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## The Gospel and Justification

*We are glad to welcome another contribution by Dr Clifford, whose paper on 'The Christian Mind of Philip Doddridge (1702-1751)' appeared in THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY 56, 1984, 227-42. His present paper is a revision of a lecture given at the conference of the Protestant Reformation Society in September, 1982.*

### Introduction

'How then can man be justified with God? (Job 25:4). This is the heart-cry of a man humbled in the presence of God. He is conscious of the guilt and pollution of his sin. He is distressed on account of the infinite holiness of the God with whom he has to do. He is anxious for mercy and desperate for reconciliation. For this troubled man, the remedy is at hand. 'I know that my Redeemer liveth . . . ' (Job 19:25). This glorious Old Testament statement points ahead to the fulness of God's gracious revelation in Christ. '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, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses.' (Acts 13:38, 39).

Those who are unashamedly 'evangelical' identify themselves with Job's condition and the only gospel that could cure it. The language of Charles Wesley is also theirs:

How can a sinner know  
His sins on earth forgiven?  
How can my gracious Saviour show  
My name inscribed in heaven?

We who in Christ believe  
That he for us hath died  
We all his unknown peace receive  
And feel his blood applied.<sup>1</sup>

This was also the heart-beat of the first Evangelical revival—the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. After centuries of

<sup>1</sup> *Methodist Hymn Book* (1933), 377: 1,3.

scholastic distortion, the fathers of the Reformation rediscovered God's way of salvation. Martin Luther spoke for them all when he described the doctrine of justification by faith as *articulus stantis vel cadentis ecclesiae*—the article of a standing or falling church.<sup>2</sup> Here in England, the same conviction was to be expressed in the XXXIX Articles of the Reformed English Church.<sup>3</sup>

It is impossible to fully comprehend the doctrine of justification by faith without appreciating the wider context of doctrinal truth. *Sola fide* is, in a sense, but one chapter in the book of salvation. Thus, the true import of the chapter cannot be discerned in isolation. The full story is the sum of all the chapters. In other words, when challenged by Rome to justify their views, the reformers responded with *sola scriptura*. In denouncing the Roman doctrine of merit, they cried *sola gratia*. In short, the doctrine of justification by faith presupposes a message to be proclaimed, a gospel to be believed.

### I. What is the Gospel?

This is a question no Christian should find difficulty in answering. The essence of the evangel must surely be John 3:16. The Protestant Reformers were perfectly clear about the meaning of 'evangelical'. For Luther, John 3:16 was 'the gospel in a nutshell'. John Calvin spoke for them all in his exposition of the 'nutshell' text:

For there is calm haven where our minds can rest until we come to God's free love. The whole substance of our salvation is not to be sought anywhere else than in Christ . . . He was offered as our saviour . . . the heavenly Father does not wish the human race that He loves to perish . . . It follows that until Christ vouchsafes to help the lost, all are appointed to eternal destruction . . . For since He necessarily hates sin, how shall we be convinced that he loves us until those sins for which He is justly angry with us have been expiated? Thus before we can have any feeling of His fatherly kindness, the blood of Christ must intercede to reconcile God to us . . . Our firm and substantial support is to rest on the death of Christ as its only pledge.<sup>4</sup>

With the reformers' rediscovery of the gospel came a resurgence of preaching. To whom should they preach the good news? Again, Calvin notes the 'whosoever believeth' of John 3:16:

And he has used a general term, both to invite indiscriminately all

<sup>2</sup> See J. I. Packer, Introductory Essay to James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification* (1961 rep.) 1.

<sup>3</sup> See Article XI.

<sup>4</sup> *The Gospel According to St. John*, tr. T. H. L. Parker (1959), Vol. 1, 73-74.

to share in life and to cut off every excuse from unbelievers. Such is also the significance of the term 'world' which he had used before. For although there is nothing in the world deserving God's favour, He nevertheless shows He is favourable to the whole world when He calls all without exception to the faith of Christ . . .<sup>5</sup>

Implicit in Calvin's exposition here is his belief that a universal atonement provides the *raison d'être* of universal gospel proclamation. Whilst Calvin was uncompromising in teaching the doctrines of election and predestination, he did not, like some of his disciples, offer violence to such 'universalist' texts as John 3:16 in the interests of some rationalistic mentality. Calvin's thoroughgoing and consistent biblicism prevented him from suppressing any truth in favour of another. As a biblical theologian *par excellence*, Calvin shares none of the inhibitions of subsequent generations of 'Calvinists'. One example will suffice to demonstrate how the reformer perceived the issues:

It is incontestable that Christ came for the expiation of the sins of the whole world . . . Hence, we conclude that, though reconciliation is offered to all through Him, yet the benefit is peculiar to the elect . . . However, while I say it is offered to all, I do not mean that this embassy, by which on Paul's testimony (2 Cor. 5:18) God reconciles the world to Himself, reaches to all, but that it is not sealed indiscriminately on the hearts of all to whom it comes so as to be effectual . . .<sup>6</sup>

The relevance of this should be obvious. What is the 'good news' a sinner must believe in order to be justified? He must, says Calvin, believe that God loves him, that Christ died for him and that pardon is offered to him. Repentance and faith presuppose such a gospel. Notwithstanding the reality of election, a sinner must not first enquire if he is elect, and then come to Christ on that basis. Election is to be learned from believing, not *vice versa*. The warrant to believe is 'in' the gospel, and not 'in' some knowledge the sinner might have that he is elect (See 2 Peter 1:10). In Calvin's view, the death of Christ for all is the pledge of God's willingness to save all who come to Him through Christ.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>6</sup> *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, tr. J. K. S. Reid, (1961), 148–149. See also Calvin's comments on Mark 14:24; Romans 5:18; Galatians 2:20 and 5:12; Col. 1:14; Hebrews 9:27–28. See also the statements in the *Institutes* II:13:3 and III:1:1, together with his *Antidote to the Council of Trent* in *Tracts and Treatises* (C.T.S. ed.) (1851), Vol. 3, 93, 109. Calvin evidently expounds the atonement according to the dualistic formula espoused earlier by Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas. 'sufficient for all/efficient for the elect'. See Calvin's comment on 1 John 2:2 and *Sermons on the Saving Work of Christ* (ed. Nixon), (1980 rep.), 151.

Recent theological discussion within the Reformed evangelical world on this subject has been stimulated by Dr. R. T. Kendall's *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (1979). Whilst Kendall's work is not altogether as accurate or cogent as the evidence demands,<sup>7</sup> he has shown that significant differences do exist between the theology of Calvin and that of his disciples. What the Anglo-Saxon world has understood as Calvinism for three centuries or more is to be attributed to Calvin's successor Theodore Beza. It was Beza, and not Calvin, who insisted that the atonement is limited to the elect alone.<sup>8</sup> Paul Helm's reply *Calvin and the Calvinists* (1982) says nothing to seriously counter this thesis.<sup>9</sup> William Perkins of Cambridge was largely responsible for the appearance of 'High Calvinism' in England during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Proceeding beyond the period covered by Dr. Kendall, the illustrious Dr. John Owen was responsible for the classical statement of the doctrine of limited atonement in his *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (1648). This work determined the character of orthodox 'high' Calvinism in subsequent generations, even assisting the transition from high Calvinism to hypercalvinism proper within eighteenth century English Dissent.<sup>10</sup>

There can be no doubt that the theological 'shift' to which we have referred was responsible for a number of developments. First, the rise of Arminianism. Had Beza retained Calvin's original, balanced theology of grace, the Arminian reaction might have been a non-event. Secondly, Calvinism would never have lost the evangelistic character everywhere evident in Calvin's conception of the gospel. Thirdly, the anxious quest for assurance which tended to dominate puritan piety might have been avoided. In other words, as David Sceats comments,<sup>11</sup> the 'religious psychology' is notably

<sup>7</sup> Kendall clearly misrepresents Calvin's views on the sufficiency/efficiency formula, as well as denying that, in Calvin's mind, Christ did pray for reprobate as well as elect persons. *op. cit.*, 14, 16. See Calvin on John 17:9 and *Sermons on Isaiah's Prophecy*, tr. T. H. L. Parker (1956), 143.

<sup>8</sup> Kendall, *op. cit.*, 29f.

<sup>9</sup> Helm provides a thoroughly contradictory account of Calvin's attitude *vis-a-vis* the extent of the atonement, *op. cit.*, 18. His arguments are largely inferential or deductive, whilst he frequently flies in the face of Calvin's explicit statements. Cf. 46 with Calvin on Col. 1:14. The controversial Hesshusius passage is more a statement about consubstantiation than the extent of the atonement. See my *Atonement and Justification: John Owen and John Wesley* (University of Wales Ph.D. thesis, 1984), 116f.

<sup>10</sup> See Michael Watts, *The Dissenters* (1978), pp. 298 and 456f. See also the references to Owen in *A Defence of Some Important Doctrines of the Gospel ... preached in Lime Street* (1732), Vol. 1, 379, 385, 431.

<sup>11</sup> *Reformed Faith then and now in Word and Spirit* (Journal of the Church of England Reformed Fellowship, Spring, 1982, n.p.)

different in puritan high Calvinism compared with the 'spiritual liberation' of the Reformation era.

It is true; many high Calvinists were evangelistic, and thus happily inconsistent. But the gospel as presented by them often lacked the uninhibited fulness of Calvin's presentation. Dr. John Owen (whose major thesis will be examined in another article) considered that sinners were obligated to come to Christ simply because of 'the command of God and the call of Christ.'<sup>12</sup> In no sense can the basis of belief be 'a persuasion of the love of God and good will of Christ' to all.<sup>13</sup> A modern exponent of Owen's position is Dr. J. I. Packer. He denies that the extent of the atonement has any bearing 'on the content of the evangelistic message' since 'the object of saving faith is . . . not, strictly speaking, the atonement, but the Lord Jesus Christ, who made the atonement.'<sup>14</sup> This is highly debatable and very different from Calvin. Does not the Apostle speak of 'faith in his blood' (Romans 3:25)? If sinners are directed to Christ, are they not directed to a *crucified* Christ? Are they not called to Him whose *death* has relevance for them? To deny this is to employ a distinction without any difference.

It is surely worthy of our notice to see the total unanimity between Calvin's theology and that of Reformation Anglicanism.

This is how the prince of preachers, Hugh Latimer, preached the gospel:

But when we are about this matter (namely election), and are troubled within ourselves whether we be elect or no: we must ever have this maxim or principal rule before our eyes, namely, that God beareth a good will toward us. But you will say, how shall I know that? Or how shall I believe that? . . . He hath sent the same His Son into this world, which hath suffered most painful death for us. Shall I now think that God hateth me? Or shall I doubt of His love towards me? Here you see how you shall avoid the scrupulous and most dangerous question of the predestination of God. For if thou wilt enquire of His counsels, and enter into His consistory, thy wit will deceive thee, for thou shalt not be able to search the counsels of God. But if thou begin with Christ and consider His coming into the world, and dost believe that God hath sent him for thy sake, to suffer for thee, and deliver thee from sin, death, the devil, and hell, then when thou art so armed with the knowledge of Christ, this simple question cannot hurt thee; For thou art in the book of life which is Christ Himself.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *Op. cit.*, (1959 rep.), 298.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>14</sup> *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (1961), 66. See also the author's famous introductory essay to *Owen's Death of Death* (1959 rep.)

<sup>15</sup> Given in Geoge Bull, *Examenae Censurae* (1843), 339-340.

Latimer surely speaks for the Anglican reformers generally, as a study of the Parker Society volumes reveals. John Hooper believed that Christ died as 'one that represented the person of all the sinners that ever were, be now, or shall be unto the world's end.'<sup>16</sup> In the *Book of Common Prayer*, Archbishop Cranmer's theology of the atonement is very evident. In the prayer of consecration from the service of Holy Communion, we are reminded that Christ made 'a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world.' Elsewhere Cranmer speaks similarly.<sup>17</sup> In the Catechism, the catechumen learns that God the Son 'hath redeemed me and all mankind' and that God the Holy Ghost 'sanctifieth me and all the elect people of God.' This view correlates perfectly with John Bradford's statement that 'Christ's death is sufficient for all, but effectual for the elect only.'<sup>18</sup> Not surprisingly, this is the theology expressed in the XXXIX Articles<sup>19</sup> and the *Books of Homilies*.<sup>20</sup>

It is therefore abundantly clear that if the Arminian deviation proved incompatible with Reformation Anglicanism, the same must be said of *high* Calvinism. It is surely arguable to suggest that had English Calvinism avoided the logical excesses of Perkins and Owen, then John Wesley might not have exhibited that antagonism towards election for which he is famous. Whatever are the merits of his understanding of Article XVII, *Of Predestination and Election*, Wesley was aware that Reformation Anglicanism did not support the advocates of limited atonement. In his reply to certain criticisms by Rowland Hill, Wesley says:

I never preached against the Seventeenth Article, nor had the least thought of doing it. But did Mr. Hill never preach against the Thirty-First Article which explicitly asserts universal redemption?<sup>21</sup>

It is interesting to note that neither John Wesley nor John Owen were aware of Calvin's precise view on the atonement. Had matters been otherwise, the history of English evangelicalism might have been a different story. The errors of high Calvinism and Arminianism are equally to be regretted. In our own day, a rediscovery of the true Reformation position might prove to be a conciliatory *via media*. It might stimulate discussion to suggest that Luther,

<sup>16</sup> *Later writings of Bishop Hooper* (1852), 31.

<sup>17</sup> *Works*, Vol. 1, 436.

<sup>18</sup> *Writings of John Bradford*, (1980 rep.), 320.

<sup>19</sup> See Articles XXXI, and also II and XV.

<sup>20</sup> *Certain Sermons of Homilies* (1822 ed), 395, 397 and 413.

<sup>21</sup> *Works*, ed. T. Jackson (1841), Vol. 10, 368.

Calvin and the English reformers would not be embarrassed to sing with Charles Wesley

O for a trumpet voice,  
 On all the world to call!  
 To bid their hearts rejoice  
 In Him who died for all;  
 For all, my Lord was crucified,  
 For all, for all, my Saviour died.<sup>22</sup>

Although divine election is the ultimate explanation for the success of the Gospel, it is irrelevant as far as the preaching of it is concerned. In his *Defense de la doctrine de Calvin* (1644) and other writings, Amyraldus expounded his view that the gospel is revealed to mankind as a conditional covenant. He argued that predestination should be viewed as an *ex post facto* explanation of the application of the atonement, and not a feature of the gospel as such. In this, Amyraldus appealed to Calvin himself.<sup>23</sup> In England, Ussher, Davenant and especially Richard Baxter became the true custodians of Reformation Calvinism.<sup>24</sup> It may be safely argued, as a prelude to considering the doctrine of justification, that the Protestant Reformers possessed a clear, biblical grasp of the message which a sinner must believe in order to be justified before God.

## II. What is Justification?

The subject of justification proved to be the focal point of theological controversy at the time of the Reformation. This is hardly surprising since a rediscovery of the gospel involved a return to those great biblical statements of the gospel in Paul's letters to the Romans and the Galatians. Clearly, for the Apostle, justification was the heart of the gospel. Any misunderstanding here involved a misunderstanding of the gospel in its entirety.

What did Paul mean by justification? The term is a legal or forensic one. It refers to the acquittal of an accused person in a court of law. In Paul's mind, a sinner is charged with breaking the law of God (Romans 3:10, 19, 23). The penalty is death (6:24). The justice of God demands that the penalty be paid. However, God is also merciful and wishes to save the life of the accused. How then can both the justice and mercy of God be

<sup>22</sup> *Methodist Hymn Book* (1933), 114:7.

<sup>23</sup> See Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy* (1969), 158f.

<sup>24</sup> See Baxter's *Catholick Theologie* (1675) and *Treatise on Universal Redemption* (1694).



satisfied? The divine dilemma is solved through the atoning death of the Lord Jesus Christ, who bears the penalty on behalf of the accused (3:25; 4:25; 5:6-11). Justice having been done through a substitutionary atonement, God is free to offer pardon to the accused (3:24-28), who is discharged a free man (5:1-2; 8:1). This is what Paul meant by justification. The basis of justification cannot therefore be the law, since that only condemns. Since Christ has met the demands of the law by His death, then his vicarious sacrifice is the only basis of justification. The repentant offender then appropriates the benefits of justification by faith in Christ alone, and not by legal obedience (3:28). The proceedings of grace satisfy a holy, yet loving God, and cheers the heart of a sinful yet believing man. It is 'good news' (1:16).

It is obvious from Paul's understanding of justification that it is something objective rather than subjective. It is a judicial declaration concerning a person's standing before God. The Greek *dikaiosis* is not therefore to be equated with the Latin *justificatio*. The Roman Catholic theologians understood the concept of justification as 'infused grace', deriving some support from the Latin word which implies a 'making righteous', rather than a 'declaring righteous'.

The chief error of Rome arises out of this misunderstanding, which was further compounded by the idea of merit. In other words, the meritorious work of Christ is supplemented by the merit of the believer's good works. To oppose this detraction from Christ's all sufficient merits, the reformers asserted that we are justified by faith *alone*, and not by good works. Rome accused the reformers of advocating a gospel of moral licence. If we are justified by faith alone, they said, then the greatest rascal on earth can assume he is saved. This became a very sensitive matter, since the *sola fide* principle was liable to abuse.

It must be said that 'faith alone' is a phrase nowhere used by the Apostle Paul. Therefore, the reformers had to explain their use of it with great care. Cranmer writes that *sola fide* is 'spoken for to take away clearly all merit of our works . . .'<sup>25</sup> In other words, 'faith only' is not a comment about the *psychological* constituents of a believer's experience but a statement about the merits of Christ. It is a *synecdochal* expression meaning 'faith in the merits of Christ only.' The mighty Luther was not entirely clear at this point. Whilst he admitted that, after justification, faith is 'not idle, but occupied and exercised in working through love'<sup>26</sup> yet he repudiated the idea that 'faith then justifieth, when

<sup>25</sup> *Homily on Salvation, op. cit.*, 30.

<sup>26</sup> *Commentary on Galatians*, revised Philip S. Watson (1953), 466.

charity and good works are joined withal.<sup>27</sup> Luther surely views 'faith only' psychologically rather than synecdochally. Calvin did not agree. He argues that 'faith cannot possibly be disjoined from pious affection.'<sup>28</sup> Cranmer argues likewise that saving faith 'hath charity always joined unto it . . .'<sup>29</sup> Luther's fear arose from a mistaken idea that justification and sanctification must be kept strictly separate. Calvin and the English reformers did not share this particular neurosis. 'Christ' says Calvin, 'cannot be divided into parts, so the two things, justification and sanctification, which we perceive to be united together in him, are inseparable.'<sup>30</sup>

The *sola fide* idea, properly understood, is simply stressing the point that the merits of Christ are the sole basis of the sinner's justification before God. In this respect, even 'faith' itself does not justify, a truth stressed clearly by Calvin<sup>31</sup> and Cranmer.<sup>32</sup>

In an age impatient with theological technicalities, questions frequently posed are 'How does Paul's almost unique doctrine of justification relate to the rest of the New Testament teaching about salvation?' 'How, for instance, does justification relate to the less technical concept of forgiveness?' Furthermore, 'if justification is by faith, what significance is to be attached to repentance?' 'Notwithstanding Paul's stress on justification by faith without works, why does he insist so strongly on the need for good works?' It is usually said in orthodox reformed circles that

(a). Justification is more than forgiveness, since divine acquittal is more than mere pardon. An imputation of Christ's righteousness is involved.

(b). Justification, unlike forgiveness, is a complete, once and for all, act of God, whereas forgiveness of sin is the Christian's daily requirement.

(c). Although repentance must accompany faith, yet justification is to be attributed to faith, not repentance.

(d). Good works are necessary evidences of a person's justification, not contributory factors in salvation.

I feel obliged to suggest that these statements are questionable half-truths, and that theological, exegetical and pastoral considerations demand that they be carefully scrutinised. I wish therefore to demonstrate the following propositions:

(1). Justification and Forgiveness are identical.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>28</sup> *Institutes* III:2:8.

<sup>29</sup> *Homily on Faith*, *op. cit.*, 40.

<sup>30</sup> *Institutes* III:11:6.

<sup>31</sup> *Institutes* III:11:7.

<sup>32</sup> *Op. cit.*, 31.

(2). Justification is a complete, life-long continuum, not a single, instantaneous event.

(3). Justification *must* involve the believer's obedience.

(1). *Justification and Forgiveness are identical.*

It seems very clear from Acts 13:38, 39 and Romans 4:6–8 that the apostles Peter and Paul view justification and imputation simply in terms of 'forgiveness'. The relationship between them is that of legal metaphor to spiritual reality. To say otherwise, that the legal terms are 'absolute' is to imply a theological deficiency in those New Testament writings where such language is totally absent, e.g. the epistles of Peter and John, not to speak of several of Paul's letters. However, these other writings do speak of pardon or forgiveness, which is the same thing. One might argue that the epistle to the Hebrews is the doctrine of forgiveness clothed in *ceremonial* language, as surely as the epistle to the Romans is the same doctrine clothed in *legal* language. Had the Roman and Galatian letters never been written, then the Reformation might have witnessed the rediscovery of the doctrine of *sanctification* by faith alone. In other words, to adopt the systematic scheme that sanctification follows justification is to fail to see the equivalence of two sets of metaphorical ideas.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, 1 Cor. 6:11 might suggest the scheme should be reversed! From a 'legal' perspective, *justification* is followed by *obedience*; from a ceremonial perspective, *washing* is followed by *service*. These are metaphorical expressions of the truth that *forgiveness* through Christ results in *living* for Christ (John 8:11).

To be justified then means to be forgiven. Furthermore, to have righteousness imputed is the necessary consequence of that forgiveness. In other words, the Lord's Prayer contains the doctrine of justification quite as definitely as the epistle to the Romans. On this point, the reformers would seem quite unanimous. Calvin's comments on Acts 13:39 and Romans 4:6–8 could not be clearer. His numerous statements in the *Institutes* clearly indicate that, for Calvin, 'forgiveness of sins' and 'justification' are 'altogether the same.'<sup>34</sup> Cranmer,<sup>35</sup> Tyndale,<sup>36</sup> Latimer,<sup>37</sup> Hooper<sup>38</sup> and Jewel<sup>39</sup> expound the evidence similarly.

<sup>33</sup> See J. A. T. Robinson, *Wrestling with Romans* (1979), 49–50.

<sup>34</sup> See *Institutes* III:11 and the *Commentaries*.

<sup>35</sup> *Homily of Justification*, *op. cit.*, 25.

<sup>36</sup> *Doctrinal Treatises* (1848), 508.

<sup>37</sup> *Sermons* (1844), 415, 528.

<sup>38</sup> *Early writings*, (1848), 49–50, 59.

<sup>39</sup> *Works* (1848), Vol. 3, 66.

There is no evidence in the writings of the early reformers of the theory that both Christ's *passive* and *active* righteousness, i.e. the merit of his *life* and *death* are imputed to the believer in justification. Such a view is probably to be attributed to Theodore Beza.<sup>40</sup>

In subsequent generations, Beza's view of justification was to lead to several problems, not least the question of antinomianism. Indeed, if Christ's personal, active obedience to the law is imputed to the believer, then does the believer need to concern himself with the law and the pursuit of personal holiness? Calvin clearly thought otherwise. In his view, the believer is only delivered from the *curse* of the law (Gal. 3:13). Christ's obedience absolves us from the *penalty*, and not the *precept* of the law.<sup>41</sup> Calvin's view of justification does not therefore invite the charge of antinomianism. It was left to Johannes Fischer or Piscator (1546–1625), the German Reformed theologian to expose the inherent contradiction in Beza's view, although his trenchant analysis failed to prevent Reformed orthodoxy embracing Beza's theory. Piscator made explicit Calvin's suggestion<sup>42</sup> that Christ's active obedience demonstrated his qualification to be the guiltless sin-bearer. His own obedience was relevant to himself, and only to believers indirectly. Since the law only demanded 'do or die' Christ did not produce a *double* righteousness for the sinner on the basis of 'do and die'. Piscator further argued that had Christ merited life for sinners by his *life*, then there was no need for the cross. Therefore, since the Scriptures everywhere attribute salvation to the *death* of Christ, the believer's righteousness before God derives from Christ's *passive* obedience.<sup>43</sup> Calvin's and Piscator's insistence that 'justification', 'forgiveness' and 'imputation of righteousness' are equivalent ideas, and that Christ's obedience in *death* is the basis of the sinner's justification, appears eminently Scriptural. In Romans 5:6–21, Philippians 2:8 and Hebrews 5:1–9, the obedience in question is Christ's death. Consistent with this, the Apostle says that 'we are justified by his blood' (Romans 5:9) and not 'by his life and death.' It would seem that Christ's life is relevant, not directly to the believer's justification, but to his obedience and holiness. It is for *imitation* rather than *imputation* (see 1 John 2:6). It is a fact worthy of note that, generally speaking, it was the Arminian tradition that perpetuated Calvin's

<sup>40</sup> See Beza, *Tractationes Theologiae* (1570–1582), Vol. 3, 248, 256.

<sup>41</sup> See Calvin on Romans 6:15.

<sup>42</sup> See *Institutes*, II:16:5.

<sup>43</sup> See Piscator's *Libri Duo de Justificatione Homini Coram Deo* (1618). (For translated extracts, see Arminius, *Works* ed. Nichols (1825), Vol. 1, 634.

view of justification. Arminius himself,<sup>44</sup> John Goodwin the Puritan<sup>45</sup> and John Wesley,<sup>46</sup> all appeal to Calvin in their exposition of the subject.

(2). *Justification is a complete, life-long continuum, not a single, instantaneous event.*

In view of the equivalence between 'justification' and 'pardon', it is arguably incorrect to suggest that justification, unlike the 'new birth', is a once for all event in the Christian's life. It is true that, at conversion, all sins hitherto committed are forgiven immediately. However, to say that such an instantaneous justification is a valid ticket for every sin thereafter is to 'over do' the legal metaphors of the Epistle to the Romans. There Paul clearly imagines a court trial. Justification of the accused relates only to crimes hitherto committed (Romans 3:25?). Any future violations of the law would demand a further trial for justification to occur. It is true, the meritorious basis of all justification is the once for all sacrifice of Christ. But to say that the sinner's justification is complete because the gracious basis of acquittal is complete is to confuse a *single* cause with a *multiplicity* of effects. Sin is not forgiven until it is committed and repented of. Justification is never in advance. A believer's life is a continuum of instants. At any instant 'I have been justified' and 'I am being justified' are perfectly compatible statements. The just man is living by faith.

It is obvious from our Lord's own teaching in Luke 18:11-14 and Matthew 12:36-37 that the proceedings of the day of judgement will terminate the justification continuum. This is logically related to the problematic statement in James 2:24 where justification involves a life of obedient faith. It is because of this evidence that even Protestant divines have entertained the theory of a two-fold justification, against which Dr. John Owen argued at great length. Even Owen was arguably a little confused. Just before maintaining that justification is complete at the initial moment of trust,<sup>47</sup> Owen insists that the 'meritorious procuring cause' i.e. Christ's death, was 'complete'.<sup>48</sup> Now the latter thought is surely valid, whereas the former is questionable. To solve the

<sup>44</sup> See *Works*, ed. Nichols (1825), Vol. 1, 636. On the passive/active righteousness debate, Arminius refused to commit himself, *Ibid.*, 632.

<sup>45</sup> See *Imputatio Fidei or A Treatise of Justification* (1642), 49 and 119f.

<sup>46</sup> See *Works*, ed. T. Jackson (1840), Vol. 3, 201 (*Journal* for May 14th, 1765); Vol. 5, 226; Vol. 10, 326 and 345.

<sup>47</sup> *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith in Works*, ed. Gould (1851), Vol. 5, 144.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

obvious difficulty Owen employs an aristotelian-style definition of justification, i.e. 'it may be considered either as to the nature and essence of it, or as unto its manifestation and declaration'.<sup>49</sup> Then comes the paradox. Whilst Owen emphatically rejects the two-fold justification theory, he says that the *manifestation* (if not the *essence*) of justification is two-fold, i.e. initial in this life, and second and final at the day of judgement. Owen finally capitulates when he asserts that by 'our personal obedience' we 'shall be declared righteous at the last day, and without it none shall be . . . justified'.<sup>50</sup> Appealing to the *essence* of justification does not prevent Owen from formulating a view virtually indistinguishable from the one he is anxious to refute. It is hardly surprising if lesser mortals are confused by the exegetical data when Owen clumsily trips himself up!

The theory that justification is one continuum, or a sequence of justifying instants, avoids the unbiblical idea of a two-fold justification—one by faith, the other by works. It might be objected, that by equating justification with forgiveness, one is admitting a theory of multiple justifications, if believers need daily forgiveness. However, the idea only appears odd until one remembers that Paul's legal exposition in Romans assumes *current* charges against the accused. The use of the *aorist* in Romans 5:1 simply indicates that whenever justification occurs, sins then repented of are completely forgiven. In a sense, believers 'go to court daily' for daily forgiveness, assured that the just judge is seated on a throne of grace.

It is more than interesting to discover that Calvin does not seem ill-at-ease with a continuum view of justification.<sup>51</sup> Whilst expounding Paul's doctrine of justification, Calvin states that 'we must have this blessedness not once only . . .'.<sup>52</sup> Elsewhere, he argues that 'by a daily forgiveness God receives us into his favour'<sup>53</sup> and that 'this alone keeps us in God's family'.<sup>54</sup> The kind of view being advanced here in no way threatens the correctly understood conception of *sola fide*. The meritorious sufferings of the Son of God are the sole basis of the sinner's justification at every instant of his believing experience. Since Christ's *perfect* work is the basis of the believer's assurance also, a continuum view of justification will not undermine the assurance of a

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 159–60.

<sup>51</sup> See *Institutes* III:14 (title).

<sup>52</sup> *Institutes* III:14:11.

<sup>53</sup> Calvin on 2 Corinthians 5:20.

<sup>54</sup> Calvin on 1 John 1:7.

diligent believer. It will, however, dispel the false confidence of a merely nominal Christian.<sup>55</sup>

(3). *Justification must involve the believer's obedience.*

It has often been pointed out that whereas Paul seems to attribute salvation to 'faith', our Lord seems to attribute it to 'works'. Put differently, Christ stresses 'doing' and 'working' as well as 'believing'. (See Matthew 5:20; 7:21; 12:36, 37; 25:31-46.) Furthermore, in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, repentance is usually coupled with faith as equally necessary for salvation. There seems therefore to be a discrepancy between the emphasis on 'faith' in Paul's letters, and actual apostolic practice. The problematic statement in James 2:24, although seemingly inconsistent with Romans 3:28, does not seem out of character when compared with statements in the Gospels. Richard Baxter believed that one must necessarily distinguish between 'legal obedience' and 'evangelical obedience' and that the latter, unlike the former, is bound up with considerations of justification.<sup>56</sup>

Compared with the antinomian controversies of the seventeenth century, when the very suggestion of 'good works' seemed to indicate a Rome-ward trend, the reformers appear quite untroubled. Cranmer declares that 'faith of itself is full of good works'.<sup>57</sup> He even insists that 'the works of the moral commandments of God be the very true works of faith, which lead to the blessed life to come'.<sup>58</sup> Hooper declared that 'good works are . . . necessary for salvation'.<sup>59</sup> Even Calvin admits that 'good works' are 'inferior causes' of salvation, and that the Lord 'makes eternal life a consequent of works'.<sup>60</sup> However, the 'true cause' (by which Calvin must mean the *meritorious* cause) is 'the mercy of God.' Justification is ever by faith, but, says Calvin, 'We dream not of a faith which is devoid of good works . . .'.<sup>61</sup>

This brings us again to James 2:24, ' . . . by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.' It is surely fair to say that the Reformed conception of justification has always been embarrassed by this text. Luther's strong antipathy to what he called 'the epistle of straw' is well known. Various exegetical solutions have been advanced to eliminate the apparent contradiction between

<sup>55</sup> See 2 Peter 1:10 and Calvin's comment.

<sup>56</sup> *An End of Doctrinal Controversies* (1691), 252-3.

<sup>57</sup> *Homily on Good Works*, op. cit., 51.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>59</sup> *Later Writings*, (1852), 59.

<sup>60</sup> *Institutes* III:14:21.

<sup>61</sup> *Institutes* III:16:1.

Paul and James. Calvin set a precedent when he said that the two apostles employ different ideas of justification. Paul is therefore concerned with the 'imputation of righteousness' whereas James is concerned with its 'manifestation'.<sup>62</sup> In short, James is discussing merely *evidential* features of justification. Cranmer also held the evidential view,<sup>63</sup> although he is seemingly unclear about this.<sup>64</sup> The judicious Hooker went so far as to suggest that James really meant sanctification when he spoke of justification!<sup>65</sup>

The entire Puritan and Evangelical tradition was to follow Calvin's lead in the exposition of James 2:24, although Richard Baxter and the sub-tradition that followed him proved a notable exception.<sup>66</sup> The usual reformed view may be summarised thus:

1. James, unlike Paul, is not dealing with justification before God, but before men.
2. James is teaching an 'evidential' justification to clear men from hypocrisy.
3. James is saying that if faith justifies the believer, then works justify his faith.

The question which demands an answer is: does the above type of exposition satisfactorily explain the statement 'by works a man is justified? James does *not* say works justify a man's faith, but the man himself. Had he meant that 'by works a man is *proved*' then why did he not use *dokimos* instead of *dikaiosis*, as he had done in James 1:12? Furthermore, is James assuming a human 'tribunal' when he seems to assume the context of salvation—'can (dead) faith *save* him?' (v.14) If Calvin's approach is correct, James should have asked 'Can faith *prove* him before men?' It is clearly arguable therefore, that James is using justification in precisely the same sense as Paul. It may be suggested that the clue to the solution of this age-old dilemma lies in the nature of saving faith.

### III. What is Faith?

It seems to be the case that the 'works of the law' rejected by Paul in Romans 3:28 are not the 'works of faith' urged by James in James 2:14–26. Paul's denunciation of law-righteousness arguably arises because (a). any degree of obedience can never

<sup>62</sup> *Institutes* III:17:12.

<sup>63</sup> *Homily on Faith*, *op. cit.*, 47.

<sup>64</sup> *Notes on Justification in Miscellaneous Writings* (1843), 208.

<sup>65</sup> *Works*, ed. Keble (1836), Vol. 3, 630–1.

<sup>66</sup> See G. F. Nuttall, *Richard Baxter and Philip Doddridge: a study in a tradition* (1951) and Doddridge's comments on Romans 3:28 and James 2:24 in *The Family Expositor, Works* (1805), Vol. 8, 414 and Vol. 10, 228.



compensate for instances of disobedience; (b). it is a man's duty to obey the law, and there is nothing meritorious about doing one's duty; and (c). without regenerating grace, it is impossible for any one to obey God. On the other hand, James is urging a believer to a life of 'evangelical obedience'. It is also true that whereas James defines faith in terms of assent to truth (v.19) *plus* trust (v.23), with works being the fruit of both (v.26), Paul's conception of faith embraces comprehensively all that James means by 'faith and works'. This vital insight was expounded by Archbishop Tillotson (1630–1694), whose view of justifying faith seems to provide a coherent solution to the dilemma posed by Romans 3:28 and James 2:24. The Archbishop handles all the texts without suppressing, or distorting, any of the data in the interests of a theological theory. At the same time, his solution is consistent with the essential genius of Reformation theology, viz. salvation through the merits of Christ alone—*solo Christo*. Tillotson's view of faith may be summed up as follows: Faith has a triple character:

- (1). Assent to the truth of the Gospel.
- (2). Trust in the merits of Christ alone.
- (3). Obedience to Christ as Lord.

Tillotson validates his view by pointing out these very elements in Pauline usage. Paul speaks of assent to gospel truth (Romans 1:16) and trust of the heart (Romans 10:10), together with an obedient or working faith (Romans 1:5; 16:26; Galatians 5:6). Sometimes all three are implied together (Romans 6:17) and even treated synonymously (Romans 10:16). For other New Testament instances of this comprehensive conception of faith, Tillotson cites Hebrews 5:9; 2 Thessalonians 1:8 and 1 Peter 1:22. This vital observation duly made, Tillotson justly concludes that 'we cannot be said to be justified by faith alone, unless that faith include in it obedience.'<sup>67</sup>

It now becomes clear that when James speaks of 'works', Paul is speaking of an 'obedient faith' which produces 'good works.' This would permit the following paraphrase of James 2:24: 'By an obedient faith a man is justified, and not by mere assent and trust.' This might suggest that faith is seen to possess *meritorious* worth. The same might also be said of repentance. However, this is a mistake. Since man is dutifully obligated to repent and believe—otherwise unbelief cannot be regarded as sinful (see Acts 17:30; 1 John 3:23; 2 Thessalonians 1:8), the performance of

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<sup>67</sup> *Of the Christian Faith which Sanctifies, Justifies and Saves in Works* (folio 1712), Vol. 1, 476.

them cannot be regarded as meritorious, even apart from the consideration that without grace (Acts 5:31; Ephesians 2:8) they cannot be performed. Furthermore, what Calvin and Cranmer say of faith applies equally to Tillotson's conception of faith. By virtue of its very imperfection, it can have no intrinsic justifying virtue. However, what is true of faith as a whole applies equally to its aspects or constituents. In short, assent, trust and obedience must all be genuine and sincere, even if they are never perfect.<sup>68</sup> With regard to repentance, Tillotson's exposition suggests that it is necessarily comprehended by faith. Since faith involves assent, trust and obedience, so repentance implies a *change* of mind, heart and will. Put differently, repentance and faith are but negative and positive sides of the same coin—one necessarily implies the other. This is why Paul's stress on faith in his doctrine of justification is not inconsistent with his stress on repentance elsewhere. (See Acts 17:30; 20:21; 26:18)

Whilst faith is not a *meritorious* work, man must perform it as a subjective condition of justification. As such, Tillotson, together with Calvin,<sup>69</sup> had no inhibitions about using the language of conditionality. Neither was he under pressure from a dubious theory of imputation to deny that faith is imputed to the believer for righteousness, i.e. he is accepted before God when he believes. (See Romans 4:5 and Galatians 3:6). Calvin is also most explicit on this point.<sup>70</sup> Tillotson was thus careful to say that faith was only a condition in the sense of being the *causa sine qua non* of justification. As with the Reformers and the Puritans, he insisted that the atoning death of the Son of God was the sole, *meritorious* condition of salvation, and that, accordingly, salvation was all of grace.<sup>71</sup>

It might seem somewhat disconcerting to find an evangelical writer quoting the views of Archbishop Tillotson. After all, the Latitudinarian archbishop and his colleagues have been blamed for creating the very conditions which necessitated the evangelical revival of the eighteenth century.<sup>72</sup> The seraphic George Whitefield got into hot water for denouncing the dead primate for

<sup>68</sup> *Christ the Author and Obedience the Condition of Salvation in Works* (1712), Vol. 1, 501.

<sup>69</sup> See *The Eternal Predestination of God*, pp. 105–6 and *Sermons on the Epistles to Timothy and Titus* (1983 facsimile), 1181–82. Kendall is incorrect to say that 'Faith for Calvin was never a "condition".' *Op. cit.*, 210.

<sup>70</sup> See Calvin on Romans 4:4–5 and Galatians 3:6.

<sup>71</sup> *The Possibility and Necessity of Gospel Obedience and its Consistence with Free Grace*, in *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, 502f.

<sup>72</sup> See Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England from Watts and Wesley to Maurice (1690–1850)*, (1961), 56.

'knowing no more about Christianity than Mahomet.'<sup>73</sup> John Wesley also criticised Tillotson's views on justification during his early 'Lutheran' phase, although his mature views approximated very closely to the archbishop's position.<sup>74</sup> The facts remain that Whitefield was totally wrong to attribute to Tillotson a 'bare historical' conception of faith, and Wesley failed initially to grasp Tillotson's arguments against a false interpretation of the *sola fide* principle. In short, Tillotson was accused of undermining the doctrines of the Reformation. Let us allow him to speak for himself.

There is a wide difference between the doctrine of the Papists about justification, and this doctrine. They say that obedience and good works are not only a condition of our justification, but a *meritorious* cause of it; which I abhor as much as anyone. It is the doctrine of merit that the Protestants chiefly oppose in the matter of justification.<sup>75</sup>

The final vindication of Tillotson's position derives from an unexpected source. His tripartite conception of faith<sup>76</sup> developed the full implications of Calvin's brilliant exposition of Christ's offices of prophet, priest and king.<sup>77</sup> Calvin says that 'the office which he received from the Father consists of three parts' and 'faith embraces Christ as he is offered by the Father.'<sup>78</sup> In short, a correlation obtains between the character of faith and the offices of Christ. Tillotson insists, along with Baxter,<sup>79</sup> that saving faith is

<sup>73</sup> See Luke Tyerman, *The Life of the Rev. George Whitefield* (1876), Vol. 1, 360 and Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield* (1980), Vol. 2, 47.

<sup>74</sup> See *True Christianity Defended* in *Works*, Vol. 7, 433. Wesley later published two of Tillotson's sermons in Vol. XLV of his *Christian Library* (1755). See also John C. English's valuable study *John Wesley and the Anglican Moderates of the Seventeenth Century* in the *Anglican Theological Review*, Vol. LI, No. 3 (1969), 203-220.

<sup>75</sup> *Of Justifying Faith* in *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, 484.

<sup>76</sup> Tillotson was probably influenced by George Bull's *Harmonia Apostolica* (1667). Bull argued that 'faith' is the sum of all that God requires of man under the Gospel, a view strongly hinted at by Cranmer (*Homilies, op. cit.*, 39-40) and explicitly affirmed by Coverdale (*Treatise on Death in Remains* (1846), 93.)

<sup>77</sup> See J. I. Packer's discussion of this in *John Calvin*, ed. Duffield (1966), 168.

<sup>78</sup> *Institutes* II:15:1 and III:2:8.

<sup>79</sup> *The Necessity of Repentance and Faith* in *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 3. See Baxter's *Directions to a Sound Conversion in The Practical Works of Richard Baxter* (Select Treatises) (1981 rep.), pp. 590-2. Contrary to the verdict of Dr. Packer, Baxter's errors over justification do not arise from his rejection of the imputed *active* righteousness of Christ but his application of the term 'justification' to both pardon and holiness. Baxter's mistakes arose chiefly from terminological ambiguities. See J. I. Packer, *The Doctrine of Justification in Development and Decline among the Puritans in By Schisms Rent Asunder* (1969), 18-29.

more than mere trust in Christ's *priestly* mediation. It also assumes an acceptance of his *prophetic* teaching, and anticipates obedience to his *kingly* authority. If any *one* of these elements is absent, then justifying faith does not exist. It is therefore impossible to receive Christ as Saviour without, at the same time, acknowledging him as Lord. One might add that a further correlation obtains between the psychology of the believer and the faith he exercises in Christ. In other words, when a sinner receives Christ, the *whole* man (mind, heart and will) embraces a *whole Christ* (prophet, priest and king) with a *whole* faith (assent, trust and obedience). Each constituent of faith has a corresponding office in Christ's person, which in turn is an expression of every aspect of the believer's psychology. To insist, as John Owen mistakenly did, that justifying faith only relates to Christ's priestly office, is to receive an incomplete Christ with an incomplete faith.<sup>80</sup>

### Conclusion

An attempt has been made to analyse, discuss and evaluate the labyrinth of issues associated with the fundamental doctrines of the Gospel. On balance, it would seem that Reformed theology has not always spoken with the clarity and consistency the Scriptural data demands. In the belief that Scripture does point to a harmonious understanding of the seemingly conflicting evidence, the article has sought to clarify certain areas of understanding and to resolve longstanding problems.

The indiscriminate gospel declaration 'Christ died for you' is not a statement about the efficacious application of the atonement, but about the basis of benefits conditionally offered to all. In this respect, a 'universal atonement' means 'something substantial is offered to all.' Calvin's position, unlike that of his professed disciples, is not embarrassed by the criticism that if Christ is not given for all, then the unbeliever is punished for rejecting nothing.

God's sincerity in the universal offer cannot justly be called into question if there are inscrutable reasons why he permits some to reject salvation, while others are chosen to prove the efficacy of grace. God is not obliged to violate human freedom in order to demonstrate the sincerity of his offers of mercy. In short,

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<sup>80</sup> See Owen, *op. cit.*, 117 and R. L. Dabney's penetrating discussion of this issue in *A Phase of Religious Selfishness in Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, (1967 rep.), Vol. 1, 694f.

there is an unfathomable interaction between the divine purpose and the human will in the application of salvation. In the mystery of the process, God is ever sovereign and man is ever free. The saved will give God all the glory of their salvation, and the lost will justly reproach themselves in their condemnation.<sup>81</sup>

With regard to justification, it is clear that faith has *active* as well as *passive* features. Whereas Paul is primarily concerned with the objective character of divine grace, James is concerned with the subjective character of the human response. That said, Paul largely assumes the very conception of faith for which James is pleading. James is not therefore arguing for a different conception of justification, but for a view of faith Paul generally takes for granted.

The Christian's justifying righteousness is always that of pardon. The continuum view of justification is a sounder and more coherent alternative to the idea that justification is the initial act with sanctification the subsequent process. The continuum view insists that there is a perpetual correlation between objective pardon and subjective renewal, at every instant of the believer's experience. The two can never be separated, as Calvin maintains. No one can claim Christ's work *for* them, unless they can demonstrate Christ's work *in* them.

The solution proposed above at once avoids both legalism and antinomianism. The righteousness of grace delivers the believer not from the law but from lawlessness. However, if Christ's *active* obedience to the law is imputed to the believer, then two things follow. First, the believer has a *legal*, rather than a *gracious* righteousness, and second, the law may be disregarded with impunity. However, a gracious righteousness, i.e. pardon, does not render invalid the *precept* of the law, but only the *penalty* of the law. The statement 'Christ died that I might not die eternally' makes good, gospel sense, but the statement 'Christ kept the decalogue that I might not keep it personally' is bad, antinomian nonsense. This is not to be legalistic, but to honour the God who is the author of both Law and Gospel. Indeed, legalism is

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<sup>81</sup> For a valuable discussion of these issues, see John Howe's *The Reconcilability of God's Prescience of the Sins of Men, with the Wisdom and Sincerity of His Counsels* . . . (1677). In a treatise *The Redeemer's Tears Wept over Lost Souls* (1684), Howe writes 'And therefore it is unavoidably imposed upon us, to believe that God is truly unwilling of some things, which he doth not think fit to interpose his omnipotency to hinder, and is truly willing of some things, which he doth not put forth his omnipotency to effect.' *Works of the English Puritan Divines* (1846), 62. See also R. L. Dabney, *God's Indiscriminate Proposals of Mercy* in *Op. cit.*, 282f.

properly the doctrine which teaches justification by legal obedience. However, whilst the gospel is inconsistent with legalism, it is not inconsistent with the law (Ps. 119:29; 1 Cor. 9:21). It is surely for this balanced conception of the gospel Paul is arguing in both Romans and Galatians, see Romans 3:28; 6:1-7:25; 13:1-14 and Galatians 2:16-21; 3:13; 5:1-15.