

# Present Truth

A magazine dedicated  
to the restoration  
of New Testament Christianity  
in this generation

*Sola Gratia*    Solely by Grace  
*Solo Christo*    Solely by Christ  
*Sola Fide*    Solely by Faith

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Vol 4 #3

## THE RADICAL NATURE OF JUSTIFICATION

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# Present Truth

**Present Truth** is a magazine dedicated to the restoration of New Testament Christianity and committed to upholding the great Reformation principle of justification by faith.

Editor: Robert D. Brinsmead  
Publishing Editor: Norman James

**Publishers:** A group of Christian scholars and businessmen without denominational sponsorship who have united to uphold the objective gospel amid the present deluge of religious subjectivism. Multitudes are being caught up in the popular and frantic effort to find satisfaction in some sort of religious experience. *Present Truth* is a voice in this barren wilderness of groveling internalism, a voice which boldly proclaims those great principles upon which the Reformation was founded—namely:

1. *Sola gratia.* God's saving activity outside of us in the person of Jesus Christ is the sole *ground* of our salvation.
2. *Solo Christo.* Christ's doing and dying on our behalf is the sole *basis* of our acceptance and continued fellowship with God.
3. *Sola fide.* The Holy Spirit's gift of faith through the hearing of this objective, historical gospel is the sole *means* whereby Christ's substitutionary life and death are imputed to us for justification unto life eternal. He who is thus justified by faith and filled with God's Spirit will glory only in Christ's cross and make God's saving work in Christ the central affirmation of his Christian witness. Though he will be careful to obey God and please Him in all things, he will continue to repent rather than glory in the feeble attainments of his own Spirit-filled life.
4. *Sola Scriptura.* The Bible and the Bible only is the Christian's objective and infallible rule of faith and practice, alone sufficient that he may "be established in the present truth" (2 Peter 1:12).

*Present Truth* is not only committed to the task of upholding these founding principles of the Reformation, but it believes that we today must allow these principles to call all that we do and all that we teach into question. These principles call all traditions into question and all statements about the truth into question—even the ones set forth in this magazine. Our vision is a new Reformation that will recover what the Reformers bequeathed us and complete the restoration they so nobly began.

**To Contributors:** Since truth is above the preferences and prejudices of any denomination, the editors welcome contributions from anyone and will judge them on their merit alone. If you wish a manuscript returned, please send a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

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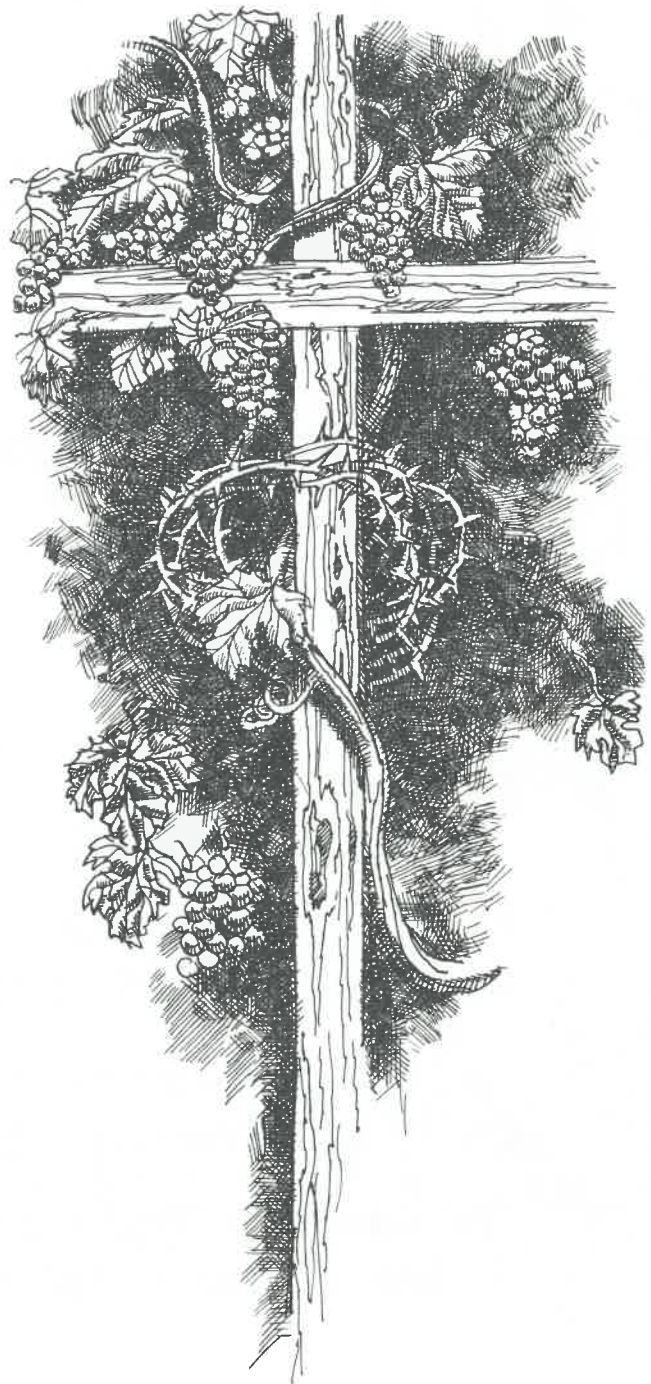
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# Letters

Address Letters to *Present Truth*,  
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## The "Ordo Salutis"

Sir / For some time I have desired to write to you to express appreciation for the magazine, *Present Truth*. It has been thrilling to see the strong assertion of justification by faith and also the extraordinary and effective antidote to false subjectivism which abounds wherever there is a lack of true expository preaching.

It is also a mighty encouragement to read the issue in which you examine false views of prophecy—dispensationalism in particular—and find them wanting! The need is vast for strong assertion of justification by faith and the establishment of right views of sanctification based on sound teaching rather than on feelings. Also, dispensationalism has become the curse of the age, dividing Christian from Christian—and that on the basis of an elaborate system arbitrarily imposed on the Scripture without any warrant whatsoever. It will be a glad day when the scourge of dispensationalism is removed.

The November, 1974, issue of *Present Truth* was not so pleasing; and I refer in particular to your article which smacked of universalism. Is this due to the nefarious influence of Karl Barth? To assert universalism from Romans 5: 18 is extraordinary when the whole context concerns two races of men which are quite distinct from each other—namely, the race redeemed in Christ and the race lost in Adam. To take verse 18 out of that context and use it in the way you do is to fall miles below the standard of the previous issues.

With bated breath we have watched the progress of *Present Truth*, hoping all along that it would not end in retrogression! If progress is to be made, we need to build upon the foundations laid by the sixteenth century Reformation. John Calvin and those who followed him in England (particularly the English Puritans), Scotland and Holland went much further in a consistent, positive understanding of soteriology than did the Lutherans. This progress is reflected in the Westminster Confession and in the 1689 Baptist Confession,

which of course follows Westminster.

The mention of the 1689 Confession reminds us too that the Reformers were confused on the doctrine of the church, and sacramentalism has been a hindrance ever since. The sixteenth century Reformation needs completion, and this will only transpire when the doctrine of the church is clarified. The emergence of the Reformed Baptist movement throughout the world is one of the most encouraging signs of our generation, because it indicates a movement of the Holy Spirit in which the best of the Reformation is retained and that which is erroneous rejected.

Of course, here I am merely asserting these things, but in other places I have sought to elucidate them and provide proof from Scripture. It is certain that you will not be offended by my letter, since the openness and frankness which you show by publishing correspondence in *Present Truth* which is utterly hostile as well as that which is favorable is most refreshing. It was a joy both to meet and to hear Geoffrey Paxton preach when I was in Australia. I pray that you will follow him in soteriology and that you both will follow C.H. Spurgeon in his biblical doctrine of baptism and the local church.

Erroll Hulse, Reformed Baptist  
Minister, England

\**Present Truth* editors do not believe in universalism as such, but that the atonement of Jesus Christ was sufficient for all and efficient for those who believe. We submit that Calvin was not superior to Luther in every department. Even Reformed Baptists call Calvin into question on the matter of baptism. We thank you for calling us into question. May the truth of justification by grace, for the sake of Christ, by faith, continue to call us all into question.

(Erroll Hulse is editor of the Reformed Baptist magazine, *Reformation Today*, 5 Fairfield Close, Haywards Heath, Sussex, RH16 3EF, England. Some of our readers might like to subscribe to his publication.) —Eds.

## Christ the Representative . . . Of How Many?

Sir / My reading of "The *Ordo Salutis*" (Nov., 1974) resulted in warm appreciation and endorsement until I reached the paragraphs with the heading, "Christ the Representative . . . Of How Many?" Here I and other Reformed friends perhaps would feel that you departed from biblical accuracy both in your reasoning and in conclusions drawn. I make three points by way of comment.

1. In spite of your many references to the doctrine of election, you in fact propounded an attempted synthesis of election and universalism. In seeking to answer the "how many" question, you succeeded in denying the Reformed view that Christ was in fact the actual Representative of those whom God has elected. The article stated, "The representative office of Christ did not appear because of election, but election appeared because of the work of the Mediator." But this is to relate and confuse the Bible teaching on the divine decrees with the mediatorial office of Christ as Prophet, Priest and King. The simple question is, Did God predestine and elect a multitude that no man can number unto salvation, or did He not?

2. In what you present as the basis for the presentation of the gospel, there is contradiction and confusion arising out of an erroneous view of the familiar misunderstanding of the extent of the atonement. You state, "The gospel is to be presented as a general, external call to all." Yes, of course. But then that statement is reversed when in the following argument you continue, "... we have a duty to tell each man . . . that his sins have been borne by Jesus Christ, that he has been chosen and accepted in the Person of his Representative . . . consequently . . . repent. . . ." This surely is to reverse the *ordo salutis*! Where in Scripture are we told to present the gospel on *that* basis? Those words are not true of the unbeliever, and the only basis that Scripture gives us for presenting the gospel is that which is firmly grounded on the

doctrine of grace to unworthy sinners. Passages such as Romans 5:12-18 and 2 Corinthians 5:14 confirm the opposite of the universalist argument of the article. The "all" in both passages refers to those who are elect and "in" Christ. Reformed theology does not seek to contract the extent of the atonement, *Potentially* Christ died for all (the world); *actually* He died for His elect. The gospel is freely proclaimed to all simply because "all have sinned" and not because the Saviour is the Representative of all men indiscriminately.

3. How can it be argued that common grace bears any affinity to the atonement and its merits? On the contrary, Romans 1:20, 21 declares the exact opposite—namely, that it increases guilt. To say "That God has seriously intended all to share in the benefits of Christ's atonement is clear from the blessings of 'common grace'" is to confuse things that differ. Common grace is one thing—a wonderful display of God's goodness and love to all men indiscriminately; but only the recipients of His electing grace can share in the actual benefits of the atonement.

Graham Wood  
England

### **Amazing Grace**

Sir / Let me thank you for the fine work you are doing. I feel a fresh, new wind in your publication, *Present Truth*. And it has been long overdue! I find every article captivating and challenging. As a young evangelist and lay pastor, I have had to do some serious rethinking of my understanding of the gospel. The content of my messages changed radically over the year that I have been receiving *Present Truth*. I have seen the folly of preaching a subjective gospel and have felt the burden of my flock's trying to "make the Christian life work." Your article, "The *Ordo Salutis*," in the November, 1974, issue, has given me a much deeper appreciation for that amazing grace that saved a wretch like me!

David A. Stockment  
Indiana

### **Blessed**

Sir / I recently read the November, 1974, issue of *Present Truth* and was richly blessed by the articles in it. Particularly did I enjoy Mr. Brinsmead's "The *Ordo Salutis*," and I appreciated the presentation of man's response to God's objective work in Christ.

David Hultgren  
Minnesota

### **Election in Christ**

Sir / Your November, 1974, issue of *Present Truth* was great. The articles were excellent in content and presentation. I feel you are correct in your interpretation of the believer's election "in Christ." My eyes were opened to this truth a few years ago.

H. Eugene Eslinger, Minister  
Wisconsin

### **Right Direction**

Sir / The February, 1975, issue on "Sanctification" is another step in the direction of excellence. I especially appreciated the positive and comprehensive tone of this issue.

James Miller, Minister  
Colorado

### **A New Reformation**

Sir / I write to say that I believe *Present Truth* to be a bulwark for our times in upholding authentic New Testament teaching. Being well past middle life and a convinced Christian from youth, it is gratifying to find my own experience so well accounted for. I think I was swayed by entire sanctification and second blessing teaching from several sources, and for years was always looking for what I construed to be "victorious living." Many times my disillusionments were so extreme that I wondered whether I could rightly even protest that I had experienced new birth and personal relation to Jesus Christ. Through decades I agonized with my own sin problems and thought it was a losing warfare when I detected no progress.

*Present Truth* came to me at the right time to expose errors I might not have admitted years ago. My many years of prayerful reading of the Bible, though, kept me from getting very far astray. Now *Present Truth* articulately and precisely seems to say for me what essentially I knew already, and it is this knowing that makes me deeply grateful for these sorely needed emphases now. What needs to be said to this biblically illiterate generation is being said by *Present Truth*; and my prayer is that these liberating truths will be echoed and transmitted from more and more sources until we really do have a new Reformation.

Your special issue concerning sanctification is great. The long quotations from great preachers of the past show that these issues which were so alive for them in their day are just as alive now. The conclusions you draw agree with New Testament teaching; justification surely is the mainspring of sanc-

tification. This is mainline Christianity, and our ordering of our lives on these propositions is to build on solid rock.

Donald E. Kohlstaedt  
Washington

### **Rejoicing**

Sir / The special issue on "Sanctification" is so terrific that I would like to use it in our prayer meeting as a study. I do enjoy reading *Present Truth* and am rejoicing with others who read the magazine. It is the greatest publication today. I believe the hope of the church is a coming back to the Bible truth.

B.L. Wright, Minister  
Washington

### **Effective Immediately!**

Sir / I meant to cancel my subscription to *Present Truth* long before this, but it slipped my mind until I received your special issue on "Sanctification." I am sorry, but I disagree with 95% of what *Present Truth* stands for; and effective immediately, I wish to have my name withdrawn from your mailing list.

Claudia R. Thomason  
Arizona

### **No Thank You!**

Sir / You are teaching half truths, errors contrary to the Scriptures, and nothing that has to do with the teachings of the great men of the Reformation era. Your false, perverted doctrine would cause me to collapse emotionally. No thank you, your doctrine isn't the gospel. It is another subtle attempt by Satan to try to destroy the wonderful relationship between the believer and His Lord and Saviour. I pray that God may destroy your work here in America before it gets a foothold!

Mrs. James L. Gear  
California

### **From a Young Christian**

Sir / As a young Christian caught up in the holiness and Pentecostal movements, your articles were a great help. I had almost come to despair seeking the second blessing and always finding it eluding me. After reading your articles, I can see that the old man will always be with me, and I have to daily submit myself to Christ and walk in the Spirit. Trying to put yourself back under the law to obtain a second blessing, after being saved by grace, is foolishness and can only lead to disaster.

John Hofmann  
Pennsylvania

## Many Antichrists

Sir / *Present Truth* comes as an oasis in a parched and barren land. My wife and I and another couple, our close friends, were recently introduced to your magazine in a rather unusual way, and it has served as an extraordinary confirmation of what the Lord has been teaching us from His Word.

By way of background, I am a layman and have been a member of various Southern Baptist churches for twenty-seven years, but was saved only four years ago. Up until that point in my life, I had been basing my acceptance with God upon my trying to live a life pleasing to Him, including the faithful and zealous performance of various religious activities—in short, my “religion” was totally man-centered. God, in His grace, opened my eyes to the truth of justification by faith. The testimony of my wife and those of our friends mentioned above is quite similar, nearly identical, to my own. Several months after our conversion the Lord allowed us to be swept up into the charismatic movement, and we became deeply involved for about two and one-half years. But once again, in His grace, He opened our eyes to the truth and set us free from bondage, exposing the charismatic error for what it is—a very attractive and very subtle counterfeit outpouring of the Holy Spirit, seeming to have great spiritual depth, but in reality being nothing more than shallow, experience-centered religious subjectivism—“fire . . . from heaven . . . in the sight of men.” You voiced a view in one of your editorials with which I totally agree—no one can confront the objective facts of the gospel and remain a part of the modern charismatic movement.

Your articles on modern “revivalism” and “evangelicalism” accurately describe the majority of what we hear being put forth today as the “gospel.” The emphasis is almost always on an inward experience of the heart (e.g., inviting Christ to come into your heart, praying to receive Christ, committing your life to Christ, making a decision for Christ, etc.), and it is so often stated or implied that if man will do something, God will respond by granting salvation—man in the place of God. You expressed quite clearly what has been of increasing concern to us in this regard. Your articles on eschatology were most enlightening, lining up with what we had begun to see in the Scriptures concerning the popular premillennialist view. Without question, the most significant truth which we have learned from your material thus far is the scriptural pattern for confronting people

with the righteous demands of God’s law. We discovered that we had been using only one edge of a two-edged sword, merely telling people about the purpose of the law (e.g., Rom. 3:20; Gal. 3:24) rather than confronting them with the righteous demands of a righteous God and letting the law do its work (as Paul does in Romans 1:18 through 3:20). Already this new insight into God’s truth has borne fruit for the kingdom and has given us a deeper appreciation for God’s holy law. Truly the law is a grace gift from the Lord. He knew what we needed to bring us unto Himself.

If there is a single word which encompasses the substance of all that the Lord has taught us during these past few years, it is *grace*. And grace forever disallows every vestige of human merit, self-dependency and man-centered subjectivism. In showing us something of the meaning of His grace, He has also shown us, by contrast, the ponderous mass of dead religion and false teaching surrounding us today, and the accompanying dearth of sound doctrine even at the most fundamental level. Truly, “even now are there many antichrists.”

Gordon W. Knight  
Florida

## Brief Criticism

Sir / I wish to applaud your efforts in the February, 1975, issue of *Present Truth* on the subject of “Sanctification.” I found the articles therein constructive and profitable.

I have this brief criticism. On page 58 you wrote, “For all its strength, Reformed theology tends to relegate justification by faith to an initiatory action in the soteriological process.” And from there you describe the “once saved, always saved” teaching such as is popularly held among many who think they are “Reformed.” I believe this is a distortion of Reformed theology. First of all, each and every individual who comprises the elect body, with Christ as Head and Mediator, is justified from all eternity. God beholds this body, not as sinners, but as perfectly righteous, redeemed and justified in Christ. Second, the entire body of the elect were justified in the completed work of Christ historically. Old Testament faith was directed toward the cross in hope, and New Testament faith is directed toward the cross in history. Christ atoned once and forever for all the sins of those whom the Father had given before the foundation of the world. That is *vicarious* atonement. Third, the elect receive justification by faith, as declared in the gospel of the

Person and work, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. With the good news of Christ’s work comes the promise that “Whosoever believeth on Him shall not be ashamed.” That is not an offer head for head, but a sure promise to those who believe. Only in the elect will God preserve such faith, and only in the elect will He put a new heart which can seek nought but to persevere. Finally, there is the public justification of the elect in the revelation of the righteous judgment of God on the last day of resurrection, judgment and reward.

I can see no particular objection to your suggestion of the “present, continuous nature of justification” as long as you mean that God continually holds the faithful before Him as justified on the basis of the merits of Christ’s work for that individual. The gift of faith is the fruit of the individual’s historical justification by the Person and work of Jesus Christ. The individual apprehends and appreciates that justification through God’s gift of faith. Faith does not *secure* justification. Faith is the gift which God gives His people to *appropriate* the justification which *He has already secured for them*. They cannot get their fingers on it to squeeze it, smudge it, drop and break it, lose or misplace it. It is reserved for them in the heavenlies. Each day of their life should add to a growing awareness of their need to appropriate this precious gift, and each day should cultivate a thankfulness to God for the sufficient satisfaction of an ever increasing debt. The imperishable nature of God’s gift of His Son should be the cause of joy, praise and comfort. Why do some reduce God’s love by measuring it by the number of people to whom they think it extends? The extent of God’s love is seen in *this* measure—that He gave His only Son. And He gave that Son, not for Jews, but for whomsoever believeth from every tribe and tongue and people and nation in the world. God so loved that He gave His Son; not God so loved that He did it for every man head for head. For in this way did God love the world—that He gave His only Son for the purpose that everyone who is believing on Him may *not* perish (in contrast to those bitten by serpents), but may have life eternal.

In recent issues you have developed the themes of justification by faith and ethics, eschatology, election and sanctification, respectively. I don’t know how long you can avoid the issues of the church and baptism, and the issue of the Lord’s supper. I hope it is not long.

Harvey L. Bluedorn, Oregon

## Editorial:

# The Radical Meaning of Sola Fide

... a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law. — Rom. 3:28.

*Sola fide* (by faith alone) was the war cry of the Reformation. It was radical then. It is just as radical now. In its true biblical context it does not mean quietism, i.e., "Let Christ live the victorious life in you." Nor does it mean the slothful indolence of spineless do-nothingism. The Reformation was dynamic. *Sola fide* was not the slogan of a delicate, cloistered piety. It was the ensign of a movement of blood and fire.

What does "faith alone" mean?

1. "Faith alone" is a confession that all which is necessary for our acceptance with God has been done by God Himself in His redemptive act in Jesus Christ. It is an acknowledgement that Christ Himself, in our name and our behalf, met all our obligations before the bar of eternal justice. This redemptive act was so complete and perfect that we cannot add anything to it. Nothing needs to be added to it. *Sola fide* means that we cannot in the least contribute to our salvation, but that we must submit to what God has already done—fully and completely. That is the meaning of "faith alone."

"Faith alone" does not mean that faith itself will make us pleasing and acceptable to God. Only One is righteous, One is pleasing.

We in faith flee from our own acts even of repentance, confession, trust and response and take refuge in the obedience and faithfulness of Christ—"Lord I believe, help Thou mine unbelief." That is what is meant to be justified by faith. — Thomas F. Torrance, "Justification," *Christianity Divided* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1961), p. 293.

2. "Faith alone" is also a confession that God's saving work has been done completely outside of our own experience. There are some who will admit that

God alone saves, but they imagine that this saving work is done inside of them. But it was done outside the gate of Jerusalem on a Roman cross. Faith is always directed to this outside-of-me action of God in Jesus Christ. As Bunyan aptly says, it is the righteousness which resides with a Person in heaven which justifies me, a sinner, on earth.

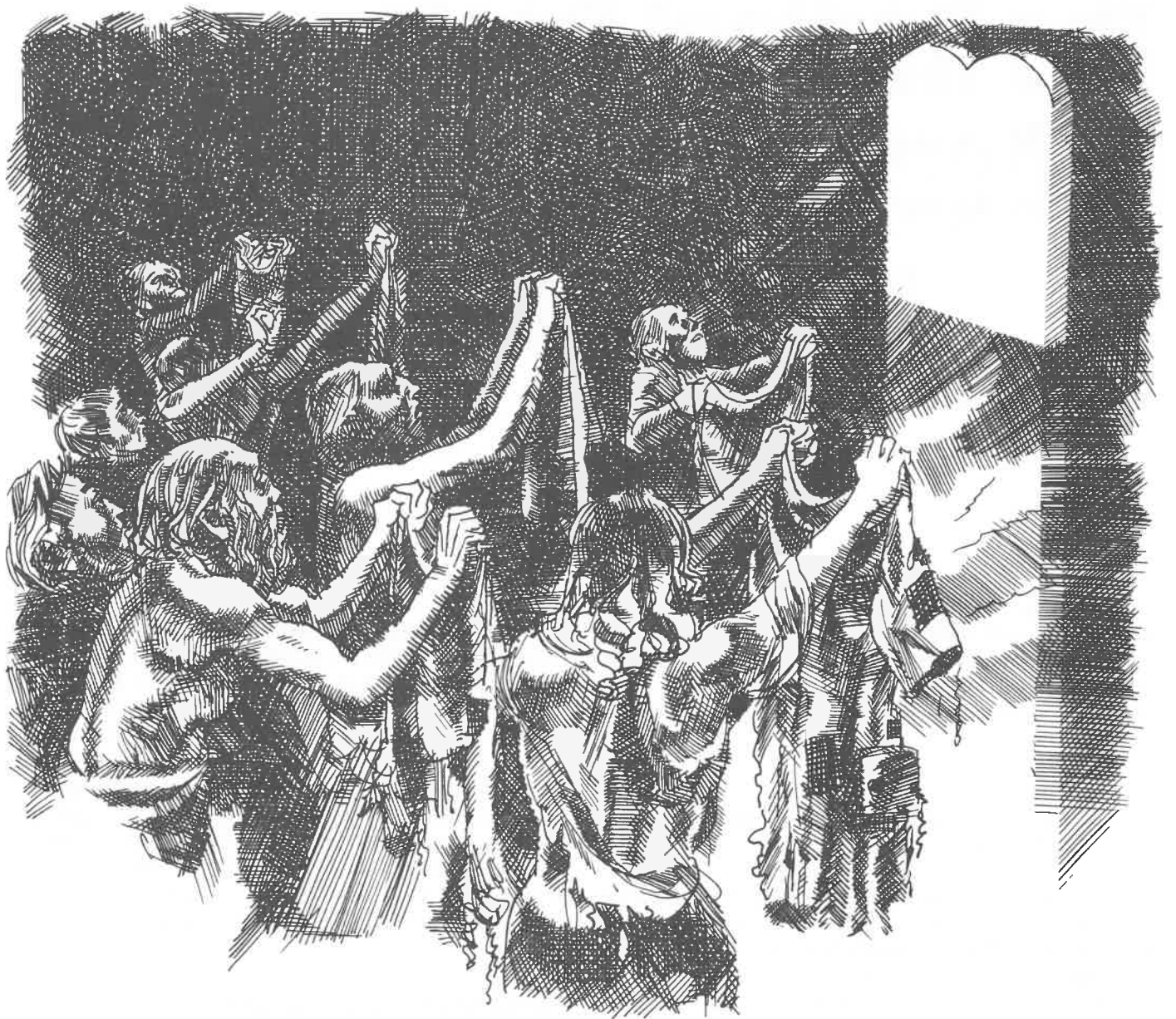
The book of Revelation shows that the ongoing cause of Christ depends on the action of Christ in the throne room of the universe. He alone can move history on toward the great consummation. And finally, He alone must come to bring salvation to those who eagerly wait for Him (Heb. 9:28). "Faith alone" is therefore a confession that salvation is won by mighty, conquering acts in which we had no share.

3. "By faith alone" is a confession that our righteousness is not in us, but in Jesus Christ at God's right hand. It means that we continually confess that we are sinners and have no righteousness to justify us save that which is outside of us in the Person of our Mediator. It means that life is not fulfilled here and now in this historical process. We abandon all hope of seeing perfection here below (although we press toward that mark). We know that all that we do is unworthy. Our best deeds, when tried before the undimmed splendor of God's law, are no better than filthy rags. We are never righteous before God by virtue of being born again, filled with the Spirit, or by our lives of new obedience. The truth of *sola fide* is a great No! against the aspirations of humanism, Romanism, Pentecostalism, and against all -isms which promise fulfillment through internal experience. "Faith alone" says, "Our completeness is realized only in Him" (Col. 2:10).

4. "By faith alone" means true self-surrender, true crucifixion of self. Hereby we admit our destitution. We confess before justice that we have nothing to pay. "Faith alone" means that we come to God relying on love and mercy and forgiveness unfathomable. "Faith alone" is a humbling of man in the dust, a dependence upon God to do for us that which we cannot do for ourselves. Nothing empties a man like "faith alone." That is the reason why we are filled with the Spirit by faith (Gal. 3:14). Let us never speak of faith plus self-crucifixion, but faith as self-crucifixion.

5. "Faith alone" is the fountainhead of all true obedience. The first commandment says, "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me." In his *Catechism* Luther says:

A God is that to which we look for all good and where we resort for help in every time of need; to have a God is simply to trust and believe in one with our whole heart. . . . If your faith and confidence are right, then likewise your God is the true God. On the other hand, if your confidence is false, if it is wrong, then you have not the true God. . . . I say, whatever your heart . . . confides in, that is really your God. . . . If the heart is rightly disposed toward God and this commandment is kept, obedience to the remainder will follow of itself.



6. "Faith alone" frees a man for a life of good works. On the other hand, when a man fails to understand the gospel, he labors in vain and spends his strength for naught. His effort is directed to do what God alone can do. Deep down, every soul is conscious of the need to be right with God. But justification is a great work which only God can do. When a man blindly spends his strength and effort to do God's work, he cannot be about his own work. When he works his fingers to the bone trying to save himself, he cannot love his neighbor, for he has no time for him.

The soul released from anxiety about itself, is free to exercise concern about others. The heart is at leisure from itself to set forward the salvation of those around. — W.H. Griffin Thomas, *The Principles of Theology: An Intro-*

*duction to the Thirty-nine Articles* (London: Church Book Room Press, 1956), p. 194.

This is a far cry from that false *sola-fideism* which removes all urgency for ethical action. "Faith alone" does not mean "Christ has done it all; there is nothing for me to do." "Faith alone" puts a man to work for God as nothing else can. It is not an opiate to put a Christian to sleep, but a stimulant to stir him to action.

"Faith alone" is mighty. It is mighty because in itself it is nothing. What makes it mighty is its mighty Object. Like John the Baptist, it points away from itself to the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. "Faith alone" lets God be God and man be man.

R.D.B.

# The Radical Basis of Acceptance with God

From an address delivered by Geoffrey J. Paxton

Let me begin by asking a very fundamental question. It is this: On what *basis* does God accept a man?

Look at the question carefully. It is the most fundamental of all religious questions. I will propose several answers, and I shall ask you to choose the one which is correct.

1. A life of obedience to the law
2. Faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ
3. Some other way

We are a little embarrassed about asking for a show of hands on this question because so many give the wrong answer. The situation is even worse when we are at a seminary and find that the professors give the wrong answer! But the glorious thing about the gospel is that we are accepted even when we are wrong. So let us put ourselves on the line and choose answer number 1, number 2 or number 3.

[The speaker asks for a show of hands. One hundred percent reject number 1. About ninety percent choose number 2. A few choose number 3. And some abstain.]

As I have said, this question which I have asked is most basic. It is the most cardinal religious question a person can be asked. It demands a clear answer. And in order to give such an answer, we must be clear in our own minds about this important matter. This was the

Geoffrey J. Paxton is an Anglican clergyman and president of the Queensland Bible Institute, Brisbane, Australia.

The address from which this article is taken is available on cassette tape: GS-3, "The Righteousness of God" (suggested donation, \$2.00). This is the third tape in a set of seven cassettes reproduced from the Australian Forum's "Gospel Substitutes" Seminar (Winter 1974). The entire set of seven cassettes is available (suggested donation, \$14.00). Order from *Present Truth*.

great issue of the Reformation. Some feel that times have changed and therefore newfangled questions are more relevant. But we believe our question is as relevant today as it was in the days of Paul or Luther. It is the most fundamental question that plagues the human heart. It is at the root of all problems in society.

We of the Australian Forum believe that the only correct answer to this question is number 1. Some of you are looking cross-eyed! Well, that is all right. But we hope that by the end of the lecture your eyes will be uncrossed. Unequivocally, we choose answer number 1. The only basis upon which any person is accepted with God is a *life of obedience to the law*.

## The Answer of Legalism

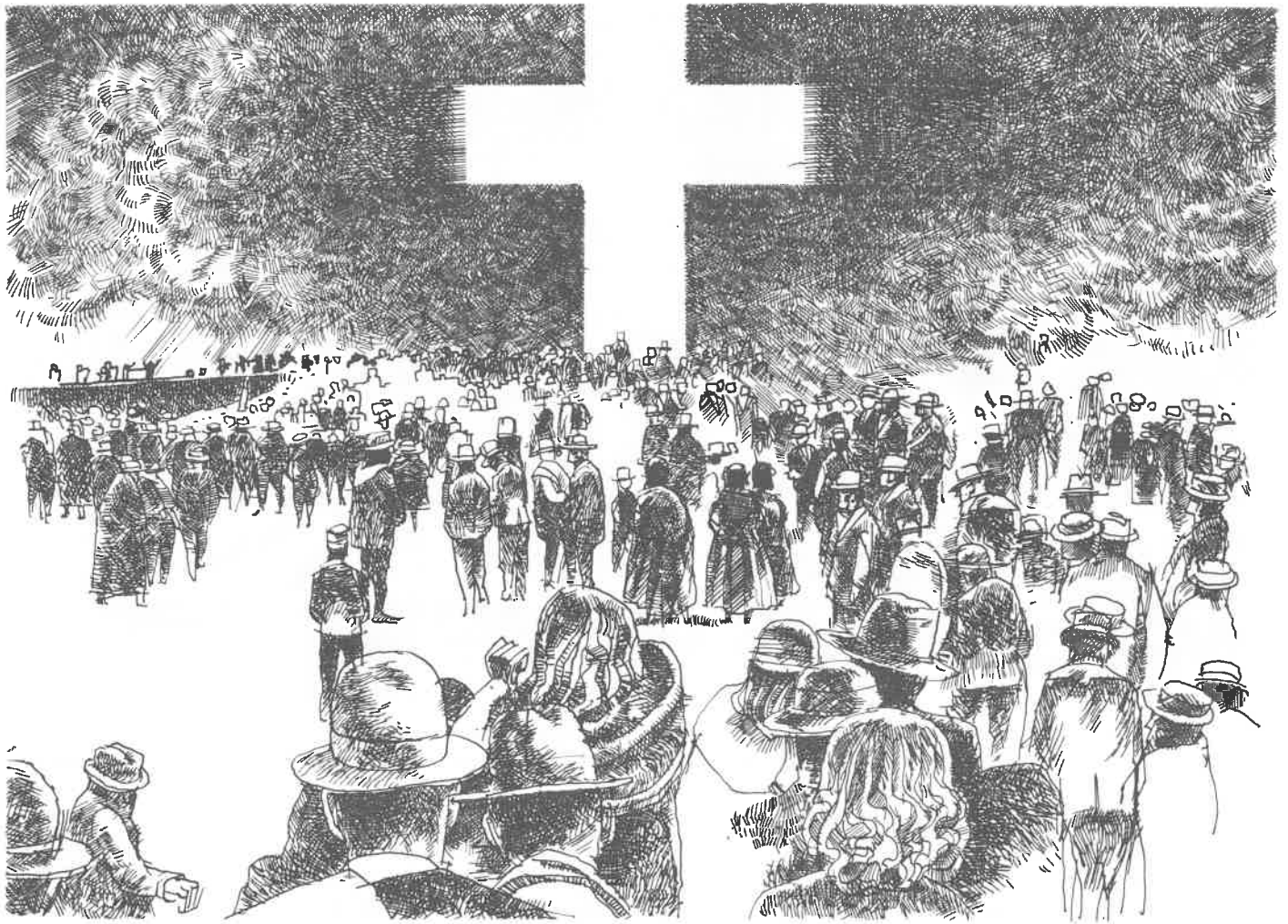
I'll tell you why you chose number 2 and why you didn't choose number 1. You did not want to appear to be a legalist. Most people choose number 2 (i.e., faith in the gospel of Christ) because they think it is against legalism. But number 2 is really the legalistic answer.

I can see that some of you are beginning to look confused—like a university student in Minnesota who had a big K written on the back of his shirt. I asked, "What does K stand for?" He replied, "Confused—I'm confused—that's what it means." "But," I replied, "you don't spell *confused* with a K." "Ah," he said, "you don't know how confused I am." So you may be saying, "I'm confused. You've tricked us. That's the last time I'll come to your forum."

Let us reason together!

Number 2 is really the legalistic answer. What is another word for *basis*? [The audience answers, "Foun-





ation," "Ground."] Good. What is the basis, foundation, or ground, on which a man is acceptable with God? None of the Reformers and no Bible scholar worthy of the Reformation tradition has ever said that faith is the basis, or ground, of acceptance with God. Never! Faith is glorious. Of all attributes that grace implants in the human heart, it stands right at the top. It is the gift of God and the root of all virtues. But irrespective of the princely nature of faith, it never has the position of the basis, foundation, or ground, of salvation. And one of the perils of the modern religious scene is the idea that it is *because* of my faith, because I'm born again, or because I trust in Jesus that God accepts me.

To say that faith is the basis of acceptance with God is legalistic, because it offers to God something which is within me as the basis of acceptance with God. (That God gives faith makes no difference to the principle. Faith is still a quality within me.) If you take the time to look at the decrees of the Council of Trent on *Justification*, you will see that number 2 is the classic Roman Catholic answer. The Reformers stood against that position.

## The Answer of Faith

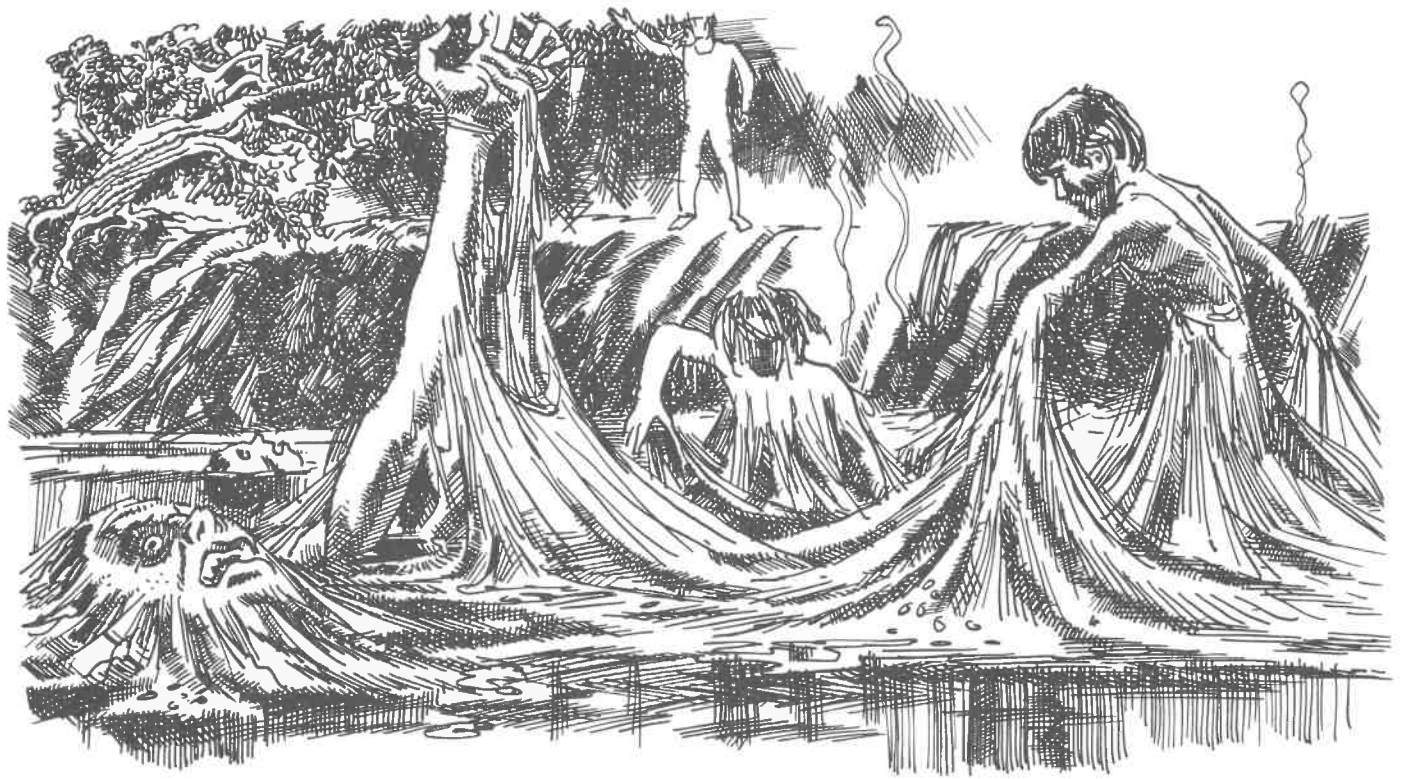
Now let us look at Romans 2: 12, 13:

For as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law: and as many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law; (for not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified.)

The Bible is unequivocal. None but the doers of the law are accepted by God. That is an eternal principle. God will not turn from it. He has never changed His mind. A life of obedience—that is to say, a life of righteousness—is the only basis of acceptance with God.

The trouble with so much evangelicalism today is that the gospel is regarded as a smart way of skirting around the law. It has come to mean a smart trick whereby we can jump over the claims of the law straight into the presence of God. We think that the gospel means that God is less demanding than He used to be.

God demands a life of perfect obedience to His law. No lame, imperfect, halfway, broken obedience will



satisfy His holiness. “. . . the doers of the law shall be justified.” This fundamental basis of biblical religion has been overlooked in this twentieth century. There is little true preaching of the law today. We have neglected to preach the holiness and majesty of God. God is presented to men and women as an easygoing Benevolence who frantically runs around heaven seeking how He may please insatiably worldly people. No wonder we’re in such a religious quagmire. We need the law. We need to know the holy requirement of God. We need to know the standard of God. We need to preach the standard of God in such a way that people will cry out, “How then can I be saved?”

When Paul contrasts the way of faith and the way of works in Romans and Galatians, he is not contrasting faith and works as such, but faith and our (weak, puny, defective) works. We must not get the idea that faith is against the law. In Romans 3:31 Paul argues that the way of faith is not against the law. Faith establishes the law. Faith is not the negation of the law of God. Faith honors the law. Faith acknowledges that it is only on the basis of answer number 1—a life of obedience to the law—that God will ever accept a man.

## Man’s Predicament

In the early chapters of Romans Paul shows the perilous predicament of man. What is that perilous predicament? Paul shows clearly that neither Gentile nor Jew is able to meet the holy standard of God which is demanded in the law of God. And it is to rectify this

situation that Paul talks—as he does in Romans 3:21-26—about Jesus Christ and the righteousness of God.

But we often jump into Romans 3:21-26 without giving due attention to the force of the preceding argument. Let us remember that in Romans 1:13 to 3:20 Paul seeks to hammer home with unsurpassed clarity and inspired force the message that the whole human race is in a terrible predicament because man has not been able to give God what is God’s due—and that is nothing less than perfect conformity to God’s law.

The Christian gospel honors the law of God. Faith honors the law of God. True faith will always gravitate to answer number 1. Since faith always feeds off its object and takes its value from its object, faith will always answer, “Number 1.”

## The Righteousness of God

Romans 3:21 begins, “But . . .” That is the biggest little word in the Bible. That was the biggest little word in my childhood, too. My father would take me aside and say, “Your mother has told me that you’ve been a very naughty boy. You deserve to be punished. You ought to be thrashed.” Thus he would work up to a great psychological climax wherein I could feel the impending thrashing. Then he would say, “But . . . I want you to know what grace is. I’m going to withhold what you deserve.” Whew!

“But now *the righteousness of God . . .*” This is what

intervenes into our terrible predicament. Let us understand that it was this "righteousness of God" around which and out of which the Reformation exploded. What is meant by the righteousness of God?

1. *The righteousness of God is that which is measured by the character of God Himself.* It is that which is commensurate with the holiness of God. It has God as its measure. It is His holy, spotless, divine character.

2. *This righteousness of God is the demand of God.* His justice demands it of every man and woman. This is what He has always demanded, and this is what He will always demand of us, because He could never demand anything less than His own perfect being. This is the matter over which Luther wrestled. He almost despaired when He saw this facet in "the righteousness of God." You remember how he struggled with all his power and ascetic principles to give to God what God required. Yet his conscience gave him no rest. "Have I done enough? Have I done it well enough? How can I be sure?"

We submit that it is because we today are not wrestling with these same convictions that the gospel is virtually unknown. For the gospel only makes sense against the backdrop of God's radical and uncompromising demand. When men and women understand that a life of perfect conformity to the law is the basis of acceptance with God and when they are distressed as to how they can meet that demand, then, and only then, will the gospel make any sense.

What is so wrong with much of our religiosity today is that we are not asking theological questions. We rather want to know, "How can God please me? How can He satiate my world-loving heart?" But the fundamental question of the Bible and the fundamental question which gave birth to the Reformation was, "How can I please God?" Only when this question is an urgent necessity will the third point about the righteousness of God make any sense.

3. *The righteousness of God is that which God Himself provides.* When Luther discovered this, the Reformation was born. That is good news. It is glorious!

Jesus is both the demand of God and God's provision. If you want to see what God demands of you and me, look at the perfect life of Jesus Christ. He was truly man as man was meant to be. But don't turn Jesus into a greater Moses. Jesus is the righteousness of God in that He is the provision of God. When He was born into this world, it was a birth such as had not been since Adam fell. He came to this earth to live a life that no one had lived since Adam fell. If you look at the whole stream of human history from the Fall to the end of the world, you will see only thirty-three years that God endorses. Jesus came to give the perfect sacrifice, the *antilutron* (the substitutionary ransom) for the failure of men and women to live acceptably before God. He rose from the tomb and ascended to the right hand of

**The gospel only makes sense against the backdrop of God's radical and uncompromising demand.**

God, so that right now He is in God's presence as a perfect Man on behalf of all those who trust Him.

Jesus came and lived a life of perfect obedience to the law of God. His life matched the holiness of God at every point. What the holiness of God demanded, Jesus provided. Have you ever read *Concerning the Incarnation of the Word of God*, by Athanasius, or *Cur Deus Homo? (Why Did God Become Man?)*, by Anselm? We ought to read these classics instead of this candy-floss stuff that floats about. These men grappled with the question of the incarnation. God had to become man in order to provide for us what His only holy self-consistency demanded.

## **The Action of Faith**

Jesus provided the righteousness that God requires, but we are still obligated to present it to God in order to be personally justified. Christ's obedience to the law will not help you unless somehow it becomes yours. You've got to present it to God. You've got to say, "Here it is, Father." How does that come about? It comes about *through* (not because of) the princely channel of faith.

When we come before God in repentance, we say, "Lord, I see myself portrayed in Romans 1: 18 to 3:20. I have not kept Thy holy law. I have not presented what Thy holiness requires. Be merciful to me, a sinner." But faith says, "Thy holy gospel says that Thou hast done it for me in Jesus Christ." We reach out our beggarly hands and say, "Mine are Jesus' birth, His sinless life,

His death, resurrection and ascension." That is the language of faith. Faith reaches out and grasps the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ. *Then through faith we are able to present His life to God as ours.*

4. *The righteousness of God, therefore, is my righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ.* Sometimes charismatics come up to us and ask, "Brother, have you made the exciting discovery of the Spirit-filled life?" The tragedy is that, when thus confronted, many Christians feel spiritually nude and embarrassed. The only answer of a man or woman of faith is, "Yes, what a life! I was born perfectly, I have lived commensurately with the holiness of God Himself in my Substitute, Jesus Christ." When we boast about that Spirit-filled life (which is ours by faith), it makes every other Spirit-filled life look small and insignificant by comparison. Our trouble is that we have not outbragged the charismatics.

5. *The righteousness of God, which is mine through faith, is in Jesus Christ.* It is not a quality in my heart. This is the emphasis of Romans 3:21-26—"in Christ Jesus." This righteousness is found alone in Jesus at God's right hand. Paul tells the Colossians:

If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with Him in glory. — Col. 3:1-4.

So don't set your affection on the wrong life. Your life of sanctification, which of necessity follows justification, is a shadow of the Christian's true life at God's right hand. I like the way Calvin put it (and this is an antidote for once-saved-always-saved-ism—as if faith for a moment brings life for eternity): "Christ justifies no one whom He does not at the same time sanctify."

## Conclusion

Let me conclude by saying this: A life of obedience to the law—that which God demands—has been performed by the doing and the dying of Jesus Christ. I am able to present it to God by faith. This is not presenting the righteousness which I have within, but it is presenting the righteousness which is Jesus Christ. It is, as Luther said, the alien righteousness of Christ. It is reserved in heaven as a great treasure for people who live among thieves. Heaven is a safe place for it to be. Thus, God accepts us on the basis of a perfect righteousness. He saves us justly. This means that our salvation is grounded on the justice of God. That is good news. We sometimes wonder if the mercy of God will run out. The pastor might tell us that God is merciful. Yet we may say, "But he doesn't know my heart. Is God that merciful?" But have you thought it possible that God would cease to be just? No! That is why we think His mercy may run out—because we know how just He is.

Here is the glorious message of Romans 3:25, 26, which is not taught as much as it should be today: The gospel is a declaration of God's justice. God has saved us in a way that affirms that He is just. He has not skirted around the law. He has not been inconsistent. Before God could reject a man who trusts in Jesus Christ, He would first have to become unjust. ". . . to declare, I say, at this time His righteousness: that He might be just, and the justifier of Him which believeth in Jesus." Rom. 3:26. So our security is grounded firmly in God's justice.

God has never changed His mind. He has always required perfect obedience to His law. And when He looked out on a world in utter desperation, He came Himself—God in a donkey's foodbox, sucking at the breast of a Palestinian maiden; God allowing the Palestinian dust to sift through His toes as He fulfilled His own law on our behalf. Faith acknowledges the law because Jesus acknowledged the law. Faith always chooses the perfect, law-conforming life of Jesus as the basis for acceptance with God (answer number 1) and not itself (answer number 2) or any other way (answer number 3).

# The Radical Basis of Christian Fellowship

Geoffrey J. Paxton



## Introduction

Sadly, the word *justification* does not conjure up thoughts of life and vitality in many modern ears. Yet it would not be difficult to show that in the New Testament (especially Paul) the word is well nigh synonymous with life. Since the Reformation the concept has somehow lost its radiant color and vibrant, life-giving nature.

Consider the place of justification in so much preaching. If it is preached at all, it is preached on one of those days that the speaker thinks fitting—like Reformation Sunday. Or it may be preached occasionally to remind the congregation of one of the distinctives of Protestantism. For the most part, justification is seen as synonymous with conversion—a sort of first step which enables the believer to get down to the real business of cultivating a holy life. The great preponderance of sermons focus on sanctification or the theme of moral obligation. And justification is not thought to have any real connection with each step of the Christian walk.

This thinking is an offense to the Bible. Only the complete denial of justification is more incorrect. As a matter of historical fact, justification is the most relevant doctrine in the entire Bible. Justification is living and vibrant. And the church that does not experientially know this is a church that is in a sad state indeed. In the Scriptures justification is the backbone of acceptable, practical behavior. If there is behavior which is not determined by justification, it is sub-Christian.

Consider the problem of Christian fellowship. We say “problem” of Christian fellowship, because it was a problem in Paul’s day and, in many instances, is a problem in our day as well. When we speak of Christian fellowship, we are speaking of *our acceptance of other Christians*. We are speaking of the *ground and nature* of fellowship. On what *basis* do we accept others as Christians? What does it *mean* to accept others as Christians? We repeat, these factors were a problem in Paul’s day, and they are a problem in our day also.

Paul sought to solve these difficulties with the doc-

trine of justification by faith alone. This was so much the case that some have (wrongly) suggested that justification, far from being central to Paul's theology, was merely the specific doctrine particularly applicable to the question of fellowship, to the question of the unity of Jewish and Gentile Christians. Though the deduction that justification is only one of many centers in Paul is false, the observation that justification is supremely applicable to the question of fellowship is right on target.

What of today? Is justification normative in ecumenical dialogue? Is justification informing *our* approach to the problem of fellowship? We believe that in all too many instances it is not. We believe that justification by grace alone, because of Christ alone, holds the answer to a deeply disunited Christendom.

Let us face this issue honestly. It is all too easy for us to think that we do not have any problem regarding fellowship with other Christians. We can be so embedded in our own self-justification and self-rationalization that we completely miss the message of the gospel to *us* in the evangelical circle. When we come to this question of the ground and nature of fellowship with other Christians, let us not say with the Pharisee of old, "God, I thank Thee that I am not like other men." Let us, dear brethren, be open to the Word.

## Part 1

So that we may hasten to draw some relevant conclusions for the evangelical church today, we shall content ourselves with a succinct statement on Paul's understanding of justification. For Paul, justification is the divine declaration of acceptance because of the total acceptability of Jesus Christ. There are two ways we can explicate this statement:

1. We may concentrate on the *Christological* aspect and so major on the meaning of the total acceptability of Jesus Christ. In so doing we highlight the truth that Jesus Christ has come to this planet and worked in our place. Actively and passively, by doing and dying, Jesus has pleased God for all who believe in Him. Jesus Christ, the divinely sent Substitute, has fulfilled all of God's requirements for full and everlasting fellowship with Himself.

2. We may explicate this statement by highlighting the *theocentric* aspect. Here the message is that *God Himself*, in the Person of Jesus Christ, has come to this earth and Himself met the requirements of His own self-consistency. The Judge has become the judged *for us*. The only One able to inflict the punishment has Himself borne the punishment.

Both the Christological and theocentric emphases point to the one grand truth of justification particularly relevant to our topic: God has provided the only ground on which fellowship with Himself and with men can be enjoyed. To state the matter differently, God

## Jesus Christ has provided all that is necessary for fellowship with God and man.

Himself has provided the ground on which He may declare men and women acceptable.

This glorious truth burned deeply into the soul of Paul the apostle. He addressed himself to all who seek to be acceptable before God and man. *The status of acceptability cannot be acquired by works* (Gal. 2:16; Rom. 3:20, 24; Eph. 2:8, 9). All who wish to stand accepted on the day when God will examine all men's works and pronounce the verdict (Rom. 2:6; 1 Cor. 3) must flee to Christ and embrace Him as their hope before God. The status of "Acceptable!" is a free gift now because Jesus Christ has provided all that is necessary for fellowship with God and man. (The expressions "not by works" and "by grace alone" express the gift-nature of acceptance negatively and positively.)

Another important feature in Paul's enunciation of God's method of making men acceptable is *the present reality of acceptance with God*. What Judaism had expected as a *future* verdict to be pronounced at the last day, Paul has moved up and made a *present* experience (cf. Rom. 3:21 for the contrastive "now"; see also Rom. 5:1; 2 Cor. 5:16, 17; 6:2). True, Paul also has a future dimension (cf. Gal. 5:5). Yet the present reality of acceptability is inescapably present in his thinking.

This point demands another: If God declares a man acceptable here and now, does this mean that God declares wicked men acceptable? For there is no perfection before the end. The answer is an unequivocal Yes! *God declares wicked men acceptable*. (This is the *justificatio injusti*, the *justificatio impii* [cf. Rom. 4:5; Mark 2:17; Rom. 3:21].) Those who have absolutely nothing to commend them to justice are commended by God. The marvel of marvels is that God accepts men and women on the ground of His own acceptability brought to light in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:21). It is this last fact which demonstrates that God does not wreck all standards of morality by accepting impious men on no ground of integrity whatsoever. No, God has honored His law by meeting the requirements Himself.

Let us consider a final point from Paul before we draw some consequences. It will be remembered that Luther added the word *sola* to the wording of Romans 3:28. We say added the *word sola*, because Luther did not make any addition in meaning. The fact that the declaration of acceptability is only by a gift (grace) is



paramount in Pauline theology. The declaration of acceptability is only by Christ, meaning that it is only on the basis of His acceptability that we can be pronounced acceptable. The same is true of the expression "only by faith." This means that a man is acceptable to God and his fellow man through trusting in what God has done (grace) in Christ only. There are no requirements. One needs simply to trust in Christ's meeting the requirements on his behalf.

Much more could be said. However, we have stressed these facets of the revelation of God to Paul because of their bearing on the topic under consideration.

## Part 2

We have stated that justification by faith alone is God's declaration of acceptability because of the acceptability of Jesus Christ. *This is the justification of God.* It is the justification of God because it is God's method of declaring men acceptable and also because God Himself is honored as holy and unblamable in such an action. He has, in Christ, maintained His faultless and holy self-consistency.

The justification which contrasts with the justification of God is the justification of man himself. Actually this is no justification at all. It is a spurious accreditation wholly lacking in honor for God and help for man.

These two justifications come into head-on collision in the question of fellowship. Here man either accepts those whom God rejects or rejects those whom God accepts. The godlessness of man expresses itself no more strongly than in his godlike acceptance or rejection of himself or his fellow man. Man gnashes his teeth at God and seeks to sit on the throne of the universe pronouncing his self-spun verdict of acquittal or condemnation.

In the question of fellowship twin evils emerge. There is the evil of fellowship without any justification, and there is the evil of justification without any fellowship. The Word of God is bypassed, and the word of man goes forth to destroy, mutilate, and turn our churches into Gestapo-like ghettos.

Who will dare to deny that evangelical religion is deeply marked and marred by divisions? True, there is a surface unity, the hailing of a common Lord. But beneath this lies the dragon of division. Once it was division between evangelical and liberal; now it is between fundamentalist and new evangelical. Once it was between evangelical and Pentecostal; now it is between evangelical and new Pentecostal. This is to say nothing of the variations which mark the word *Presbyterian* or the word *Reformed*.

There is something highly conducive to the pretense of unity, and that is the fear of facing up to the real situation which pervades our age and which is aided every day by the media. We do not want to face the fact of deep divisions within the circle that claims to hear the Word of God more clearly than anyone else.

The tragic fact is, however, that we all have our own rules and regulations which determine whom we shall accept and whom we shall reject. In the multitudinous in-groups within evangelicaldom there are written or spoken codes which act as the basis of adjudication of others.

The besetting sin of evangelicalism is deep division—in some instances, flat rejection—on the ground of failure to conform doctrinally. Unless the particular creed or confession of our particular setup is endorsed

to the last degree, fellowship is prohibited. Consider the present situation in the United States of America with regard to the question of eschatological convictions. So often in a recent lecture tour of the U.S. this writer was confronted by those for whom *the* burning question was not, "Do you confess Jesus Christ as Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead?" (cf. Rom. 10:9), but, "Are you premil, postmil or amil?" It was also evident that eschatological position was normative in the consideration of theological data. One theological professor was heard to ask after a lecture in theology, "How does this fit into our scheme?"

We are not advocating fellowship with no (scriptural) justification. There is the irreducible core of confession of the Lordship of Jesus Christ demonstrated conclusively by the cross and empty tomb (Rom. 15:1f; Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:1-3). Faith in the crucified and risen Saviour entitles a person to fellowship with God and His people. This we do not seek to deny or lessen. What we do advocate is uninhibited fellowship on the basis of God's action in Jesus Christ for us, and that alone!

We shall now address ourselves to the message of biblical justification for the question of fellowship.

### Part 3

God declares men and women acceptable because of the acceptability of Jesus Christ. This is our first truth which is patient of elucidation.

If God declares people acceptable, we should be very cautious indeed that we do not treat such people as unacceptable. This, then, ought to be a fundamental question with regard to fellowship: "Does God accept this person?" If He does, then no man or institution ought to regard that person as unacceptable.

Earlier we stressed Paul's teaching that acceptability before God and men cannot be acquired by works. This is another way of stating that the only ground of acceptance is Jesus Christ—His perfect doing and dying. Therefore, all who refuse those whom God has accepted refuse to acknowledge the sufficiency of the merits of Jesus Christ. Jesus' merits are for all who trust in Him. If we treat such a person as even a little unacceptable, we are saying that something has to be added to the merits of Jesus Christ. Our faith in the adequacy of the merits of the Saviour will be practically expressed in the uninhibited way we accept those who stand on those merits.

Another way of expressing this truth is to say that failure to give the right hand of fellowship to those who trust in the merits of the Saviour alone is a serious defect in faith. Such a (weak) faith poorly apprehends the Saviour and the extent of His merits.

Though we shall have occasion to later elucidate this

truth more fully, we shall here mention that acceptance apart from works means that we can never ask people to fulfill anything in order to be uninhibitedly accepted by us. Acceptance can only be by trust in the Saviour's perfect doing and dying. *Acceptance cannot be by works.* It does not matter what the work is. We must ask for no deed to be done or deed not to be done. We must ask only, "Do you believe in the merits of Jesus Christ for you?" If God requires no work, we should require no work.

The second truth for elucidation is this: Paul stressed the present reality of justification. God's declaration of a man's acceptability on the ground of the acceptability of Jesus Christ is a here-and-now reality. This means that we cannot postpone our acceptance of another until the end. We cannot say, "I will accept him when God accepts him at the last day, if that be the case." No, there must be *here-and-now* acceptance of the one who trusts in the Saviour. God does not pronounce a person acceptable (justified) and then leave him to wander the earth alone. The justification of God is justification in the sight of men here and now. In fact, the acceptance of our fellow men because of Jesus Christ is part and parcel of sanctification, so there must be no justification without acceptance of those whom God has righted. The final verdict of God should confirm what we have been acting upon rather than provide *de novo* information about our brother's status with God.

The third great contribution of Paul which we have highlighted is that God pronounces the ungodly acceptable when they believe on Christ. Because of Jesus Christ, God is happy with the ungodly who believe. Are we? Or do we experience a lump in the throat when we find ourselves in the company of those Christians whose practices differ from ours? Happy fellowship with such will be the expression of the happiness of God. Let us remember: God is happy with us because of Jesus Christ. The merits of Jesus Christ are imputed to the believer. If we find ourselves unhappy with those with whom God is happy because of Christ, what does this say about our regard for Christ?

Justification is the justification of the ungodly. As important as we think sanctification to be, it *cannot* be the ground of fellowship. We repeat, sanctification cannot and must not be made the ground of fellowship with others. If this were the case, the new converts from a life of paganism would never enter the visible community of believers. Such a one has almost no sanctification to his credit at that point.

Constantly we find ourselves expecting others to do this or not to do that in order to be accepted by us. If this continues, some of us will never have real fellowship until glorification! However, fellowship is a here-and-now reality because its foundation—justification—is a here-and-now reality. If justification



is a here-and-now reality, it must be the justification of the ungodly, because all are ungodly until their final transformation.

The final truth which we sought to highlight is the truth of the *sola*—the *alone*. Justification is by grace alone, Christ alone and faith alone. The simple truth of this Pauline-Reformation *sola* is this: Justification by God, unlike the justification of man, is by grace alone with no "plus." In other words, *sola*—*alone*—eradicates the little conjunction *and*. It is grace alone and not "grace *and* . . ." It is Christ alone and not "Christ *and* . . ." It is faith alone and not "faith *and* . . ." Here we are able to more sharply focus what we have been saying throughout our exposition:

1. The declaration of another as acceptable must be on the ground of Christ and *not faith in Christ plus a certain denominational allegiance*. Denominational allegiance plays no part in God's declaration of acceptability, and it should play no part in ours. There is no *de facto* righteousness on the face of the earth. That means that there is no *de facto* denominational righteousness on the face of the earth. We may gain no security from denominational allegiance.

We are not saying that we should have no denominational allegiance, but only that such ought to provide us with no security for acceptance with God *or our fellow man*. Let us beware lest we seek to expect a denominational righteousness from our fellow Christians.

A Christian who is a Baptist is no better than one who is a Methodist, and vice versa. Should we ever think we are better when we believe all partake of the perfect good (i.e., the best) in Jesus Christ? We think not. We may slightly alter the wording of Paul and say, "There is no one denominationally righteous, no, not one" (Rom. 3:10).

2. The declaration of another as acceptable must be on the ground of Christ's acceptability and *not the acceptability of Christ plus party allegiance*. Sometimes so many of us only need to hear that a person is in a particular party in order to determine our subsequent relationship with him. Time and again in the U.S. this writer heard people designated as "liberal," "neo-evangelical," etc., in such a way as to close all discussion of the matter. A man's allegiance to a particular party was apparently more determinative—one fears, *omni-determinative*—than his allegiance to Jesus Christ. But there is no *de facto* party righteousness on the face of the earth. Therefore, we ought not to trust in such.

One of the truly tragic elements in party warfare within evangelical Christianity is the overt denial of the Holy Spirit. We are here referring to the idea that nothing good can come from the pen of someone who happens to belong to a party which we look upon with disfavor. We have had people write to this magazine and ask to be removed from the mailing list because we

quoted someone whom they view with disfavor. Apparently there is not even room for common grace, let alone special grace! We do sin against God and each other when we believe we have a monopoly on the Holy Spirit.

3. The declaration of another as acceptable is because of the acceptability of Jesus Christ and *not because of Jesus Christ plus the endorsement of our supporters*. Here is a real problem—the power of the voice of God and the power of the voice of the supporting constituency. The voice of God must be absolute, and not the voice of the constituency. If we are asked whether the two have to be in opposition, our answer is, Not at all. The voice of the constituency (can we speak of "the voice"?) must be heeded as the voice of God when that voice is in accord with sacred Scriptures. But so many of us want the justification of God *and* the justification of the supporting constituency. We must not seek the justification of God and the justification of man.

Surely our faith will be on trial here. We have a work. We believe it is a work of God. We want to see that work grow and prosper. But we need the financial support and good will of the supporters to achieve this. The great temptation is to want to not make the constituency unhappy.

There needs to be real heart-searching here. There needs to be real courage and a willingness to see our work dissolve rather than to shackle the truth of the gospel to the voice of our supporters. It is better to have no work and God's favor than to have a work at the expense of the gospel. We need to honestly ask ourselves whether our work is valuable to us because it acts as the objectification of our own ideals, whether it is but an empirical verification of our own skills and intrinsic acceptability. Reputation! To be well thought of! To be seen as a man whom God really blesses! These things can be really demonic and, we fear, in many instances *are* demonic. We hunger after praise and adulation from men and not (really) from God. We want the approval of men before we want the approval of God.

These are but some of the implications of the little word *sola*—*alone*. If anything is joined to grace, Christ and faith, then it is not the justification of God but the justification of man.

Perhaps more than any other, the question of fellowship highlights the normative significance of the justification by God of the ungodly. We of the evangelical church need to give serious attention to the quality of fellowship, its ground and nature. There is more than a little evidence that the justification of man is seeking to dethrone the justification of God. Grace and works for acceptance with God are incompatible. They will always be incompatible. If we have the one, we cannot have the other. We must beware of choosing the two under the guise of adhering only to the one.

# The Dynamic, Ongoing Nature of Justification by Faith

Robert D. Brinsmead



Luther's brilliant insight into one aspect of justification by faith has largely been lost or overlooked. He conceived of justification by faith as a dynamic, ongoing action in the divine-human relationship. This important concept is so completely foreign to most evangelical circles today that we should take some time to consider it and its far-reaching consequences.

To start with, most evangelicals think of justification by faith as a final, once-in-a-lifetime act. In his masterful book on *The Doctrine of Justification*, James Buchanan says that justification by faith "is a complete, final, and irreversible act of divine grace . . . at once and forever."—p. 138. He even says that this is what "the Reformers held and taught." That is not quite correct. The view he expresses does not represent Luther, Melancthon, and the whole Lutheran wing of the Reformation.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>It is also doubtful whether this view does real justice to Calvin's position. In his treatment on justification, see his chapter entitled "The Beginning of Justification. In What Sense Progressive."—*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Bk. 3, chap. 14. Here Calvin comes very close to reflecting Luther's concept of the present continuous nature of justification. This original Reformation focus seemed to slip out of view in later Protestant scholasticism.

We have no intention of crying up one of the great branches of Reformation thought against the other. The two should be seen as *complementary* rather than *competing*.

### **Distinguishing Between Justification by Faith and the Finished Work of Christ.**

If Dr. Buchanan had said, "God's redemptive act in Christ is a final and irreversible act of divine grace . . . at once and forever," he would have been on solid ground. But he does what is often done in evangelical circles—he equates justification by faith with the finished work of Christ. They must, of course, be vitally related; but they should not be equated.

The "finished work" (Heb. 10:10-14, for instance)



relates to the Christ event. By doing and dying Christ made reconciliation for iniquity and brought in everlasting righteousness (Dan. 9:24). He put away sin, defeated all the powers that were arrayed against us, destroyed death, and brought to light life and immortality (Heb. 9:26; Col. 2:15; 2 Tim. 1:10). This Christ event was so decisive and final that we call it "inaugurated eschatology"—meaning that the end-time events such as judgment, outpouring of God's wrath, resurrection, etc., have already taken place in Jesus Christ. The end of the world ("consummated eschatology") will merely be an unveiling, or cosmic disclosure, of what has already happened in Jesus Christ.

We are now living in "the times between." Those powers which are against Christ are allowed to maintain their facade of power, and the unbelieving world does not know that they have already been defeated by the decisive victory of Jesus Christ. Believers, however, know what has happened—that sin, death, the world and Satan have been vanquished by Christ—and they therefore wait in patience and confidence for reality to be openly disclosed at the coming of Jesus Christ.

Says the apostle Paul, ". . . all that believe are justified . . ." Acts 13:39. This makes a clear distinction between the finished work of Christ and justification by faith. The "finished work" took place before we came to faith. It is still a "finished work" whether men believe it or not. But not so with the personal justification of sinners. This only takes place when they "hear the word of the gospel, and believe." Acts 15:7.

". . . all that believe are justified . . ." There is more in this brief statement than meets the eye of the casual reader. Let us look carefully at the two main words here—*believe* and *justified*.

*Believe.* The verb *believe* in Acts 13:39 is in the present tense. This is in keeping with the general pattern of the New Testament's use of *pisteuo*. Most of our readers will know that the Greek present tense is *present continuous*. So Acts 13:39 means that "all that believe and keep on believing are justified," or "all that believe and continue to believe are justified." And no one else!

The atonement of Christ on the cross was a once-for-all act. But our laying hold of it in faith is no once-for-all act. The redemptive act of Christ benefits only those who believe and keep on believing. Justification is by faith. Where there is no present, living faith, there is no justification.

*Justified.* Acts 13:39 also puts *justified* in the present tense. This is not an isolated case in the New Testament. Other great Pauline passages set forth justification as present continuous. For example:

. . . being *justified* freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus . . . — Rom. 3:24.

. . . *justified* by faith without the deeds of the law. — Rom. 3:28.

But to him that worketh not, but believeth on Him that *justifieth* the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. — Rom. 4:5.

It is true that *justified* also appears in the aorist tense—meaning that it is done at once as a completed action. This underlines the important concept that God does not justify the believer piecemeal. There is no such thing as being more and more justified. There are no degrees of acceptance with God. To be justified is to be wholly justified. All this is implied in the aorist tense. But that is not all that needs to be said about being justified. There is a dimension other than aoristic. The use of the present continuous brings out another vital aspect. Justification is not static. It is dynamic and ongoing. Passages like Acts 13:39, Romans 3:24 and Romans 4:5 mean that as we *constantly* believe, God *constantly* justifies.

From the human side this means that the Christian, always aware of his falling short yet always reminded of what Christ has done, continues to believe in Him who justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5). As Luther said, "No saint regards and confesses himself to be righteous, but he always asks and waits to be justified." — Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, p. 113.

From the divine side it means that God *continues* to justify those who continue to seek His mercy.

For inasmuch as the saints are *always* aware of their sin and implore God for the merciful gift of His righteousness, they are for this very reason *always* reckoned righteous by God. — *Ibid.*, p. 125.

Thus, we confess that we are sinners, and with our weeping, penitence, grieving, and tears we show that we are sinners also in our own eyes. As soon, namely, as such fear and uneasiness cease, the sense of security lays hold of us; and where security prevails, the divine decree of counting our sin to us is again in force, for God has decided that He will not impute sin to anyone who implores His mercy with fear and trembling. — *Ibid.*, p. 135.

The present continuous nature of justification was the genius of Luther's emphasis; and we submit that it is truly biblical and Pauline. To Luther, justification was no mere initiatory action in the soteriological process. It was no mere filling station along the way or no mere door to enter but once. Luther taught that to accept justification in faith is our whole work for our whole Christian life. We never get beyond it. We never learn it too well. And thus, for Luther, justification by faith is always kept at the center. In "The Disputation Concerning Justification" in 1536, the Reformer gave voice to his view of the dynamic, ongoing nature of justification. Said he:

. . . forgiveness of sins is not a matter of a passing work or action, but comes from baptism which is of perpetual dura-

tion, until we arise from the dead. — *Luther's Works* (American ed.; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press; St. Louis: Concordia, 1955- ), Vol. 34, p. 163.

. . . Forgiveness of sins is not a matter of a passing work or action, but of perpetual duration. For the forgiveness of sins begins in baptism and remains with us all the way to death, until we arise from the dead, and leads us into life eternal. So we live continually under the remission of sins. Christ is truly and constantly the liberator from our sins, is called our Savior, and saves us by taking away our sins. If, however, he saves us always and continually, then we are constantly sinners. — *Ibid.*, p. 164.

On no condition is sin a passing phase, but we are justified daily by the unmerited forgiveness of sins and by the justification of God's mercy. Sin remains, then, perpetually in this life, until the hour of the last judgment comes and then at last we shall be made perfectly righteous. — *Ibid.*, p. 167.

For the forgiveness of sins is a continuing divine work, until we die. Sin does not cease. Accordingly, Christ saves us perpetually. — *Ibid.*, p. 190.

Daily we sin, daily we are continually justified, just as a doctor is forced to heal sickness day by day until it is cured. — *Ibid.*, p. 191.

## Distinguishing Between Justification by Faith and Eschatology

Justifying faith looks in two directions. It looks back to the finished work of Christ and forward to the eschatological judgment. The finished work of Christ is the ground of justification. Faith rests on that which is absolutely complete. We need to also consider how justification by faith relates to the end-time judgment.

*Justification* is a forensic word which has reference to trial and judgment. It is a term of the law court. It implies that one has come before the divine court and has been pronounced righteous. As George Eldon Ladd aptly comments, "Justification . . . is the decree of the divine Lawgiver and Judge that a man is free from all guilt and condemnation. As such, it is an eschatological event that belongs to the day of judgment at the end of the world." — George Eldon Ladd, "Unity and Variety in New Testament Faith," *Christianity Today*, Nov. 19, 1965.

The Bible teaches that there will be a final judgment upon this earthly life. Even believers must stand before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10). In faith the needy sinner may anticipate the verdict of the Judge even now. For all who repent and rely on the merits of the atonement the verdict is "Not guilty! Righteous!" This present justification, which is by faith, is in view of the judgment and anticipates the judgment. The blessings which will be bestowed upon the righteous on the day of judgment are already possessed in faith. But the believer does not possess them in such a way that makes the final judgment irrelevant or unnecessary.

Luther captured the spirit of the Psalmist, who sighs and longs for judgment day and who frequently and fervently implores the Judge to arise and judge His people. Paul waits for the crown of righteousness to be given him by the righteous Judge (2 Tim. 4:8; Gal. 5:5).

Those who confuse justification by faith with the finished work of Christ inevitably confuse it with the end-time judgment. If present justification is a finished work (God's final verdict upon the believer), what is the point of an eschatological judgment? Such a view does not do justice to the biblical tension between the *now* and the *not yet*. It robs the final judgment of its biblical force. It is in the final judgment that the decree is pronounced, "He that is justified, let him be justified still." Rev. 22:11. Like Calvary, this decree is final, forever and irreversible. Meanwhile justification is present and continuous as long as faith is present and continuous.

## The Consequences of Overlooking the Dynamic, Ongoing Nature of Justification by Faith

Failure to grasp the dynamic, present continuous nature of justification by faith can have some very serious consequences. We will mention six of them:

1. It results in a failure to keep justification by faith at the center of the soteriological process. How can justification remain the vital center if it is seen merely as an initiatory, once-in-a-lifetime event? Are we to suggest that this doctrine has great significance in the matter of *becoming* Christians, but not so much for the matter of *being* Christians? If justification is a door a person enters but once, how can it avoid becoming a fading memory? With too many, justification has become equated with the single conversion event. So it is easy to reason, "Doesn't the writer to the Hebrews tell us to get past the first principles of Christian initiation? Justification is good for those making their first start, but we need to get past it and on to higher things. Oh, a little nostalgia is permissible on Reformation Sunday."

2. It results in a preoccupation with a kind of sanctification which has no vital relation to justification. (We submit that the Bible sees sanctification as justification in action.) By way of illustration we refer to Buchanan's two very worthy books, *The Doctrine of Justification* and *The Office and Work of the Holy Spirit*. Although it contains a lot of excellent material, in many respects his second book is very disappointing. It does not vitally relate the Holy Spirit's work to justification. Like many of the works of the Puritans, it just shows "how easy it is to get lost when one treats of internal grace." — Berkouwer. Yet for Buchanan this was almost unavoidable on his own premise that justification by faith is "final . . . at once and forever." He

kisses justification goodbye at the gate and wanders off to consider sanctification on its own. If this happens with the giants of divinity like Buchanan, what might we expect to happen to the rank and file who follow the same theological system? When sanctification becomes separated from justification, it is no longer the joyful, spontaneous justification in action. We find ourselves resorting to all sorts of devices and gimmicks to motivate us along the path of Bible holiness.

3. For some, this relegation of justification to a one-time event opens the door to the error of "second blessingism." What happens is this: A certain person has some Christian encounter which he has been taught to regard as his moment of justification forever. The further he gets along in the matter of living the Christian life, the further he gets away from justification which took place "back there." He loses the freshness and wonder of acceptance with God and perhaps begins to backslide. He comes to the place where he desperately wants to recapture a dynamic experience. Instead of being directed again to the gate of justification—which alone brings the Spirit of joy, peace and love (Rom. 5:1-11)—and feeling he has no need to seek what he supposes is automatically his, he begins to look elsewhere, saying, "I've been justified. What lack I yet?"

Now the door is wide open to the merchants of newfangled experiences such as speaking in tongues—things calculated to stimulate the flagging zeal of those who are many days' journey away from justification by faith.

When we turn to the New Testament, we see that it is justification that sets the church on fire and *keeps* it on fire. This is what opens the door to the Spirit and opens the mouth of the apostle in that song of inspiring confidence and holy cheer (Rom. 8:30-39). The best protection against the error of the "second blessing" is to teach people to feed on the first blessing. Justification is like the manna that had to be gathered daily. Yesterday's supply cannot be hoarded for tomorrow. It is the privilege of God's people to be ever grasping the blessing anew, fresh from glory.

Remembering mine affliction and my misery, the wormwood and the gall. My soul hath them still in remembrance, and is humbled in me. This I recall to mind, therefore have I hope. It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is Thy faithfulness. — Lam. 3:19-23.

4. Relegating justification by faith to a one-time, final event has opened the door to the popular but delusive notion that "faith for a moment brings life for eternity." Some of our evangelical brethren will even doubt whether a person is in the good old Protestant faith if he questions this dogma. Yet to start with, Luther and the whole Lutheran stream of Reformation thought stood against it. Further, this teaching is not even true to the doctrine of Calvin and the Reformed

tradition, which balances the matter with the stern doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. We do not say these things because we think that the Reformers were necessarily correct, but to point out how absurd it is to make this idea a test of orthodoxy.

Modern-day writers like R.B. Thieme, Jr., will advocate that if a man is converted, he might then give up the faith, become an atheist, and do anything at all, but will still be saved. That is not the Bible doctrine of the security of the believer, but is the presumptuous notion of security for an unbeliever. We agree with Reformed scholar John Murray, who says:

It is one of the most perilous distortions of the doctrine of grace, and one that has carried with it the saddest records of moral and spiritual disaster, to assume that past privileges, however high they may be, guarantee the security of men irrespective of perseverance in faith and holiness. — John Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, p. 199.

The false idea of continuing security apart from continuing faith grows out of the confusion of justification by faith with the finished work of Christ. True, the idea of "once saved, always saved" is a reduction and a caricature which does not do justice to the great stream of thought known as Calvinism. Yet it can easily grow out of the failure to recognize the dynamic, ongoing nature of justification by faith. Evangelicals today would be enriched by considering the insight that Luther had into Pauline thought. Then we would see a greater willingness to exegete the book of Hebrews without indulging in a lot of fancy footwork around texts whose import is transparently obvious.

5. The limitation of justification to a once-for-all event results in an artificial distinction between *justification* and *forgiveness*. Since it is as clear as the sun that we need to be continually forgiven, some have therefore contended that in this respect forgiveness is different from justification.

We submit that this distinction between justification and forgiveness is altogether an artificial theological device which is quite unbiblical. True, justification is a broader term than forgiveness, implying not only pardon but a positive verdict of righteousness. Yet the Bible does at times use the two expressions to describe the one blessing. Note:

Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this Man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: and by Him all that believe are justified from all things. . . . — Acts 13:38, 39.

But to him that worketh not, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. — Rom. 4:5-7.

In his *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Melancthon appealed to these scriptures to show that justification consists in forgiveness of sins and not, as the Romanists contended, an infusion of righteousness. We have already seen how Luther, in "The Disputation Concerning Justification," freely uses *justification* and *forgiveness* interchangeably.

It is our privilege as well as our duty to keep praying for forgiveness, even as our Lord taught us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Blessed is the man who does this and goes down to his house justified—daily.

6. Finally, the Bible doctrine of a final judgment, even for believers, has been rendered empty and mean-

ingless by this sort of teaching about justification by faith which amounts to a premature seizure of the glory that shall be. Present justification is like the token of our final vindication on judgment day which the Judge sends on ahead to lure us on with confidence to the day of judgment. Being now justified by faith means that we will not stand in that judgment as defendants in the dock, but as plaintiffs who have a good case. We may expect not only a favorable verdict, but "heavy damages" against the enemy as well as the restoration of our "first dominion." Faith is therefore the substance of things hoped for (Heb. 11:1). We do not hope for that which we already have (Rom. 8:24). Let us therefore beware lest we teach a view of justification which robs God's people of their hope.

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