

Alone, but Never Alone

Fides sola est quae justificat; fides quae justificat non est sola. Latinisms can have a wonderful way of crystallising issues in theological reflection – so with this one: ‘It is faith alone that justifies; but faith that justifies is never alone!’ This isn’t just a statement about the alone-ness of faith as the means by which we receive God’s justifying grace, but something much more far-reaching. It highlights the crucial distinction we need to grasp as we try to understand what it means to be justified. Namely, that a person who is truly justified is never *merely* justified!

This may sound like theological hair-splitting, but actually it is tied in with one of the most vexed issues of Christian experience that goes back to the earliest days of the New Testament church and further back still. Because that is so, we are reminded that every pastoral problem has theological dimensions and every theological problem has pastoral implications and we dare not lose sight of either.

In a nutshell, it is the issue raised by the Galatian problem. Paul flags up the problem in his introduction to Galatians by pointing to ‘a different gospel’ that was in opposition to ‘the grace of Christ’ (1.6). He spells out the problem later on when he says,

We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Jesus Christ, that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no-one will be justified’ (2.15-16).

These people, whose experience of salvation had begun through their being justified by faith in Jesus Christ, were now being misled into thinking that their new standing could only be sustained by observing the law. They were confused over the relationship between justification and sanctification: where the Christian life begins and how it goes on.

The Recurring Problem

It isn’t just that this confusion was a recurring problem in the New Testament churches (hence the careful and repeated strand of teaching in Romans, Ephesians and elsewhere), but that it has surfaced again and again during the history of the church.

As the Western Church descended into the dark ages of Mediaeval Catholicism, its whole understanding of salvation was warped almost beyond recognition by its blurring of the distinction between grace that is *imputed* and grace that is *imparted*. So even though in one sense the Roman Catholic Church could quite happily assent to the fact that it is ‘grace alone’ that saves, what Rome meant by that was quite different from its Protestant counterparts in the Reformation. For Catholicism (as with the Galatians), the grace that justifies was confused with the grace that sanctifies.

It would be wrong to pretend that this was and is a problem only for Roman Catholics both then and now. Sadly it has been and continues to be an all too pervasive problem for Protestant churches as well. From the theological Liberalism of the nineteenth century to the ‘Social Gospel’ of the early twentieth century, there was a wide-ranging

belief that our standing before God was determined as much by what we do as by what or in whom we believe.

For our generation the issue has surfaced in the debates surrounding the 'New Perspective' on Paul propounded by E.P. Sanders and N.T. Wright, the 'Federal Vision' theology of Auburn Avenue and Norman Shepherd's neo-nomianism. All these debates converge most significantly in the two questions of how a person a person *gets in* to God's family on the one hand and how they *stay in* on the other – the relationship between justification and sanctification.

The Root of the Issue

The reason for this recurring confusion highlights just how deep the roots of sin extend into our fallen human nature. There is something in all of us that wants to claim the merit for what we are and where we stand. Whether it be our well-meaning neighbour who says their hope of heaven rests in the fact they've tried their best and never done anyone any harm, or in ourselves when we subconsciously allow our enjoyment of communion with God to be performance-related. By nature we are self-justifying creatures.

The gospel strikes at the very heart of that notion. It tells us in no uncertain terms that 'There is no-one righteous, not even one' (Ro 3.10), 'For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Ro 3.23). Even 'all our righteous acts are like filthy rags' (Isa 64.6) and all this is true as much for those who are believers as for those who are still outside God's family.

In practical terms this means there is an overwhelming temptation for all of us to look to self for the hope that God will accept us. It is the most fundamental pastoral problem a minister can ever address, because it has the profoundest implications for our eternal destiny. It will affect the way we deal with those who are seeking salvation and it will also affect the way we handle those who are troubled over assurance of salvation. There is something in them that points them in the wrong direction for answers; but there is something in the gospel that points them in an altogether different direction and that's where we need clear understanding ourselves. The two great questions, 'What must I do to be saved?' and 'How do I know I am saved?' are the most important a minister will ever have to answer.

Confusion over Concepts

Tracing out the history of these issues right down to the present reveals a significant confusion over concepts and terminology that crops up again and again. All too often the concept of justification has been confused with salvation. O. Palmer Robertson brings this out in his critique of Norman Shepherd's paper, 'The Relation of Good Works to Justification in the Westminster Standards'. He says, 'Mr. Shepherd interchanges the concept of "salvation" with the concept of "justification".' In so doing, the precise and narrow focus given to justification in Scripture is lost in the wider web of truth bound up with salvation as a whole.

This confusion has been made worse for the present generation of Bible students by a breakdown in the hermeneutical circle that controls the way we interpret its message.

Historically, that task has been seen to begin with certain presuppositions about Scripture that in turn feed through into exegesis, biblical theology, historical theology and finally culminate in dogmatics, or systematic theology. Increasingly in many training institutions today that chain has been broken at the point of biblical theology and created an excuse for open-endedness on theological certainty. So we hear even leading biblical scholars refusing to be pinned down on precise theological formulation on the pretext, 'I'm only a biblical theologian!' Such vagueness is no comfort to a sinner troubled by his guilt who asks, 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' or a saint who asks, 'How can I be sure?'

It was an older generation of theologians (who were in reality pastor-preacher-theologians, not mere academics) who recognised the precision of the God of revelation that is mirrored in the truths he reveals in his Word. The finest of their formulations are still to be found in the *Westminster Standards* and their value is acknowledged trans-culturally around the world in the many churches that continue to subscribe these great summaries of Bible teaching. When it comes to what they say about justification and sanctification and how they are connected, they have yet to be bettered.

Similar, but Significantly Different

All three major documents that comprise the summary of doctrine produced by the Westminster Assembly – the *Confession*, and *Larger* and *Shorter Catechisms* – address the doctrines of justification and sanctification as separate entities. However, given the connection between the two, the Larger Catechism contrasts them for the sake of further clarity. It reads as follows:

- Q.77 Wherein do justification and sanctification differ?
A. Although sanctification be inseparably joined with justification, yet they differ, in that God in justification imputeth the righteousness of Christ; in sanctification his Spirit infuseth grace, and enableth the exercise thereof; in the former, sin is pardoned; in the other it is subdued; the one doth equally free all believers from the revenging wrath of God, and that perfectly in this life, that they never fall into condemnation; the other is nether equal in all, nor in this life perfect in any, but growing up to perfection.

Both these elements of salvation spring directly from the grace of God and are the fruit of the regenerating work of his Spirit. In that, sense in all our understanding of salvation, there is a priority to the new birth as the source from which every part of our experience of redemption flows. The contrast drawn by the Westminster divines in this part of the Catechism is designed to demonstrate that justification is an *act* of God's free grace, whereas sanctification is its *work*. Both begin at the same moment and in the same place; but one has a forensic priority over the other.

The former is the once-for-all declaration of the court of heaven in the future, applied to the believing sinner in the present on the basis of the finished work of Christ in the past. In it sin is pardoned, guilt removed and the righteousness of God in Christ reckoned to the one who believes the promises of God in the gospel. Justification changes a person's legal standing before the Judge of all the earth; but in itself it does not change their moral condition. They are justified, but they are still sinners and are still prone to temptation and failure.

In sanctification, however, God works by his Holy Spirit to make those who are righteous in his sight in principle, righteous in reality through their new obedience to Christ. He provides them with the ability to make their moral and spiritual choices no longer according to the enslaving sinful instinct with which they were born, but instead according to the freedom given them in Christ. They are ‘new creation’ (1Co 5.17) – people with new desires and new potential who ‘are being transformed into his [Christ’s] likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord who is the Spirit’ (2Co 3.18).

The contrast between these two elements of saving grace is further developed by Wilhelmus à Brakel – one of the key figures in the Dutch Second Reformation. In *The Christian’s Reasonable Service* (Vol. 3 p.4) he says,

Justification and sanctification always coexist in a believer; where the one is, the other will also be present...Nevertheless, these two matters are in essence entirely different. First, justification is executed by God as righteous Judge; sanctification is executed by God the Holy Spirit as re-creator. Secondly, justification is executed towards man as the object; sanctification transpires within man as being the subject. Thirdly, justification removes guilt and punishment, and establishes man in a state of felicity; sanctification removes pollution and restores the image of God. Fourthly, justification is executed perfectly each time; sanctification always remains imperfect as long as man is upon earth. Fifthly, in natural order justification comes first, and sanctification follows as proceeding from justification.

As with all in the Puritan mould, À Brakel’s concern in writing was primarily pastoral. He was seeking to address practical needs common to all Christians with a synthesis of gospel truth expounded from all of Scripture. His starting point was not an atomistic view of the Bible in all its component parts according to their human authors, but the fact that this book speaks with one voice: the voice of the living God. Since that is so, it is both right and reasonable to expect that voice to speak in harmony on single themes as well as on the relationship between connected themes as the message of the Bible unfolds. He does not begin with the apparent tensions in Scripture, as so many contemporary academics so often do; but rather with what is clear and consistent. The effect of such an approach was to foster confidence in even the weakest of saints, as opposed to the doubts that are encouraged in even the strongest today.

It was J.C. Ryle, that latter-day Puritan of the Nineteenth Century, who has provided one further strand of reflection on this subject. In his book, *Holiness*, he not only sets out the differences between justification and sanctification, he highlights also where they are alike.

He highlights five important similarities: they both proceed from the free grace of God, are rooted in the eternal covenant and supremely in Christ, they are found in the same persons, begin at the same time and both are necessary to salvation.

In the eight contrasts he draws, three add to what has been summarised above already: the righteousness we have by our justification is not our own; while that found in sanctification is. In justification, our works have no place at all; while in sanctification they are of vast importance. And justification is a finished and complete work; sanctification is imperfect and will never be perfect till we reach heaven.

Does it Really Matter?

We said at the outset that discussion of the issues covered in these pages can easily be construed as some kind of theological self-indulgence. However, the central issue at stake in all we have covered could not be of greater significance. Whenever the lines that distinguish these two dimensions of saving grace are blurred, it is salvation itself that becomes the casualty. If we lose sight of the distinctiveness of justification as, according to Martin Luther, the mark of a standing or falling church, and allow it to become confused with sanctification, then the focus of faith is inclined to shift from Christ to self. This has been borne out in Catholicism historically as much as in neo-nomianism more recently.

The irony in it all is that in every instance where this blurring of distinctions has occurred, it has been motivated (at least in its inception) by the desire to produce better Christians. However, history demonstrates that it almost invariably ends by producing people who are not Christians at all. The only way guaranteed to produce better Christians is by a focus on the primacy of justification through faith alone in Christ alone which, if it is truly grasped, *must* lead to new obedience worked out in our being made increasingly like Christ as we journey home to heaven.