

The Justification Wars

There is much debate today concerning justification. The more learned debate the finer points of the original languages in several key passages of Scripture dealing with justification. While justification is a key doctrine and one narrowly defined within the pale of reformed orthodoxy, it is not that hard to understand and there is little room for debate. It is good for us to bring out the key doctrines of the church and run them up the flagpole every so often and closely examine what we believe. The scholarly debates of recent days however have not solidified what we believe. These debates which are often accompanied with much heat and charges from gross error to clear heresy have done little to bring edification to any and very well may have caused confusion and harm to the over all body of Christ.

Every attempt to more clearly word the doctrine meets with a letter-by-letter dissection of the statement that defies understanding. In the reformed churches we have confessional documents that clearly define the term and have held us in good stead for several hundred years. Several of these new innovations are not in accord with these documents and despite all the heat and verbiage cannot be supported from the Bible. We no longer appear to have the ability to call together in one place a universal council which all of the reformed churches will recognize. This leaves each denomination or group with the task of examining these deviant views and making a declaration concerning their being a viable alternative view to our confessions or denouncing them for what they are, heresy. Few have done so and the rank and file of the church continues to hear men of some renown speak roaring words of heresy without the watchmen of the church raising the alarm.

I am positive that what I write here will be placed under a microscope and torn to bits by both sides of this debate. This is of no concern to me and I really do not care who says what concerning my beliefs unless it can be shown clearly I vary from the Bible. The Bible is very clear concerning justification. The prime tool of biblical interpretation is that the Scripture interprets Scripture. In this hermeneutic verses that are not clear are read in the light and guidance of the verses that are clearer. God chose to set before us in His revealed word a clear statement concerning justification:

Eph. 2:8 By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: 9 Not of works, lest any man should boast. 10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.

I would be very dissatisfied if my elementary class could not understand this passage. A simple definition of justification may be in order and the words simplified, but just perhaps. The shadow some seek in other passages is of no concern since the principle is for the clearest passage to interpret the less clear. God does not need our help in saying what He intended to say. Let us then in issues like this allow the Bible to interpret the Bible and the clarity of God's word speak for itself.

The Westminster Confession of Faith in chapter XI. 1, 2 states:

Those whom God effectually calleth, he also freely justifieth: not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; nor by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness; but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness, by faith; which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God. Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification:[4] yet is it not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love.

The Confession of Faith is not Scripture and was never intended by the original writers nor accepted by the church as being on par with the Bible. It is a simple attempt to explain in terms all can understand what the whole of God's word teaches us concerning any particular point of doctrine addressed. The present day detractors however have taken this portion of the confession along with one of the most long standing positions of the reformed churches to find a place to create a theological hook upon which to hang their teachings. The opening salvo attacks the so-called great Solas of the church (By grace alone, by faith alone, by Christ alone, etc.) by pointing out that the confession itself admits that faith is never alone and therefore there must be something added to faith for man to be justified. What they add is works by attempting to show that in every passage that speaks of judgment that the believer is judged by his works. This they would say means they agree justification is a forensic declaration of God but it has a future or eschatological element and is only complete when at the final judgment the works of the believer in the flesh are judged and his justification made whole and final.

The defenders of the faith make a grave error in claiming these interlopers of reformed theology are confusing justification with sanctification seeing sanctification connected to the works of man in the flesh. From this faulty foundation they tilt at windmills then instead of routing these modern day heretics and exposing them for what they are. Sanctification has no more to do with the work of the person than justification. The bible is again very clear and needs no assistance in being understood. We read in the Bible:

Romans 8:30 Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified.

This is a clear passage and shows without doubt sanctification is of God just as much as justification and as such does not have anything to do with justification. It just as clearly shows that justification and sanctification have their roots in the eternal election of God and both begin and end with God not what the created does or does not do. To deny this

infringes upon God's work because we read in Philippians 2:13 "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." To add works then is to deny the sovereignty of God the very soul of reformed doctrine. God's sovereignty tramples the autonomy of man and this is where we find the desire to change the doctrine of justification to allow at least some element of man's work to be included in salvation. The proponents deny this. These for the most part are sincere godly men and one can only wonder why they are so engaged. They either have deluded themselves or are being misled by the devil and not seeing Satan's hand upon their shoulder guiding them along the path of destruction. It happened to Peter in the biblical revelation of that portion of history and it happens today. None of us are an island of wisdom and for this reason the reformed have always held the command of Scripture to be in subjection to our fellow believers very close. While never on par with the Bible church tradition or what the church has believed through the ages has been given some weight in how we understand doctrine within the church.

Ephesians 8:10ff and Romans 8:30 then form our two most clear passages to understand justification as God has revealed it to us. All other so-called controversy must be examined in light of these two clear passages and brought into compliance because there is no contradiction in God's word. James and Paul were not teaching two different doctrines but the same doctrine with a shift of emphasis as such. Paul says we are justified by faith alone, James appears to add works but when read in the clarity of the whole of Scripture it becomes clear James was saying the same thing that God said in Romans 8:30. That is that those whom God elected God does all other things for too. Thus I cannot have a justified person who does not do good works. Christ said, "by their fruit you shall know them." If the works are rotten so is the soul and that person is not justified and of course the opposite is also true. However, we are never given permission to judge the soul of any person but we are told to examine the fruit and call to repentance those who do not do good works.

To point to works being the foundation of our final judgment is a non-issue in this or any other key point of doctrine because the works of man have not and will not ever save the first person. Justification means salvation in totality and it is final from the election though it may be made manifest at various times in history (time). Our works do matter. Works however have no weight whatsoever in where our eternal home will be. Paul writing to the church of Corinth said:

1 Cor. 3:12 Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; 13 Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. 14 If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. 15 If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.

In other words even if a believer is misled and does nothing but bad works (not within the will of God) they will not be lost. Salvation of God is eternal and complete from its

beginning in election until its completion in glorification with Christ. If the works of the person can be destroyed and have no effect on the person's salvation how dare any claim our justification is not complete through faith alone? Paul wrote these words of explanation so all can understand justification and the final judgment. This does not say one single believer will be standing before Christ with no works whatsoever, all of their works having been burned in judgment.

How are we saved? 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 is the biblical answer. It doesn't need debate it needs believing and the active living of the holy life the believer is called to. God has spoken and so it is. As Paul writes in Romans 3:4, "Let God be true and all men liars." It is only then we are justified in our words and found righteous when judged. It is God who elects, calls, justifies, sanctifies and glorifies. The effort of any to prove otherwise is pure vanity and an affront to the sovereignty of God and the reformed faith.

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