

Reclaiming the Doctrine of Justification

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The Reformation answer to the question, "Don't I contribute anything to my salvation?" is, "Yes...Your sin!"

Any evangelical--indeed, any Christian--would probably say that the key issue of human life is that of a saving relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Those who are familiar with the scriptures and know what is described with regard to the nature of the fall of the human race in Genesis three and have come to grips with the texts that plumb the true depths of that fall and the ramifications for every human being born after Adam and Eve, would probably not hesitate to say that man became at that point totally depraved.

Total depravity, of course, does not mean that man has become as bad as he can possibly be, but that every part of us is infected with a deep infection and that we cannot solve our own problem with regard to that infection. This realism moves the evangelical to affirm, therefore, that the eternal Logos assumed to himself a particular human nature and had as his work to be our prophet, priest, and king and to solve our basic problem in our stead or in our place. The word that most evangelicals would use for that is a biblical word...salvation.

And so, in one way, our subject is a very very simple one: How am I to be saved? And in a way, the answer to the question is as simple: Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved! Or, to use a couple of texts which Luther and Calvin cited in their debates with great frequency, "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the Law..." (Rom. 3:28) and, "But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness" (Rom. 4:5).

Now the basic motifs are as follows: (1) The reformers really believed that the popular (and, by the mid-sixteenth century, official) Roman Catholic position was a self-salvation. By "Roman Catholic" I don't mean what's going on necessarily at St. John's by the gas station today. Rather, it is to the medieval position which I refer, the Roman Catholic theology that was represented in the Council of Trent.

(2) When God gives orders and tells us what will happen if we fail to obey those orders perfectly, it is

in the category of what the reformers, following the biblical text, called "law." When God promises freely, providing for us because of Christ's righteousness the status he demands of us, this is in the category of "gospel." It is good news from start to finish. The Bible includes both, and the reformers were agreed that the scriptures clearly taught (contrary to many forms of dispensationalism) that the Law (whether Old or New Testament commands) was not set aside for the believer. Nevertheless, they insisted that nothing in this category of "Law" could be a means of justification or acceptance before a holy God.

The Law comes, not to reform the sinner, nor to show him or her the "narrow way" to life, but to crush the sinner's hopes of escaping God's wrath through self-effort or even cooperation. All of our righteousness must come from someone else--someone who fulfilled the Law's demands. Once we have been stripped of our "filthy rags" of righteousness (Is.64:6), our "fig leaves" through which we try in vain to hide our guilt and shame, only then can we be clothed with Christ's righteousness. First comes the Law to proclaim judgment and death, then the Gospel to proclaim justification and life. One of the clearest presentations of this motif is found in Paul's Epistle to the Galatians.

For many in the German "Higher Life" movement, and those in the stream of Wesley generally, the motif is Law-Gospel-Law. B. B. Warfield, the great dean of "Old Princeton" Reformed theologians, was one of the clearest early critics of this trend, which has now culminated in the vast literature of "victorious living" versions of the Christian life. Warfield argued that, at the bottom of it all, the Higher Life movement was nothing more than a revival of prominent Wesleyan-Arminian features. Warfield also stated that he was fairly convinced that the Arminians had another God. That's a deep shot. Is it justified? To answer that, let us go back for a moment to the Reformation debate.

In the sixteenth century the issue of law and grace was more clearly dealt with than at almost any other

time since the apostles. The lines were cut cleanly, and as the great Yale historian, Roland Bainton, has written, "This was the only issue of the century." Anybody who is studying the sixteenth century primarily through the issue of economics is going to miss the whole point of the century. It is impossible to understand the sixteenth century if you start with the categories of Marxism and revolution, or anything else.

The Gospel in the Middle Ages

Throughout what has come to be called "the Middle Ages," the western Church was discussing and debating the nature of justification. What then was the medieval doctrine of justification?

Thomas Aquinas had a doctrine of justification, but it was one doctrine among many. Somewhere tucked behind, around, and under such subjects as regeneration, predestination, sanctification, etc., there was a doctrine of justification. It also was a doctrine of justification that involved God loving the sinner in so far as he or she was not a sinner. He did not love the sinner qua sinner; how could a holy and just God love a sinner? But he loved sinners in so far as they had the potential to not be sinners.

Duns Scotus spoke of the necessity of an absolutely selfless act of contrition (sorrow) and love for God by natural means if a person was to be saved. Think about that for a moment. At least once during your life, you have to perform an utterly selfless act that has no vested interest for you whatsoever, or you will not be saved. Luther believed that this way of justification prevented God from befriending publicans and sinners, and that if it were true, God was not truly free.

Of course, there were many other views. Strict Augustinians insisted on the priority of grace, which because of predestination, rendered it absolutely certain that one would be justified--one day in the future. Even for the Augustinians--and there were not a few--justification was primarily moral transformation, not a legal declaration distinct from any prior moral conditions.

The medieval consensus which won out has come to be known by the technical name "Semipelagianism"--from the fourth century debate between Augustine, defender of grace, and Pelagius, a monk who denied original sin and, therefore, the need for supernatural

grace. While the Council of Orange (529 A.D.) condemned both Pelagianism and Semipelagianism, the heresy of works-righteousness, erected on the foundation of free will, grew increasingly popular among the masses and even among the theologians.

What the reformers said of the position was that it was by necessity a theology of doubt, of fear, and finally of despair, of being saved. One had to be sanctified enough first in order to merit justifying grace, and the essence of justification was a real change within the human heart. (We must mark this well, because we shall discover parallels to this in evangelicalism when we discuss this below.) Justification, for Roman Catholic theology, is primarily a real empirical change in the human heart. Aquinas argued that justification involved a gradual change from unjust to just, thus justified. Grace amounted to an infused power to enable one to cooperate with the Spirit, to gradually move oneself from the category of "ungodly" to "righteous." And this would be noticeable in fewer and fewer sins.

As if Aquinas were anticipating the Enlightenment, he seems to have much more in common with Kant than with the New Testament, when he offers a statement likely to be heard in any number of evangelical circles in our day: "God never asks of anyone something for which he does not first give them the power to perform it." Reformation people, of course, had (and still ought to have) tremendous problems with this theory which underestimates both the seriousness of sin and the greatness of grace.

The Gospel According to the Reformers

What then is the doctrine of justification as taught by the reformers? It is, they said, primarily a forensic declaration, that is, it comes from the world of law courts. In this transaction, we the guilty party stand before the judge who is righteous and are declared as if we were not only innocent, but as though we were perfectly righteous. (Notice how the popular definition, "just-as-if-I'd-never sinned" only tells half the story: We are not only forgiven; we are also credited with Christ's complete righteousness as though we had perfectly kept the Law through the course of our lives.)

The reformers did not believe that this justification was an empirical change in the human heart; rather, it was external. One of my favorite stories that illustrates this particular matter deals with a time

when Luther was under the ban of the Empire, was translating the Bible into German at the Wartburg castle, and could only have contact with his star student Melanchthon by courier. Melanchthon had a different sort of temperament than Luther. Some would call Melanchthon timid; others of a somewhat less generous bent might call him "spineless." At one point, while Luther was off in the Wartburg castle translating, Melanchthon had another one of his attacks of timidity. He wrote to Luther, "I woke this morning wondering if I trusted Christ enough." Luther received such letters from Melanchthon regularly. He had a tendency, a propensity, to navel-gaze, and to wonder about the state of his inner faith, and whether it was enough to save. Finally, in an effort to pull out all the stops and pull Melanchthon out of himself, Luther wrote back and said, "Melanchthon! Go sin bravely! Then go to the cross and bravely confess it! The whole gospel is outside of us."

This story has been told time and time again by less sympathetic observers in an effort to caricature Luther and the Reformation generally as an invitation to licentious abandon. If we are not justified by our own moral conformity to the Law, but by Christ's, surely there is nothing keeping us from self-indulgence. Of course, this was the criticism of the gospel which Paul anticipated in Romans six: "Shall we therefore sin so that grace may increase? Heaven forbid!" Nevertheless, Luther's pastoral advice was calculated to jar Melanchthon out of morbid introspection. Great sinners know liberation when they have it, but Melanchthon had been a scrupulous, pious Catholic. This, however, did not bring him assurance, but only doubts. For his assurance depended, not so much on God's promise to the ungodly as ungodly (Rom.4:5), but on his ability to see growth and improvement in his Christian walk. Luther's frustrated counsel was not an invitation to serve sin, but an attempt to shock Melanchthon into realizing that his righteousness was external to him: The whole gospel is outside of us.

In order to precisely define justification we ought to use the full formula, taking the words of William Hordern:

The Doctrine is properly called justification by grace alone through faith alone. Through the years a kind of shorthand has risen whereby we have spoken of justification by faith alone. In and of itself this is

innocent enough and it avoids having to keep repeating the full formula. But the trouble with this abbreviation is that it can give a quite mistaken view of what the doctrine is really saying. When by grace alone is dropped from the phrase, the impression is that faith is the primary element in justification. But then faith begins to appear as something that we must perform. And so, ironically, the term justification by faith leads to a new doctrine of works. Faith comes to be seen as a work that we must accomplish in order save ourselves.

Ironically, even in the Lutheran church this concept is rife. We took a national survey in North America and found out that seventy-five percent of Lutherans across synodical line were functioning Roman Catholics. Seventy-five percent of them answered "yes" to questions like, "I think I will be saved because I am trying harder to obey the Ten Commandments this week than last week." A few years ago Will Herberg and other commentators noted that a predominant aspect of North American religion was that we have faith in faith. One American evangelist, in fact, wrote a booklet, "How To Have Faith In Your Faith." To believe fervently is good, regardless of what it is we believe. No doubt this attitude is partly the result of the abbreviation justification by faith alone.

I mentioned that the Roman Catholic position was that we were saved by grace, and that grace is an infused power to lead a God-pleasing life. Luther did not agree that the word "grace" in the Bible meant an infused power to live a God-pleasing-life, as though it were a substance. He said rather that grace is the opposite of merit: unmerited favor. We are saved by God's graciousness to us. God has decided to be gracious to sinners; we are saved by his graciousness.

Grace is not even a principle: It is an attribute, a disposition, of the living God. He is gracious. To be saved by God's graciousness is to give up on merit, or to use Luther's phrase, to "let God be God." Luther believed that to "let God be God" was to recognize that it is he who does the saving, and part of what was requisite in that was for us to quit trying to do the saving. The Roman Catholic position was that God and the believer working together can save, while the Reformation position insisted that God can save sinners only if they stop trying to save themselves. The cause of God's graciousness to sinners is not our faith, the reformers insisted; the

cause of God's graciousness to sinners is his graciousness. In other words, we do not leverage the love of God out of heaven. We do not have any archimedean point for a lever to pry it down toward us. Our openness, our yearning for him, our longing to be part of his gracious plan: none of this justifies; none of these dispositions or desires on our part can pry open the gate of heaven.

If the reformers were correct in interpreting what Paul was getting at in the epistle to the Romans, one hundred percent of our salvation is due to his graciousness, and zero percent is due to anything in us. The Reformation answer to the question, "Don't I contribute anything to my salvation?" is, "Yes...Your sin!" The value then of saving faith is only a value in virtue of the object grasped. Faith has no virtue; it connects us to the one who is virtuous.

Along these lines, a book that has been a low point in the history of publishing in the West appeared in the nineteen-fifties titled, *The Magic of Believing*. Again, it's Charlie Brown's line: it doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you believe in something. It helps to keep your blood pressure down, and you'll be less likely to have ulcers if you believe in something, no matter what it is. This was not the Reformation position: Faith had no virtue on its own. It was, they said, an empty hand which grasps the free treasure of Christ. The old sermon illustration is worth remembering: If a person happens to be drowning and someone throws out a life-ring and pulls the person, it is bizarre for the rescued party to say, "Did you see how I grasped that ring? Why just look at these hands!"

Luther said that faith in Christ to save allowed God to be who he was. And so the Reformation affirmation is that we are saved on account of Christ through faith, and it is not that we are saved on account of faith through Christ. It is the graciousness of God that saves us by his act in Christ, not our faith itself. If we say that our faith is something which we offer to God--like some sort of transaction in which God offers salvation in exchange for our act of faith or decision, we are functioning Roman Catholics. I used to say to some of my evangelical students that they ought to find a priest and join the Roman Catholic Church, because it was the same theology and the priest could say it more clearly. What has become blurred and confused in evangelical circles is quite clearly and articulately

spelled out in the dogmatic conclusions of the Roman Catholic magisterium.

Man, said Luther and Calvin, has no faith and he cannot produce any faith. We are all helpless, impotent, and bankrupt by virtue of our participation in Adam and Eve's act, and we cannot pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. The place we find this most clearly expounded by Luther is in *The Bondage of The Will*.

I hear the reader asking, "Well then, is saving faith just a matter of knowing facts?" Hardly, and the reformers knew that. They distinguished between historical faith and saving faith. Historical faith had as its goal or end, human speculations. It was an intellectual acceptance of facts concerning Jesus' life, work, and death; nevertheless, it came only from the human mind, acknowledging the facts, but remained basically uninvolved with the one that caused the facts to happen. And the key phrase that Luther used was that the person who just had historical faith believed that none of this was *pro me*, or for me. Once a person comes to accept that this whole action summed up in the Nicene creed was for me, then said Luther we're talking about the kind of faith that saves. There we have an active embracing of the son of God and his self sacrifice. And you say, "Ah ha! There is something self produced in faith." Answer from the reformers, "Not at all. God gets the total credit when someone starts to think that sort of thing." That is the power of the Holy Spirit through the gospel that gives that inclination to us against our own.

The motif in the New Testament, and in the Reformation is that Christ's death was outside of me and for me. It is not primarily something that changes us. After one has been declared righteous by grace through faith, this grace will begin to change us (sanctification); nevertheless its changing us is certainly not what justifies us. In Roman Catholicism, and in John Wesley's work, what makes us acceptable to God is his internal work of renovation within our hearts and lives.

Thus, through the influence of Arminianism and Wesleyanism, the situation in many evangelical churches bears almost indistinguishable resemblance on these points to medieval Rome. Some of the preaching in evangelicalism--certainly some of the Sunday school material, some of the primary addresses by retreat speakers and Christian leaders-

all taken together as the basic spiritual diet, tend to reinforce that old intuition that good people are the ones who are saved and that those who are not so good are the ones who are lost.

The bell-weather test as to where a person stands on this is what he or she does with Romans chapter seven, particularly passages such as, "The good that I would, I do not. And that which I abhor is that which I do...Oh wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?" In many cases, those who are not grounded in the Reformation persuasion have to say this was Paul's experience before he met the Lord, while those of us from the Reformation perspective would probably say there is no better description of the Christian life in all of the Bible than Romans seven. The reformers really believed that the Christian life was a life *simul iustus et peccator*-simultaneously justified and yet sinful, and that we would remain in this tension until death. They were eager to proclaim Christ as savior and lord and would never have known the dichotomy expressed by Zane Hodges and other antinomian Bible teachers, but they were absolutely opposed to a self-salvation by self surrender.

Any righteousness that we have, even in the Christian life, is gifted to us. They would not have been especially impressed with the kind of things that have come from the Keswick movement in England, from the German higher life movement, from Ian Thomas, from the American Finneyites, Andrew Murray, or some of the writings of Lewis Sperry Chafer. Here is a quote from the famous B. B. Warfield on Louis Sperry Chafer:

Mr. Chafer makes use of all the jargon of the higher life teaching. In him we too hear of two kinds of Christians whom he designates respectively carnal men, and spiritual men on the basis of a misreading of 1 Corinthians 2:9 and following. And we are told that the passage from the one to the other is at our option, whether we care to claim the higher degree by faith. With him too, thus, the enjoyment of every blessing is suspended on our claiming it. We hear of letting God, and indeed we almost hear of engaging the Spirit as we engage say a carpenter to do work for us. And we do explicitly hear of "making it possible for God to do things," a quite terrible expression. Of course we hear repeatedly of the duty and efficacy of yielding, and the act of yielding ourselves is quite in the customary manner

discriminated from consecrating ourselves...
(*Princeton Theological Review*, April 1919)

Many of the elements present in medieval theology are replicated in North American fundamentalism and evangelicalism. The family resemblances, if you want to talk across the spectrum of Christian theology, are: Luther/Calvin; Wesley/Rome.

What About Sanctification?

Did the reformers then have any doctrine of sanctification? Of course they did. We are all familiar with the biblical announcements as to what is involved sanctification: the Word, the sacraments, prayer, fellowship, sharing the gospel, serving God and neighbor, and the Reformation tradition acknowledges that there are biblical texts that speak of sanctification as complete already. This is not a perfection which is empirical or observable, but a definitive declaration that because we are "in Christ," we are set apart and holy by his sacrifice (1 Cor. 1:30; Heb. 10, etc.). Anybody who is in Christ is sanctified because his holiness is imputed to the Christian believer, just as Jesus says in John chapter seventeen, "For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified." God sees the believer as holy. That means that Wesley should not have terrified Christian brethren with texts such as, "Without holiness, no one will see the Lord." The Christian is holy--it's all imputed. And then there are texts that say, "Be holy as I am holy." What would the reformers do with that? They would say we are called to be holy. But why should we be holy if we are already perfect in Christ? Because we are saved unto good works, not unto licentiousness, according to Romans chapter six; the question has been asked before. The works are done out of thankfulness of heart by the believer who has been saved, not by one who is trying to be saved. Clearly the reformers had a doctrine of sanctification. They believed that the Law in the Bible had three uses. First, it was a civil ordinance to keep us from stealing each other's wives and speedboats. The civil use of the law applied to the whole culture. Second, the theological use of the law which was to reveal our sin and drive us to despair and terror so that we would seek a savior. Luther believed that was the primary use of the law in all of Scripture. But the reformers also believed in a third use of the Law, and that was as a didactic use, to teach the Christian God's will for holy living.

If the Christian is reading the Law and says, "This is not yet true of me: I don't love God with all my heart, and I certainly don't love my neighbor as I love myself. In fact, just today I failed to help a poor chap on the side of the road who was having car trouble. I must not yet be a Christian," here the reformers would counsel, "You hurry back to the second use of the law and flee to Christ where sanctification is truly, completely, and perfectly located." After this experience, the believer will feel a greater sense of freedom to obey, and it is the only way that one will ever feel free to obey. The difference between all "Higher Life" movements and the Reformation perspective finally turns on the question of what Baptists call the assurance of salvation, and what the reformers called *fides reflexa* (reflexive faith). The answer of the Higher Life movement to the struggling Christian is, "Surrender more," or, "What are you holding back from the Lord?" The Reformation answer is different.

A friend of mine was walking down the streets of Minneapolis one day and was confronted by an evangelical brother who was very anxious to know whether he was saved and asked just that. "Brother, are you saved?" Hal rolled his eyes back and said, "Yes." That didn't satisfy this brother so he said, "Well when were you saved?" Hal said, "About two thousand years ago, about a twenty minutes' walk from downtown Jerusalem." The most important thing is that the death of Christ was in fact a death even for Christian failure. Christ's death even saves Christians from major sins. There is always "room at the cross" for unbelievers, it seems, but what we ought to be telling people is that there is room there for Christians, too. This, then, is what Dr. Manske meant when earlier I referred to his comment that in many evangelical gatherings the motif is Law/Gospel/Law. The Law condemns, driving us to Christ in the Gospel, from whom we receive both instantaneous justification and progressive sanctification for the rest of our lives, according to the Reformation perspective. But in contemporary evangelicalism, the Law can come back and undermine the confidence of the Gospel. It can still make threats; it can still condemn. There is wonderful grace for the sinner out there, and the evangelical is at his best in evangelism. But the question as to whether there is enough grace for the sinful Christian is an open one in many gatherings, and I have had many students tell me, "My last state is worse than the first--I think I've got to leave the faith because I feel worse now than I did before." In

many cases, I have had brothers and sisters come up to me after I had spoken and tell me, "This is about the last shot I've got. My own Christian training is killing me. I can understand how, before I was a Christian, Christ's death was for me, but I am not at all sure that his death is for me now because I have surrendered so little to him and hold so much back. My trouble really began when I committed myself to Christ as Lord and Savior." That can come from the pastoral teaching, the Sunday school curriculum, and everything one's Christian leaders declare.

Conclusion

There must be a clear and unqualified pronouncement of the assurance of salvation on the basis of the fullness of the atonement of Christ. In other words, even a Christian can be saved. This other gospel, in its various forms ("Higher Life," legalistic, the "carnal Christian" teaching, etc.) is tearing us to pieces. I must warn you that the answer to this devastating problem is not available on every street corner. It is only available in the Reformation tradition. This is not because that particular tradition has access to information other traditions do not possess. Rather, it is because the same debate which climaxed in that sixteenth century movement has erupted again and again since. In fact, since Christ's debates with the Pharisees and Paul's arguments with the legalists, this has been the debate of Christian history. At no time since the apostolic era were these issues so thoroughly discussed and debated, to the point where the lines are clear and the distinctives well-defined. To ignore the biblical wisdom, scholarship, and brilliant insights of such giants is simply to add to our ignorance the vice of pride and self-sufficiency. The Reformation position is the evangelical position.

The only way out is an exposition of the Scriptures that has to do with Law and Gospel: An exposition of the scriptures that places Christ at the center of the text for everybody, including the Christian. All of the Bible is about him. All of the Bible is even about him for the Christian!

I used to tell my students at a Christian college that they had never heard preaching with the exception of a few sound evangelistic appeals. Their weekly diet in the congregation was not a proclamation of the grace to them because of the finished and atoning death of Christ; the grace to them as Christians. That emphasis is desperately needed. And the only way to

find it is to go back to when it was done, and it was done in the sixteenth century. The real hope for the church in the west lies with the evangelicals. Barring an unusual act of God, the mainline churches are not going to get the church back on its feet. Generally speaking, they simply do not have a high enough view of the inspiration of scripture to listen to it anymore.

The evangelicals do. They believe that the scriptures are true, but tend to read them as a recipe book for Christian living, rather than for the purpose of finding Christ who died for them and who is the answer for their un-Christian living. We must have that kind of renewal, and it can only come from the

evangelicals. The evangelical movement in America must begin reading from the reformers instead of pretending that they are committed only to the Bible, without any system of doctrine, when it is clear what books, tapes, and sermons have shaped their faith and practice. Another thing we are going to have to re-examine in connection with Christian growth is the question of the sacraments--not sacramentalism, but the very nature of the sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper), which receives far more attention in the scriptures than in contemporary evangelical discussion and piety. We are going to have to talk about them again. The major themes of the reformers are precisely the ones which the evangelical must be encouraged to recover in this time and place.

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