based on a native righteousness developed over time through personal sanctification.*

When we examine Christ’s admonition that “in the day of judgment,” the individual will be either justified or condemned “by thy words” (*Matthew* 12:36-37), we find that He gave two very remarkable illustrations: the Ninevites (*Matthew* 12:41) and the Queen of Sheba (*Matthew* 12:42). Both would face “judgment with this generation” but would be justified based on their words, whereas the men of “this generation” would be condemned based on theirs. The key to understanding the passage is to examine which words Jesus contemplates in the acquittal of the Ninevites and the Queen, and He tells us which words they are: the words they spoke from the heart upon their first hearing and believing of the Word of God, for the

Ninevites “repented at the preaching of Jonas” and the Queen of Sheba believed “the wisdom of Solomon.” “[T]he people of Nineveh believed God” upon the preaching of Jonah (*Jonah* 3:5) and the Queen of Sheba exclaimed, “It was a true report that I heard” (*1 Kings* 10:6).

When Jesus says that the believer will be justified “by thy words” on the Day of Judgment, the two examples He gives are the words spoken by the Queen of Sheba and by the Ninevites at the moment they first believed, and their *final* justification is based on the very same righteousness they possessed at the moment they first believed. Notably, Christ explained this truth at the same time He taught that a man speaks “out of the abundance of the heart” (*Matthew* 12:34) and admonished the Pharisees that the only sign they would receive is the sign of Jonas, for “so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (*Matthew* 12:40). Here Jesus has taught to us the very concept Paul would one day restate in his *Epistle to the Romans*: “That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed” (10:9-11). The Queen of Sheba and the Ninevites will be justified by their words on the last day, and those words were the overflow of the faith of their hearts—a faith that was lacking in the Pharisees.

Such men as Piper also appeal to the separation of the sheep from the goats in *Matthew* 25, desiring from the recitation of the sheep’s good works to prove final justification by works.²¹ The problem with such an appeal to *Matthew* 25 for final justification based on works is that the sheep and goats are separated into two groups *before anyone’s works are even compared*. In other words, they are separated into two groups based on whether they are sheep or goats. Since sheep are defined as those who believe (*John* 10:16, 26), the scene of judgment in *Matthew* 25:31-33 has the sheep separated based on faith, not works, which is to say that the sheep were separated based on a righteousness apart from works. Neither the sheep nor the Shepherd has entertained works in the separation of “His sheep” from “the goats.” Even when the works of the sheep are recited, the sheep are unaware of them and clearly had not anticipated a discussion about their works, *i.e.*, “when saw we thee...? ...when saw we thee...? ...when saw we thee...?” (*Matthew* 25:37-39). The sheep had arrived at the throne of judgment without their own personal holiness or moral improvement in mind.

The precise language of *Matthew* 12 and 25 is worth examining for these reasons. Whereas in *Matthew* 12, we have the concept of final justification on the Last Day, Jesus curiously omits works in His discussion of the

¹⁹ Zondervan, 2015.

²⁰ Schreiner, *Faith Alone—The Doctrine of Justification: What the Reformers Taught...and Why It Matters*, 11, emphasis added.

²¹ See, for example, Piper, *What Jesus Demands from the World*, 276.

verdict. Faith is what He has in mind. In *Matthew 25*, we have the concept of works being contemplated on the Last Day, but we do not find those works contemplated in the separation of the sheep from the goats, for sheep are separated based on faith before works are contemplated. It is a curious reality indeed to discover that when Jesus does mention justification on the Last Day (*Matthew 12*), He leaves out works. When He mentions works (*Matthew 25*), He mentions them only after the sheep have already been separated from the goats based on righteousness apart from works, and the sheep had not arrived expecting to appeal to their works. In both chapters of *Matthew*, it is clear that on the Last Day, the sheep will be set apart based on faith alone apart from works, which is exactly what the sheep are expecting.

Our point in highlighting these facts is to show what is missing in the Gospel of Jesus and Paul. What is missing is Piper's Roman Catholic construct that with the heart man believeth unto initial righteousness and then by the accumulated holiness of works the man arrives at the judgment seat so that his works may be contemplated in the verdict of final justification. In other words, Piper has adopted a different gospel than the one Jesus taught to Paul.

Not only is Piper's position heresy; it is damnable heresy. It is, in fact, the Roman Catholic system of salvation through the gradual accumulation of works of the law with an eye toward final justification. But according to Jesus, there is no distinction to be made between one being justified and being saved, and there is no difference between the righteousness contemplated by our Father when we first believed and righteousness by which we will be acquitted on the Last Day. It is all, and only, Jesus' righteousness.

Works That Follow Justification by Faith

To be sure, the works that Piper is referring to are post-justification works that every Christian ought to exhibit to some extent. The problem, however, is that Piper says these post-justification works are necessary for salvation or necessary to attain heaven. Again, it is highly revealing to note the consistency of Piper's theology in what he wrote two years prior in the Foreword to Schreiner's book,

The stunning Christian answer is: sola fide—faith alone. But be sure you hear this carefully and precisely: He says *right with God* by faith alone, **not attain heaven by faith alone. There are other conditions for attaining heaven**, but no others for entering a right relationship to God. **In fact, one must already be in a right relationship with God by faith alone in order to meet the other conditions.**²²

²² Schreiner, 11, original emphasis in italics, added emphasis in bold.

We should take notice of the consistency of Piper's statements over the years. What he recently wrote was not simply a slip of the pen. Here he makes the distinction between being right with God and entering into heaven. He states there are "*other conditions,*" *besides faith*, that one must meet in order to *attain heaven*. In making his distinction he presents faith as a "condition" we meet. In Reformed orthodoxy however, faith is not a condition we must meet to receive the righteousness of Christ. We are not declared righteous *because* we believe. Instead, faith is the instrumental means to apply or impute Christ's righteousness to us. Through faith alone we appropriate Christ and his righteousness, which is why the *Larger Catechism* provides the following answer to question 73: "How doth faith justify a sinner in the sight of God?"

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 (Gal. 3:11; Rom. 3:28), nor as if the grace of faith, or any act thereof, were imputed to him for his justification (Rom. 4:5; Rom 10:10); *but only as it is an instrument by which he receiveth and applieth Christ and his righteousness* (John 1:12; Phil 3:9; Gal 2:16).

Not only does Piper err in making faith a condition but he suggests that there are *other conditions* that one must meet after being justified to attain Heaven. What "conditions" must the believer meet to attain Heaven? Piper is suggesting that *post-justification* works are necessary for us to attain salvation and Heaven. John Robbins responded emphatically to this notion when he wrote,

Paul damned the Judaizers for teaching that *post-[justification]* works of righteousness are necessary for entrance into Heaven. The contention of both the Roman Church and the Judaizers [and now Piper] is that one cannot be saved without *post-[justification]*, that is post-regeneration, works of righteousness. The Judaizers taught that one must be circumcised and obey other parts of the Mosaic law; the Roman Church teaches both the necessity and meritoriousness of good works of Christians for salvation;" [and now Piper teaches both the necessity of works and obedience of faith for salvation].²³

James on Justification and Works

Piper appeals to *James 2* for support of his view of a final salvation that is in some way dependent on our works and obedience. He writes,

Especially as it pertains to **final salvation**, so many of us live in a fog of confusion. James saw in his day

²³ John Robbins, "The Gospel According to John MacArthur," *The Trinity Review*, May & June 1993, accessed September 20, 2017, <http://trinityfoundation.org/journal.php?id=193>.

those who were treating “faith alone” as a doctrine that claimed you could be justified by faith which produced no good works. And he vehemently said *No* to such faith.... The faith which alone justifies is never alone, but always bearing transforming fruit. So, when James says these controversial words, “A person is justified by works and not by faith alone (James 2:24), I take him to mean not by faith *which is* alone, but which shows itself by works.”²⁴

Piper is correct to point out that the faith which justifies is a faith which shows itself by works. However, he is wrong to think that these works have anything to do with our *final salvation*. Piper fundamentally misunderstands the point that James is making with respect to justification and works. James is speaking about bearing fruit before men, not about being declared righteous or justified before God at the final judgment. The faith that justifies is not a faith that is alone, but rather it is made manifest in works, which in turn justify our profession of faith *before men, but not before God*. Therefore James 2:18 says, “I will shew *thee* my faith by my works.” This demonstration of faith is before men, not before God at the final judgment. “But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith” (Galatians 3:11). To suggest or even imply that the works James is referring to have anything to do with our final salvation is to venture headlong into the citadel of Rome. This is why John Calvin wrote, “That we may not then fall into that false reasoning which has deceived the Sophists [the Romanists], we must take notice of the two-fold meaning of the word justified. Paul means by it the gratuitous imputation of righteousness before the tribunal of God; and James, *the manifestation of righteousness by the conduct, and that before men, as we may gather from the preceding words, ‘Show me thy faith,’ etc.*”²⁵

Unfortunately, there is much confusion surrounding what James meant about justification and how it relates to what Paul meant by justification. When we compare James 2:24 with Romans 3:28 we see that both Paul and James are speaking of being justified, but we must ask, “justified in what sense?” James is referring to *justification* with respect to one’s profession of faith being justified or (validated) before man, while Paul is referring to *justification* with respect to one being justified or (declared righteous) before God. James is answering the question how does one justify their profession of faith before others while Paul is answering the question how does one stand justified before God. Piper has missed that distinction and concluded that

Paul was speaking of initial justification before God and James was speaking of an ongoing and final justification before God.

The reformers correctly recognized, based on Scripture alone, that a person is wholly and completely justified and saved by faith alone in Christ alone. Romans 4:5 states, “to him that *worketh not*, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.” Here we notice that righteousness unto salvation comes by faith, not by works. In the preceding verse, it reads, “Now to the one who works, his wages are *not counted as a gift* but as his due” (Romans 4:4 ESV). If one were to work in order that they might receive salvation, then he would be receiving his due wage not a gift. But the Bible makes it clear that salvation is a gift, and it is not of works. Ephesians 2:8, 9 reads, “For by grace are ye *saved through faith*; and that not of yourselves: *it is the gift of God: Not of works*, lest any man should boast.”

Some theologians however, have stated that we are saved by faith alone, but that works are part of faith. As Robertson notes, “According to [Norman Shepherd’s] view, faith is united with works as a single response to the Gospel call for justification. As a consequence, justification is by faith and by works, or by faith/works, or by the works of faith.”²⁶ This is an egregious error for if we “hold that one is *justified by faith apart from works* of the law” (Romans 3:28 ESV), then works cannot be part of faith. Works are not part of faith nor are they united with faith but rather they are a consequence of faith. Dr. Reymond writes, “Whereas Paul is concerned with the question of how a man may achieve right standing before God, and turns to Genesis 15:6 to find his answer, James is concerned with the question of how a man is to demonstrate [before others] that he is actually justified before God and has true faith, and turns to Genesis 22: 9-10 as the probative fulfillment of Genesis 15:6 to find his answer.”²⁷

Paul condemns works added to faith, while James commends works produced by faith. We must be discerning here because our salvation does not rest on what we do; rather it rests entirely in what Christ has done for us. James asks the question in verse 14, “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works?” This is the issue James is confronting. If someone *says* he has faith but does not have works, then he is a liar and the truth is not in him. He is a false convert, a hypocrite who is self-deceived. James is asking what good is that *profession* of faith. Can that profession of faith save him? The answer is no, because that is merely a false profession of faith, rather than a true and living faith. James says in verse 17 “so also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” A true and living faith will inevitably manifest itself in works, but it does not add anything to our salvation. Not

²⁴ Piper, “Does God Really Save Us by Faith Alone?” original emphasis in italics, added emphasis in bold.

²⁵ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, Eerdmans, 1948, 314ff quoted in O. Palmer Robertson, *The Current Justification Controversy*, Trinity Foundation, 2003, 18, emphasis added.

²⁶ Robertson, 24.

²⁷ Reymond, 749.

now or ever! Unfortunately, Piper is wrong, and his teaching is not only heretical but dangerous.

Objection 1: Piper Rejects the Roman Catholic View of Justification

Because Piper's statement on justification in *Christianity Today* grounded present justification on "the substitutionary work of Christ alone," but said that future justification "accords with our works," making mention of Christ's righteousness only in reference to present justification, it appears that Piper was summarizing his own position on justification in terms of an initial justification by grace through faith, and a future justification that is based on works. The Roman Catholic Tridentine formulation on justification is that the righteousness received in justification is "preserved and also increased before God through good works," and that those works are not "merely the fruits and signs of Justification obtained" (Council of Trent, Session 6, 1547, Canons on Justification, Canon 24). If according to Piper's own formulation our initial justification is grounded on Christ's righteousness imputed to us by faith, and our final justification "accords with our works," it is difficult to see how his expression of justification is substantially different from Rome's similar expressions of initial, ongoing, and final justification.

Yet in his response to N. T. Wright, Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at the University of St. Andrews and proponent of the controversial New Perspective on Paul, Piper was startled that Wright saw future justification "based on" works: "Wright makes startling statements to the effect that our future justification will be on the basis of works."²⁸ What Piper found so startling was that Wright's position appears to conform to that of Roman Catholicism in which the justified are finally "judged righteous (and receive eternal life) because they are truly righteous."²⁹ As startling as Wright's statements are to Piper, Piper's are to us, for Piper's own formulation is just as unsettling: "Future justification is the open confirmation and declaration that in Christ Jesus we are perfectly blameless before God. This final judgment accords with our works."³⁰

Part of the answer is how Piper differentiates between "based on works" and "according to works." He writes, "I take [Paul's] phrase 'according to' (*kata*) in a sense different from 'based on.' I think the best way to bring together the various threads of Paul's teaching on justification by faith apart from works (Rom. 3:28; 4:4–6; 11:6; Eph. 2:8) is to treat the necessity of obedience not as any part of the basis of our justification, but strictly as the evidence and confirmation of our faith in Christ whose

blood and righteousness is the sole basis of our justification."³¹

Whatever one may think of Piper's various formulations on justification, in fairness to him we must at least acknowledge Piper's attempt at differentiating between "based on" and "according to" when formulating an expression in which final justification is "according to" works. Nonetheless, as we will show below, Piper is selling a false gospel that comports with and leads to Roman Catholicism.

Objection 2: By "Final Salvation" Piper Means "Final Glorification" rather than "Final Justification"

Some of Piper's defenders insist that it is wrong to make "final salvation" mean "final justification" in Piper. It seems to them, rather, that Piper is talking about "final glorification" instead. One problem with having Piper speak of glorification is that Piper repeatedly states that final glorification is our inheritance *after* attaining or getting to Heaven. In his own words, as shown above, "final salvation" is "salvation from future judgment" or "salvation after future judgment, and in Piper's thinking glorification only occurs *after that judgment*."

Note well that Piper is not speaking of glorified perfection required for acquittal for final salvation: "Obedience, evidencing inner renewal from God, is necessary for final salvation. This is not to say that God demands perfection."³² Elsewhere he speaks of glorification and final perfection as a *result* of attaining heaven only after final salvation is secured at the Last Judgment: "Jesus transforms us so that we really begin to love like he does so that we move toward perfection *that we finally obtain in heaven*."³³ When we obtain Heaven, "we are going to receive a great inheritance, including our own glorification."³⁴ To Piper, the holiness without which no one will see the Lord is not "glorification" but "love, the fruit of faith." To attain Heaven, one must first be acquitted in judgment, and to be acquitted in judgment—justified—one must have works, however imperfect they may be.

Piper thus speaks of personal holiness as a "validating transformation" that will serve as evidence of true faith *at the last judgment* so that we can attain Heaven, and he speaks of final glorification as the inheritance we receive upon attaining Heaven *after surviving that final judgment in which we are justified in accord with our imperfect*

³¹ *The Future of Justification*, 110.

³² John Piper, "What We Believe About the Five Points of Calvinism," March 1, 1985, accessed October 31, 2017, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-we-believe-about-the-five-points-of-calvinism#Perseverance>.

³³ Piper, *What Jesus Demands from the World*, 160.

³⁴ John Piper, "Children, Heirs, and Fellow Sufferers." April 21, 2002, accessed October 31, 2017, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/children-heirs-and-fellow-sufferers>.

²⁸ Piper, *The Future of Justification*, 22.

²⁹ *The Future of Justification*, 183.

³⁰ "The Justification Debate: A Primer," *Christianity Today*, June 29, 2009, 35–37.

works. Piper is speaking of, and has been speaking of, a final acquittal in judgment as a prerequisite to attaining Heaven, which itself is a prerequisite to final glorification.

Objection 3: We Should Evaluate Piper Based on Decades of Faithful Gospel Preaching

Piper's defenders also rise to defend him based on his decades of faithful Gospel preaching. Piper's *unclear* teachings on justification should be interpreted based on his *clear* teaching on justification. This objection, however, assumes that Piper has taught consistently and clearly on justification. The fact is, Piper has wavered between several different and contradictory positions on justification, which makes it exceedingly difficult to determine which teachings of Piper are the "clear" ones, and which are the "unclear ones." To understand just how unclear Piper has been over the span of his career, we provide below a survey of his thinking on justification from 1985 through 2017.

Piper through the Years

Piper received his Master of Divinity at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California (1968-1971) where he studied under Daniel Fuller and discovered the teachings of Jonathan Edwards. Piper was called to become the pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 1980 in which capacity he served until 2013.

It is worth noting that in his formative years, Piper was greatly influenced by Daniel Fuller who came under the displeasure of O. Palmer Robertson because of his problematic formulations on justification:

In substitution for the [B]iblically clear distinction between the legally imputed righteousness of justification and the vitally infused righteousness of sanctification, [Daniel] Fuller opts for the flexible meanings that may be introduced into the phrase, the "obedience of faith." Unwittingly it seems, Fuller plays on an ambiguity inherent in the phrase. When he speaks of "salvation" by the "obedience of faith," does he mean

- (1) faith as attaching to Christ altogether?
- (2) the obedient actions arising from faith?
- (3) faith considered in itself as an act of obedience?

Because of the ambiguity inherent in the phrase, Fuller may slide between its various meanings...meaning sometimes the obedience which is faith and meaning at other times the obedient actions done in faith. In other words, man is saved by doing, by keeping the revelatory law of Moses, which is the law of faith.... Fuller...leaves himself open to being understood as

commending works of faith (the "obedience of faith") as the way of justification.³⁵

Robertson's point is borne out by Fuller's work, *The Unity of the Bible: Unfolding God's Plan for Humanity* (Zondervan, 1992). Fuller built his view of justification around Jonathan Edwards' rejection of Calvin. While Edwards insisted on justification by faith alone, he struggled to grasp how a sinner could be initially justified by faith alone when the verdict on his final justification was still pending, awaiting the outcome of his perseverance. Edwards (and Fuller following) concluded that we are not actually saved by faith alone, but rather are "saved by perseverance." Thus, in the *initial* verdict of justification, God "has respect to" the eventual perseverance of the sinner: "But [contrary to Calvin] we are really saved by perseverance.... For, though a sinner is justified in his first act of faith; yet even then, in that act of justification, God has respect to perseverance as being virtually [implied] in the first act."³⁶

This is problematic. Our view on justification is that the righteousness God contemplates in His verdict of justification is Christ's righteousness alone, imputed to us by faith alone. The *Westminster Confession* insists that God justifies believers "not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them...nor by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness," not even their perseverance (11.1). Edward's problematic formulation has God contemplating the sinner's perseverance in His verdict of justification, focusing on the "thing wrought in them."

W. Robert Godfrey correctly recognized that Fuller had indeed proposed a different view of justification, and therefore a different gospel: "The clearest implication of Fuller's work has to do with the instrumental cause of justification. What is implicit in his book is made explicit in his interactions with Robertson's work where he states that faith and works are the instrumental cause of justification."³⁷

Godfrey's concern, too, had been borne out in Fuller's book. Let the reader keep in mind that Piper's view on justification blossomed in the same sun and soil as Fuller's. As Piper himself later acknowledged, "the plants of my pondering have grown" in Fuller's garden. As we shall see, starting with Fuller's ambiguous meaning of "obedience of faith," Piper has wavered throughout his ministry between multiple positions, and is still *even now* trying to find his voice on justification. Piper's apple did not fall far from

³⁵ O. Palmer Robertson, "Daniel Fuller's *Gospel and Law: Contrast or Continuum?* A Review Article," *Presbyterian*, 1981, Volume 8, Issue 1, 84-91.

³⁶ Daniel P. Fuller, *The Unity of the Bible: Unfolding Gods Plan for Humanity*. Zondervan, 1992, 296-298, citing Edwards.

³⁷ W. Robert Godfrey and O. Palmer Robertson, "Back to Basics," *Presbyterian*, 1983, 9.1, 80-81.

Fuller's tree, and Robertson and Godfrey could write the same today of Piper as they did of Fuller.

1985: Bethlehem Baptist Church Staff: What We Believe About the Five Points of Calvinism

We provide the following statement to show where Piper was early in his teaching ministry. This is five years after accepting the call to pastor Bethlehem Baptist. Piper is entrenched in the justification construct Robertson and Godfrey found so disconcerting in Fuller. Piper, puzzled over how God can provide an initial verdict of justification before the sinner has even shown that he will persevere, attempts in this statement to reconcile the difficulty:

God justifies us on the first genuine act of saving faith, *but in doing so he has a view to all subsequent acts of faith contained, as it were, like a seed in that first act....* God does not wait to the end of our lives in order to declare us righteous.... Nevertheless, we must also own up to the fact that *our final salvation is made contingent upon the subsequent obedience which comes from faith....* [W]e are justified on the basis of our first act of faith *because God sees in it (like he can see the tree in an acorn) the embryo of a life of faith.*³⁸

That difficulty will continue to arise in Piper as he wrestles with the righteousness God contemplates in the initial and final justification of the believer.

1995: The Sinner Is Justified by Faith in His Future Moral Improvement

It is now 1995 and Piper is still advancing Fuller's constructs on justification. While Piper does not completely agree with Fuller on everything, he nonetheless formulated his own view of justification based on the latent ambiguity in Fuller's "obedience of faith," the very construct Robertson found so reprehensible:

Daniel Fuller's vision of the Christian life as an "obedience of faith" is the garden in which the plants of my pondering have grown. Almost three decades of dialogue on the issues in this book have left a deep imprint.... His major work, *The Unity of the Bible*, is the explanatory background to most of what I write.³⁹

For Piper, "[f]aith is primarily future oriented,"⁴⁰ which necessarily causes the sinner to focus *primarily* on his future transformation rather than on the past work Christ

has already accomplished for him. We see Fuller's influence as Piper explains his meaning: "future grace" is the Holy Spirit's moral transformation in the believer, and the believer is justified by faith in that moral transformation: "...the heart-strengthening power that comes from the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 3:16) is virtually the same as what I mean by future grace."⁴¹ "And this *faith in future grace* is the faith through which we are justified."⁴² Thus, to Piper, both God and the sinner have the sinner's future moral improvement in mind in justification. God contemplates the sinner's future improvement—the sinner believing, and God foreseeing—that the sinner will improve over time. Take Piper's own words from *Future Grace* and the Bethlehem Baptist 1985 statement, and we have exactly the problem Robertson saw in Fuller: the sinner is justified by God's knowledge of, and the sinner's confidence in, his future moral improvement, "for the faith through which we are justified" is faith in "the heart-strengthening power that comes from the Holy Spirit." As we shall see, Piper will eventually have to revise the 1995 edition of *Future Grace* because of the "tension" that exists in his expressions of justification.

1999: Does James Contradict Paul?

In his 1999 sermon on James and Paul, Piper struggled to reconcile the two apostles, and could only resolve the tension by having Paul speak of *the initial moment of justification at the beginning of the Christian life*, and having James speak of *maintaining an ongoing and final right standing with God* through faith and works:

So when Paul renounces "justification by works" he renounces the view that anything we do along with faith is credited to us as righteousness. Only faith obtains the verdict, not guilty, *when we become Christians*. Works of any kind are not acceptable *in the moment of initial justification....* For James, "justification by works" (which he accepts) means "*maintaining a right standing with God* by faith along with the necessary evidence of faith, namely, the works of love."⁴³

Piper repeats the construct multiple times, insisting that Paul is speaking only about justification by faith alone in *initial justification*: "That's how we get started in the Christian life – justified by faith alone." James, on the other hand, is talking about how "one maintain[s] an ongoing and final right standing with God."⁴⁴

³⁸ Bethlehem Baptist Church Staff, "What we believe about the five points of Calvinism," March 1985. The statement is no longer accessible at Bethlehem Baptist Church, but as of October 2017 it is archived at <http://www.sohmer.net/media/Calvinism.htm>, emphasis added. See also note 30 above.

³⁹ John Piper, *Future Grace*. Multnomah, 1995, 7.

⁴⁰ *Future Grace*, 13.

⁴¹ *Future Grace*, 69.

⁴² *Future Grace*, 191.

⁴³ Piper, John. "Does James Contradict Paul?" August 08, 1999, accessed October 31, 2017. <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/does-james-contradict-paul>.

⁴⁴ "Does James Contradict Paul?" 28:26-34:26.

At the end of the sermon, Piper finally commends an entirely new construct to his listeners to resolve the difficulty: “justification by *dependence* alone on Christ alone.” Piper defined “dependence” as faith at the beginning of the Christian walk, and defined “dependence” as faith and works during the middle and end of the Christian walk.⁴⁵ By introducing that construct, he simply muddied the water in order to preserve a Reformational *sola*, but in reality imported works into justification.

Like his mentor Fuller, Piper thus repeatedly “leaves himself open to being understood as commending works of faith (the “obedience of faith”) as the way of justification.” In fact, this 1999 sermon was simply a recapitulation of Fuller’s 19th chapter of *The Unity of the Bible, Unfolding God’s Plan for Humanity*, “Abraham’s Persevering Faith” (281-304). It is important to establish this in Piper’s timeline to show that in 1999, Piper was still advocating a view on justification that the Reformed community found reprehensible.

2002: Counted Righteous in Christ

Something apparently had happened between 1999 and 2002. During that time, Piper wrote *Counted Righteous in Christ* to defend “the historic Protestant view of the relationship between faith and obedience so that the two are not conflated in the instrumentality of justification.” A laudable concern, indeed, since his own mentor had conflated them, and he had as well. Gone from his writing was the ambiguous language of justification by “dependence alone on Christ alone.” Absent, too, was the talk about how justification at the “beginning of the Christian life is by faith alone” but “maintaining a right standing with God” is “by faith along with...works of love.”

Had Piper finally become Protestant? Perhaps even Reformed? While Reformed teachers were cheering his new work, Piper’s mentor, Daniel Fuller, was deeply disappointed that he had wandered so far from the fold. “[I]s not such talk dangerous?” Fuller asked. In Fuller’s eyes, Piper had stumbled into the Galatian heresy.⁴⁶

The plants of Piper’s pondering had apparently left Fuller’s garden at last. Let the reader note that until he published *Counted Righteous in Christ*, Piper’s formulations on justification did not elicit Fuller’s disapproval. From his seminary years until the turn of the millennium, Piper still agreed with Fuller’s erroneous construct on justification, and that *status quo* remained until Piper finally decided to defend “the historic Protestant view” instead of what Fuller had taught him. But the plant of Piper’s pondering would soon return to its roots.

2006: What Jesus Demands from the World

Piper’s 2006 work was written to instruct Christians on the need to obey Jesus’ commands.⁴⁷ 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 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*.”⁴⁸ The two passages say nothing of the sort.

Piper’s confusion is found in his assumption that the rejected persons in each passage—“Depart from me” (*Matthew* 7:23, 25:41)—are “*fellow believers*” with the children of God. Yet both passages portray them as *unbelievers*. In *Matthew* 7:23, those who are sent away from Him are “false prophets,” “ravening wolves” dressed “in sheep’s clothing” (*Matthew* 7:15). In *Matthew* 25:41, those who are sent away from Him are *goats*, rather than *sheep*. As Christ explained in *John* 10:26, “ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep.” Only sheep believe. The people Jesus sends away to damnation are unbelieving wolves and goats. To arrive at his conclusion that Jesus will send some *believers* to hell, therefore, Piper had first to read “believers” into “wolves” and “goats,” something completely foreign to the text.

Compounding his confusion, Piper then attempted to justify his reading of *Matthew* chapters 7 and 25 by appealing to chapter 12. In doing so, Piper interpreted Jesus’ reference to *faith* as a reference to *works*, and on that basis concluded that Christians will be justified by works at the last day. Piper explained his rendering of *Matthew* 7 and 25, in this footnote:

Though it may cause confusion, it is possible to use the word “justify” to describe how the fruit of good behavior works *in the day of judgment*. The fruits can “justify” us in the sense of proving that we are believers and belong to Jesus and have a right standing with God in him. That is how I understand *Matthew* 12:37, “By your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”⁴⁹

⁴⁵ “Does James Contradict Paul?” 35:30-35:50.

⁴⁶ Daniel Fuller, *Reformation & Revival Journal*, volume 12, number 4, Fall 2003, “Another Reply to *Counted Righteous in Christ*,” 115-120.

⁴⁷ Piper, *What Jesus Demands from the World*, 17.

⁴⁸ *What Jesus Demands from the World*, 160, emphasis added.

⁴⁹ *What Jesus Demands from the World*, 161n, emphasis added.

Here Piper has read “works” into “words,” completely foreign to the text. As we showed above, Jesus’ reference to people being justified or condemned by their “words” on the Last Day was a reference to being justified by faith or condemned for unbelief, not judged by their “works.”

Our concern with Piper’s 2006 position is twofold. First, in his analysis of the role of works in justification on the Last Day, he distorted three separate passages from Jesus to get to his point. Second, it shows that the “plant of his pondering” never really left Fuller’s “garden” at all. He was still right where he was in 1999 when he explained repeatedly that initial justification is by faith alone, but it is our duty to maintain our right standing with God through works.

It is notable, as well, that Piper’s position in 2006 was not dissimilar to that of N. T. Wright. The year after he published *What Jesus Demands from the World*, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) rejected Wright’s formulations on the same grounds that Robertson and Godfrey had rejected Fuller’s:

It would appear that Wright is inconsistent when it comes to his means for receiving present and future justification. In the present, Wright argues that the badge of justification is faith alone and that no works are involved in this (Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 132). However, in reference to “final” justification, Wright argues that it is “on the basis of the whole life led.” But this is a contradiction: how can one be assured of “final justification,” if the final verdict is based on the whole life led (i.e. faith plus faithfulness/works)? *Is there such a case as a person receiving present justification and not final justification? These inconsistencies seem to shift the means for receiving justification to works, since the only difference between one who receives present justification from one who receives final justification is that the latter works.*⁵⁰

We would ask Piper the same questions because of his own inconsistencies. Is there such a case as a person receiving *initial* justification and not maintaining right standing with God through good works? 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.”⁵¹ If so, then in what way does Jesus “really” send some of our “fellow believers” to hell on the Last Day?

2007: *The Future of Justification*

In his critique of N. T. Wright, Piper ironically criticized him for his ambiguous use of “the obedience of faith,” the very thing for which Robertson had critiqued Fuller. Piper wrote,

Adding to the ambiguity of how our works function in justification is Wright’s apparent conflation of “faith,” on the one hand, and “faithfulness” (or faithful obedience), on the other hand.... The issue is whether justification by faith really means justification by works of any kind, whether provided by God or man. That is the issue, and Wright again leaves us with the impression that human transformation and Spirit wrought acts of obedience are included in the term “faith” when he speaks of present justification being by faith alone.⁵²

We remind the reader that only eight years earlier, in his attempt to harmonize James and Paul, Piper was advocating for “justification by *dependence* alone,” as noted above, explaining that our initial right standing with God is by faith alone, but our ongoing and final right standing with God is maintained by both faith and works. Both were collapsed into the single construct, “dependence alone.” Like Wright, Piper was including “Spirit wrought acts of obedience” in the term “dependence,” holding to justification by “dependence alone” (meaning faith alone) at the beginning of the Christian life, and justification by “dependence alone” (meaning faith and works of love) throughout the life of the believer. Piper too, had been “adding to the ambiguity of how our works function in justification” less than a decade earlier.

2009: John Piper, Meet Doug Wilson. Doug Wilson, Meet John Piper

Back in 2003, Douglas Wilson, pastor of Christ Church in Moscow, Idaho, suddenly began “to suspect that what he has believed for many years may actually be a truncated form of the truth, particularly when the subject concerns the gospel and salvation” (Douglas Wilson, “The Objectivity of the Covenant,” *Credenda/Agenda*, 2003, volume 15, issue 1, 4). Wilson had recently bought into the controversial Federal Vision theology and appeared to be expressing the gospel in terms of justification by faithfulness alone, instead of by faith alone, the very construct for which Piper had criticized Wright in *The Future of Justification*. The Federal Vision would eventually be judged erroneous at the 34th PCA General Assembly (2007) mentioned above. The PCA report on Federal Vision expressed concern that its adherents were creating confusion about the Gospel by combining justification and sanctification together:

⁵⁰ 34th PCA General Assembly, “Report of ad interim Study Committee on Federal Vision, New Perspective and Auburn Avenue Theology,” 2007, 2228n, emphasis added.

⁵¹ Piper, *What Jesus Demands from the World*, 210.

⁵² Piper, *The Future of Justification*, 130-131.

[T]he way Federal Vision proponents collapse the distinct benefits of this mediation (i.e. justification, adoption, sanctification) into “union with Christ” creates significant confusion. Similarly, Federal Vision’s appeal to “the biblical usage” of justification as a way to collapse forensic and transformative categories also confuses doctrines that our Standards rightly distinguish (i.e., justification and sanctification). (2225-2225)

In 2009, John Piper invited Douglas Wilson to speak at the annual Desiring God Conference because he was “deeply persuaded that Doug [Wilson] gets the gospel right.”⁵³ Wilson’s gospel is “very complicated,” Piper conceded, but it is not “another gospel,” and he just “gets a bad wrap from a lot of PCA guys who aren’t careful about the way they think.”⁵⁴ In the same discussion, Piper insisted that, for all of his criticism of him, “I don’t think N. T. Wright preaches a false gospel, either. I think N. T. Wright preaches a very confusing gospel.”

What is so remarkable and ironic about Piper’s embrace of Wilson is that Wilson was drifting away from “the [ostensibly truncated] historic Protestant view of the relationship between faith and obedience” and conflating faith and obedience in the instrumentality of justification, *at precisely the time* that Piper felt compelled to distance himself from Fuller’s gospel and write *Counted Righteous in Christ* to defend “the historic Protestant view of the relationship between faith and obedience so that the two are not conflated in the instrumentality of justification.” And yet, in 2009, Piper returned to his Fullerian roots and concluded that Wilson *had actually gotten the gospel right*, even though he was expressing it in similar terms as Fuller and Wright had—men from whom Piper had ostensibly been distancing himself since 2002.

2012: Still Fine-tuning His Understanding of Justification

In 2012 Piper revised *Future Grace*, acknowledging exactly what we have been highlighting in this timeline: the inconsistent, wavering announcement of justification by [something] alone, and *Future Grace*’s imperative of forward looking faith. Because of the latent ambiguities in his constructs on justification in the 1995 edition, and (we believe) because of the uncertain trumpet he had sounded over the years, Piper felt compelled to clarify his teaching once more:

⁵³ “John Piper – Why so many Presbyterian speakers this year?” YouTube, May 22, 2013, accessed October 31, 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bTAv8mzsnPk>.

⁵⁴ “John Piper – Why Doug Wilson?” YouTube, May 22, 2013, accessed October 31, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kkCoCDDOmOY>.

In the never-ending question of how Christians, who are counted righteous in Christ by faith alone, should nevertheless pursue righteousness, this book is my answer. It is my fullest attempt to explain why the faith that justifies also sanctifies, without mingling or confusing those two glorious works of God.

Since publishing the first edition of *Future Grace* in 1995, I have walked through extended controversies surrounding the nature, ground, and instrument of justification. These controversies have sharpened my own grasp of what the Bible teaches. Some of that sharpening is captured in *Counted Righteous in Christ* (Crossway, 2002), *The Future of Justification* (Crossway, 2007), and *Finally Alive* (Christian Focus, 2007). Some people have felt tensions between the first edition of *Future Grace* and the message of those books. I hope that this revised edition will remove those tensions.⁵⁵

We are not convinced, however, that *Future Grace* can be corrected to fix the problem of “mingling or confusing” justification and sanctification. Just as Piper’s 1999 sermon on James and Paul—drawn from the 19th chapter of Fuller’s *Unity of the Bible*—showed that he was still at that time in Fuller’s garden, *Future Grace*, written four years prior, was based largely on the 18th chapter. In chapter 18 Fuller attempted to work out the implications of “faith’s futuristic orientation” (249-280). We do not believe, however, that Piper can truly extract himself from Fuller’s garden while continuing to consume the fruit that grows there.

2013: Bethlehem Baptist Church Updates “What We Believe about the Five Points of Calvinism”

In 2013, Piper updated his church’s 1985 position on Calvinism. Correcting some of the tensions that had existed in previous expressions of justification, just as he did the previous year with *Future Grace*. In the updated statement he deleted “God justifies us [with] a view to all subsequent acts of faith,” and simply stated, “God justifies us completely through the first genuine act of saving faith, but this is the sort of faith that perseveres and bears fruit in the ‘obedience of faith.’”⁵⁶

Also, instead of God justifying us because He can see in our first act of faith “a life of faith with its inevitable obedience,” the focus was shifted now to Christ’s righteousness: “The first time we believe in Jesus we are united to Christ. In union with him, his righteousness is counted as ours, at that moment.” Nevertheless, the statement on obedience being required for final salvation remained: “Obedience, evidencing inner renewal from God, is necessary for final salvation.”

⁵⁵ John Piper, *Future Grace*, Preface to the 2012 edition, Multnomah, 2012.

⁵⁶ See note 30 above.

Conclusion

In *The Future of Justification*, Piper recalled that Richard Gaffin spoke at the Pastors Conference in Monroe, Louisiana in 2005 (the namesake of the Monroe Doctrine and by some reckoning the origins of the Federal Vision). At the Conference, Gaffin expressed what Piper believed, upon further study, to be “the true biblical understanding of the function of works in the final judgment.”⁵⁷

In the 1970s, throughout the Westminster Theological Seminary justification controversy surrounding the teachings of Norman Shepherd, Gaffin was Shepherd’s ardent defender. At the heart of the controversy was Shepherd’s view of the role of works in the justification of the believer, and Gaffin had sided with Shepherd. Shepherd’s views were eventually determined to be out of accord with the *Westminster Confession* and he was dismissed from the seminary in 1982. Gaffin never recanted his support of Shepherd.⁵⁸

We provide here three of Shepherd’s theses that were so offensive to the Reformed community, and invite our readers to determine where Piper differs from Shepherd:

Thesis 21: The exclusive ground of the justification of the believer in the state of justification is the righteousness of Jesus Christ, but his obedience, which is simply the perseverance of the saints in the way of truth and righteousness, is necessary to his continuing in a state of justification (Heb. 3:6, 14).

Thesis 22: The righteousness of Jesus Christ ever remains the exclusive ground of the believer’s justification, but the personal godliness of the believer is also necessary for his justification in the judgment of the last day (Matt. 7:21-23; 25:31-46; Heb. 12:14).

Thesis 23: Because faith which is not obedient faith is dead faith, and because repentance is necessary for the pardon of sin included in justification, and because abiding in Christ by keeping his commandments (John 15:5; 10; 1John 3:13; 24) are all necessary for continuing in the state of justification, good works, works done from true faith, according to the law of God, and for his glory, being the new obedience wrought by the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer united to Christ, though not the ground of his justification, are nevertheless necessary for salvation

from eternal condemnation and therefore for justification (Rom. 6:16, 22; Gal. 6:7-9).⁵⁹

The problem with Piper is that his position does not differ from Shepherd’s at all. This is by design. Federal Vision proponent, Rich Lusk, delights that the double justification doctrine is making headway in Evangelical circles: “[T]his double justification doctrine (initial justification by faith alone, followed by a second justification according to works in the eschatological judgment) is re-emerging as a “consensus position” among today’s leading evangelical and Reformed biblical theologians.”⁶⁰

Justification by works is “re-emerging” as a “consensus position” because men like Piper are now preaching “a second justification according to works” as if it was the Good News Christ came to announce to His flock. We remind the reader, as well, that Gaffin, Piper, Lusk, and Shepherd are preaching a gospel that Roman Catholics delight to hear. Erstwhile Presbyterian, Jason Stellman converted to Roman Catholicism after embracing the same interpretation of *Matthew 12* that Norman Shepherd advances in his theses, forcing him to “conclude that justification is not a once-for-all event, but that there is indeed such a thing as future justification...in which our works are intimately and causally involved.”⁶¹ Many years earlier, when Scott Hahn was seeking to discover who else was finding a second justification by works in the Scriptures, stumbled upon Norman Shepherd, and was delighted to find that Shepherd, too, was preaching Romanism:

I was so excited about this discovery. I shared it with some friends, who were amazed at how much sense it made. Then one friend stopped me and asked if I knew who else was teaching this way on justification? When I responded that I didn’t, he told me that Dr. Norman Shepherd, a professor of Westminster Theological Seminary (the strictest Presbyterian Calvinist Seminary in America) was about to undergo a heresy trial for teaching the same view of justification that I was expounding. So I called Professor Shepherd and talked with him. He said he was accused of teaching something contrary to the teachings of Scripture,

⁵⁹ Norman Shepherd, “Thirty-four Theses on Justification in Relation to Faith, Repentance, and Good Works,” November 18, 1978.

⁶⁰ Rich Lusk, “The Reformed Doctrine of Justification by Works: Historical Survey and Emerging Consensus,” in P. Andrew Sandlin & John Barach, editors, *Obedient Faith: A Festschrift for Norman Shepherd*, Kerygma Press, 2012, 2

⁶¹ Jason Stellman, “Jesus, Justification, and Every Idle Word,” December 9, 2012, accessed October 31, 2017, <http://www.creedcodecult.com/jesus-justification-and-every-idle-word/>.

⁵⁷ Piper, *The Future of Justification*, 115-116.

⁵⁸ For more on Gaffin see Karlberg, *The Changing of the Guard, A Companion to the Current Justification Controversy* edited by John W. Robbins, Elliott, *Christianity and Neo-Liberalism: The Spiritual Crisis in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and Beyond*, and Cunha, *The Emperor Has No Clothes: Richard B. Gaffin, Jr’s Doctrine of Justification* all published by The Trinity Foundation. – Editor.

Luther and Calvin. As I heard him describe what he was teaching, I thought, Hey that *is* what I am saying.⁶²

For all his protestations to the contrary, and all his attempts to reformulate his expressions of justification, that is what Piper is saying, too.

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⁶² Scott Hahn, *Rome, Sweet Home*, Ignatius Press, 1993, 31, emphasis in original.